
THE IMPACT OF TERRORISM ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF THE ISLAMIC STATE WEST AFRICA PROVINCE (ISWAP)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how terrorism, focusing on ISWAP in West Africa, reshapes international relations. It views ISWAP as a transnational actor affecting Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and global partners through violence, mobility, shadow governance, illicit taxes, and ties to the Islamic State. Using security theories and analyzing various sources from 2015 to 2025, the study finds that ISWAP has spurred historic regional military coordination and increased intelligence sharing, placing counter-terrorism at Nigeria's diplomatic core. However, it also reveals issues like sovereignty sensitivities, uneven burden sharing, fragile alliances, and how interstate disputes hinder regional cooperation. Terrorism has led to displacement, disrupted trade, reliance on external aid, and complex legal challenges. The article argues that military efforts alone can't ensure regional stability, calling for an African-led security and development alliance combining cooperation, accountable counter-terrorism, restoration of lawful economies, community services, and unified justice policies. This research shows violent non-state actors impact not just security but also diplomacy, regional bodies, economic ties, and sovereignty.

KEYWORDS: Terrorism; International Relations; Iswap; Lake Chad Basin; Regional Security; Nigeria; Mnjtf.

1. INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is no longer adequately explained as violence occurring inside a single state. Contemporary armed organisations cross borders, exploit regional markets, circulate

propaganda through global media systems, and compel states to cooperate even when they distrust one another. The Lake Chad Basin is a particularly revealing case. What began as a Nigerian insurgency developed into a regional conflict involving the territories, citizens, armed forces and diplomatic priorities of Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. ISWAP, formally associated with the Islamic State's global network, has become one of the most consequential actors in this security environment. The central problem is both analytical and practical. Much writing on ISWAP concentrates on battlefield tactics, leadership changes or the humanitarian emergency. Those issues matter, but they do not fully explain how the group has changed interstate relations. Terrorism has altered the regional understanding of threat, redirected public expenditure, encouraged military coalitions, increased diplomatic dependence on external partners, transformed border management, and complicated relations between national security institutions and international human rights regimes. The threat has also affected the everyday foundations of international relations: movement of persons, trade, refugee protection, access to humanitarian space and confidence among neighbouring governments.

This article therefore asks: (1) How has ISWAP transformed the security relations of the Lake Chad Basin states? (2) Through which mechanisms has the group affected Nigeria's foreign policy, regional cooperation and external partnerships? Moreover, (3) Why have regional responses produced tactical gains without eliminating the conditions that sustain the insurgency? The study has four objectives: to trace ISWAP's evolution as a transnational actor; to identify its principal effects on international relations; to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of regional and international responses; and to propose a policy framework that links security, development, governance, and civilian protection. The argument is straightforward. ISWAP has simultaneously integrated and fragmented the Lake Chad security order. It has integrated the region by making national isolation impossible and by generating common institutions, especially the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). It has fragmented the region because cooperation remains vulnerable to sovereignty disputes, regime changes, divergent national priorities and unequal military capabilities. The result is a form of compulsory interdependence: governments must cooperate, but the domestic politics of the participating states repeatedly weaken the quality of that cooperation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Terrorism as an international relations problem

Classical state-centred approaches to international relations tend to treat sovereignty, territorial control and diplomacy as the preserve of recognised governments. Terrorist organisations challenge that assumption. They rarely possess legal sovereignty, but they can exercise coercive authority, regulate economic activity, tax communities, shape migration and force governments to revise alliances. Their significance, therefore, lies not only in the number of attacks they conduct but also in their capacity to alter the behaviour of states and international institutions. The literature identifies several channels through which terrorism affects international relations. First, cross-border violence produces securitisation: political leaders redefine an issue as an existential threat and legitimise exceptional measures (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). Second, transnational threats encourage regional security arrangements because neighbouring states share exposure to the same armed network (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Third, terrorism creates externalities in the form of refugees, disrupted trade, arms flows and humanitarian needs. Fourth, counter-terrorism generates normative disputes over civilian casualties, detention, emergency powers and the treatment of defectors. Finally, the search for equipment, intelligence and finance pulls affected states into wider geopolitical relationships.

2.2 Boko Haram, ISWAP and the Lake Chad security order

Studies of Boko Haram show that the insurgency became transnational because the social and commercial geography of the Lake Chad Basin predates contemporary borders. Communities, markets, fishing routes and kinship networks connect the four riparian states. The same geography that sustains livelihoods can also facilitate the movement of fighters, weapons and commodities. Onuoha (2014) therefore described Boko Haram as a danger not only to Nigeria, but later research also emphasised the need to combine military pressure with governance and development reform.

ISWAP's emergence sharpened the international dimension. Following Boko Haram's pledge to the Islamic State in 2015 and a leadership split in 2016, the faction associated with Abu Musab al-Barnawi developed a more centralised and population-oriented strategy than Abubakar Shekau's Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS). This distinction should not be romanticised: ISWAP has attacked civilians, imposed coercive rules and exploited local economies. Nevertheless, its attempt to regulate taxation, markets and relations with selected communities illustrates how a terrorist organisation can compete with weak states for authority (International Crisis Group, 2019; Stoddard, 2023; Foucher, 2024).

Recent work further shows that ISWAP's conduct combines global Islamic State templates with adaptation to local political economy, a "glocal" pattern rather than a simple importation of foreign ideology (Raineri, 2025).

Three gaps remain in the literature. First, security studies often evaluate whether the MNJTF wins battles while paying less attention to how the insurgency affects diplomatic relations. Second, foreign-policy studies of Nigeria frequently discuss continental leadership in broad terms without integrating the constraints imposed by persistent domestic insecurity. Third, humanitarian and development analyses are often separated from international relations theory, even though displacement, food insecurity, border closures, and donor dependence are important forms of international interaction. This article addresses these gaps through an integrated analysis.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Regional Security Complex Theory

Regional Security Complex Theory holds that the security of neighbouring states is interdependent because threats travel more easily over short distances than across the entire international system (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The theory is highly suitable for the Lake Chad Basin. Nigeria's insecurity cannot be separated from the Diffa region of Niger, the Far North of Cameroon or Chad's Lac Province. Military pressure in one sector may displace fighters into another; border restrictions in one country may redirect trade and population movements elsewhere. The relevant unit of analysis is therefore not Nigeria alone but a connected regional security space.

3.2 Securitisation theory

Securitisation theory explains how political actors present an issue as an existential danger and thereby justify extraordinary action (Buzan et al., 1998). In the ISWAP case, governments have securitised borders, mobility, telecommunications, financial transactions and humanitarian access. Some exceptional measures are defensible, but securitisation can also produce collective punishment, restrictions on livelihoods and weakened accountability. The approach therefore helps explain both the expansion of interstate security cooperation and the unintended effects of counter-terrorism.

3.3 Integrated analytical proposition

The two theories are combined in a simple proposition: the more ISWAP demonstrates cross-border capacity and challenges state authority, the more Lake Chad states will institutionalise regional security cooperation; however, the effectiveness of that cooperation will depend on

political trust, resource commitment, legitimacy and the capacity to protect civilian life. Cooperation driven only by emergency may remain shallow and reversible.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, explanatory single-case design covering 2015–2025. ISWAP is selected because it links a locally rooted insurgency to a global terrorist brand and operates in a region where security, trade, migration and environmental pressures cross national boundaries. Evidence was purposively drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, United Nations Security Council and counter-terrorism documents, African Union and Lake Chad Basin Commission materials, UNDP and UNHCR reports, and specialist assessments by the International Crisis Group, the Institute for Security Studies, and UNIDIR.

Documents were coded thematically under seven categories: regional military cooperation; sovereignty and border politics; humanitarian diplomacy; economic relations; external partnerships; legal and human-rights implications; and non-state governance. Triangulation was used to compare academic, policy and humanitarian accounts. The design supports analytical explanation rather than statistical causal estimation. It does not claim that every change in regional diplomacy is caused by ISWAP alone; coups, climate shocks, economic crises and wider Sahelian instability also shape outcomes.

5. Evolution of ISWAP and the Internationalisation of the Conflict

ISWAP's trajectory illustrates how a violent movement can move from domestic rebellion to regional and global significance. Boko Haram's 2015 pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State created an international organisational identity, access to propaganda networks and a claim to membership in a wider ideological project. The 2016 leadership dispute then produced a clearer distinction between the al-Barnawi-led ISWAP and Shekau's JAS faction. ISWAP concentrated heavily around Lake Chad and sought to weaken state forces while cultivating a more predictable, though coercive, relationship with some local populations.

Table 1. Key stages in the internationalisation of the ISWAP conflict.

Period	Development	International-relations significance
2015	Pledge to the Islamic State and reactivation of a stronger regional military response.	A Nigerian insurgency acquires a global affiliation; counter-terrorism becomes a priority for AU, UN and bilateral partners.
2016	Leadership split and consolidation of	Distinct factions require differentiated

Period	Development	International-relations significance
	the al-Barnawi faction as ISWAP.	analysis; violence remains regional rather than confined to Nigeria.
2017–2019	Expansion of attacks on military positions and entrenchment around Lake Chad.	States deepen MNJTF coordination, external training and intelligence relationships; UNSC Resolution 2349 frames the crisis as a threat to regional peace.
2020–2021	Continued adaptation; death of Shekau and attempted absorption of JAS elements.	ISWAP's organisational influence is growing, while surrender and reintegration are becoming cross-border policy issues.
2022–2025	Military pressure produces tactical losses, but the armed constellation remains resilient; regional political rifts weaken cooperation.	The security order becomes increasingly dependent on sustained diplomacy, burden-sharing, and the insulation of the MNJTF from interstate disputes.

The group's influence is not reducible to formal command from the Middle East. Its resilience rests on local conditions: limited state presence, difficult terrain, contested markets, youth unemployment, distrust of security institutions and the capacity to extract resources from fishing, livestock, agriculture and trade. UNDP's recruitment research cautions against simplistic claims that ideology alone explains mobilisation; employment expectations, grievances and triggering experiences with state action frequently matter (UNDP, 2023). The implication for international relations is important: external military support may suppress operational capacity, but it cannot substitute for legitimate public authority in border communities.

ISWAP also demonstrates that territorial sovereignty is not binary. A state may retain international legal title while lacking effective control over islands, forests, roads or night-time economic activity. Where ISWAP taxes traders, regulates access or punishes non-compliance, it exercises *de facto* authority without lawful recognition. This shadow governance changes how states plan military operations, negotiate humanitarian access and regulate cross-border commerce.

6. Findings: Effects on International Relations

6.1 Regional securitisation and military cooperation

The clearest effect is the conversion of a Nigerian insurgency into a shared regional security agenda. The AU-authorised Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) combines forces from Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Benin under the auspices of the Lake Chad Basin

Commission. Its mandate includes combat, civilian protection, humanitarian access and stabilisation. This is a major institutional adaptation: governments with a history of border mistrust accepted coordinated sectors and joint planning because unilateral defence could not contain a mobile regional threat (Onuoha, Tchie, & Llorens Zabala, 2023).

The MNJTF has disrupted bases, rescued civilians and enabled partial recovery of movement and trade, but funding, equipment, intelligence and command gaps remain. More importantly, the coalition depends on sustained political commitment. Tensions following Niger's 2023 coup and Chad's periodic threats of withdrawal show that a shared enemy does not erase interstate rivalry (Hoinathy & Sumo Tayo, 2025). ISWAP thus creates cooperation while benefiting whenever that cooperation fractures.

6.2 Sovereignty, borders and diplomatic tension

Counter-terrorism is a continuous negotiation of sovereignty. Forces must pursue mobile groups without normalising unrestricted entry into neighbouring territory; intelligence must be shared without exposing national capabilities; and borders must be secured without destroying the mobility on which fishing, herding and trade depend. These tensions explain why operational integration often lags behind political declarations.

ISWAP has also multiplied the actors involved in border governance: military units, police, customs, immigration agencies, vigilantes, traditional authorities and humanitarian organisations. Poor coordination exposes civilians to contradictory rules. Blanket restrictions may divert commerce into informal routes, reduce state revenue and increase dependence on armed intermediaries, thereby reproducing the political economy that sustains terrorism.

6.3 Humanitarian diplomacy and forced displacement

The conflict has internationalised human suffering. Displacement links domestic security decisions to neighbouring states, UN agencies and donors. OCHA estimated in June 2025 that roughly 10 million people across the Lake Chad crisis required assistance, and close to 3 million were displaced. These pressures shape diplomacy over refugee protection, voluntary return, camp closure, humanitarian access and donor finance.

Governments seek normalisation and return, but premature or coerced movement can shift risk onto vulnerable civilians and create friction with humanitarian agencies. ISWAP attacks, military operations and restrictions on farming or fishing also narrow access. Humanitarian diplomacy has therefore become a permanent part of regional external relations rather than a temporary response to an isolated emergency.

Table 2. Summary of ISWAP's principal international-relations effects.

Dimension	Integrative effect	Fragmenting or adverse effect
Security	Shared threat perception, joint operations and intelligence exchange.	Unequal burden sharing, national caveats and vulnerability to diplomatic rifts.
Borders	Pressure for coordinated surveillance and identity management.	Trade restrictions, livelihood loss, informal routes and sovereignty disputes.
Humanitarian affairs	Regional refugee frameworks and donor coordination.	Dependence on aid, contested returns and restricted humanitarian access.
Foreign policy	Greater international attention and security partnerships.	External dependence and risk of militarised diplomacy.
Law and norms	Cooperation on prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration.	Inconsistent standards, arbitrary detention risks and accountability deficits.

6.4 Cross-border trade and economic interdependence

Terrorism has damaged the economic infrastructure of regional relations. Lake Chad historically functioned as a commercial space for fish, livestock, grain, manufactured goods and labour. Attacks, exclusion zones, road insecurity and closed water routes have increased costs and destroyed livelihoods. ISWAP has not abolished commerce; it exploits it through taxation, confiscation and control of access. A purely prohibitive border policy is therefore self-defeating. States should create secure, lawful corridors, harmonise customs and identity systems, support affected traders, and target insurgent finance using evidence rather than treating entire commercial sectors as suspect.

6.5 External partnerships and geopolitical dependence

ISWAP has increased the strategic importance of Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin to external powers. Partners provide intelligence, surveillance, training, equipment, humanitarian finance and stabilisation support, while UN Security Council Resolution 2349 (2017) framed the crisis as an issue of international peace and security. However, assistance is not neutral: donor priorities may privilege military institutions, technology dependence can create vulnerability, and wider geopolitical competition in the Sahel can weaken coordination. Nigeria must therefore combine necessary partnerships with strategic autonomy and ensure that external programmes reinforce African-led institutions.

6.6 International law, human rights and reintegration

Counter-terrorism produces difficult legal categories. Persons associated with ISWAP may include commanders, coerced recruits, abductees, spouses, children, service providers and

residents who paid taxes to survive. Treating every association as identical is legally weak and strategically counterproductive. Regional policy should harmonise screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration; distinguish levels of responsibility; protect children and victims of coercion; preserve due process; and include communities and victims in programme design. Security and rights are not competing objectives because durable security depends on trusted institutions.

6.7 ISWAP's global-local governance model

ISWAP's Islamic State affiliation provides ideological prestige, media visibility and organisational templates, but its endurance rests on local adaptation. Research on competitive control shows how the group uses rules, selective coercion and predictable extraction to entrench itself in contested communities (Stoddard, 2023), while comparative work identifies both common Islamic State practices and strong local variation (Raineri, 2025). Defeating a transnational brand will not remove the governance vacuum that made the brand useful; counter-terrorism must disrupt global links while improving justice, administration, services and livelihoods locally.

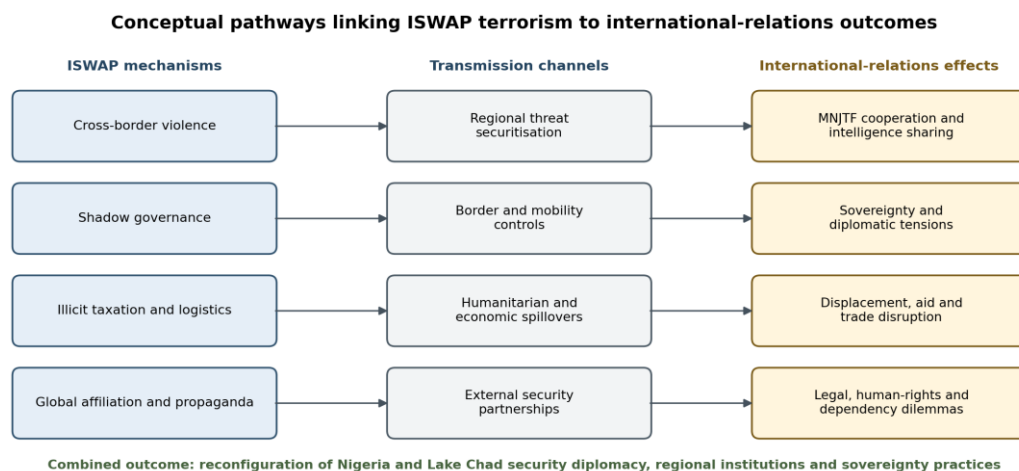


Figure 1. Conceptual pathways through which ISWAP affects international relations—
source: Author's synthesis.

7. DISCUSSION

The evidence supports the proposition that ISWAP has reorganised the Lake Chad Basin as a regional security complex. Threats are tightly interconnected: an offensive in Nigeria may generate displacement into Niger, restrict trade with Chad or redirect attacks toward Cameroon. The MNJTTF is therefore not an optional diplomatic achievement but an

institutional response to structural interdependence. Its existence confirms the integrative effect of terrorism on international relations.

However, integration has limits. Regional cooperation remains ad hoc, underfunded and politically exposed. This finding refines the common assumption that a shared enemy naturally produces a stable alliance. Shared threat perception is necessary but insufficient. Cooperation also requires compatible strategic priorities, credible burden-sharing, functioning command arrangements, and sustained political dialogue. When domestic regime interests or diplomatic disputes dominate, states revert to national operations even though the threat remains transnational.

Securitisation theory reveals a second paradox. Extraordinary controls may be necessary to protect civilians and military assets, but indiscriminate restrictions can erode livelihoods and state legitimacy. If fishing communities cannot access water, traders cannot use lawful routes, and residents are presumed guilty because of geography, counter-terrorism may create incentives for informal taxation and insurgent protection. Effective policy must therefore be selective, intelligence-led and regularly reviewed rather than permanently exceptional.

The case also challenges a narrow separation between ‘high politics’ and human security. Refugee movement, food insecurity, school closure and market disruption are not secondary effects. They shape bilateral relations, donor priorities and the legitimacy of the regional order. International relations in the Lake Chad Basin are conducted not only through summits and military headquarters but also through humanitarian corridors, return agreements, stabilisation programmes and the daily regulation of border economies.

8. Policy Recommendations

1. Insulate regional security cooperation from diplomatic ruptures. The Lake Chad states should establish a standing ministerial crisis mechanism for the MNJTF, clarify minimum national commitments and develop continuity arrangements for periods of political transition. Operational participation should not depend solely on informal relations among current leaders.
2. Build a permanent intelligence and border-governance architecture. A strengthened fusion cell should integrate military, police, customs, immigration and financial intelligence under clear privacy and accountability rules. Data exchange must be reciprocal and useful to frontline sectors, not confined to capital-city institutions.
3. Replace blanket economic restrictions with secure, lawful corridors. Governments should map essential fishing, livestock and trade routes; introduce risk-based permits and

interoperable identity systems; and support transporters and traders displaced by counter-terrorism measures. Economic recovery is a security instrument, not a post-conflict luxury.

4. Adopt a regional security-development-governance compact. Military operations should be linked to the rapid restoration of courts, schools, clinics, water systems, local administration and accountable policing. Cleared territory that remains administratively empty is likely to be re-contested.

5. Harmonise prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration. Member states should agree on screening standards, evidentiary thresholds, child-protection rules, information sharing and post-release monitoring. Communities and victims must participate in programme design to avoid the risk of reintegration without legitimacy.

6. Make external assistance support African strategic autonomy. Partners should finance predictable multi-year capabilities, civilian protection, police functions and local governance rather than short equipment cycles. Assistance should be transparent, coordinated with regional priorities, and subject to human rights due diligence.

7. Strengthen strategic communication and local accountability. Governments should publish credible information on security incidents, civilian harm, compensation and programme outcomes. Silence and propaganda thrive where official communication is delayed or untrusted.

9. CONCLUSION

ISWAP has had a profound impact on international relations in West and Central Africa. It has converted insecurity in north-eastern Nigeria into a transnational problem involving regional institutions, foreign partners, humanitarian agencies and global counter-terrorism frameworks. The organisation's cross-border violence and shadow governance have challenged the practical meaning of sovereignty. At the same time, its economic and social effects have reshaped trade, migration and aid relations across the Lake Chad Basin. The regional response demonstrates both the possibility and fragility of cooperation. The MNJTF has provided a necessary platform for coordinated action and has achieved tactical successes, but it remains exposed to resource constraints and interstate political disputes. Terrorism has therefore produced compulsory interdependence without guaranteeing durable integration. The fundamental policy failure would be to confuse battlefield pressure with political resolution.

A sustainable response must be simultaneously regional, lawful and locally legitimate. Regional forces need predictable political and financial support; border management must

protect lawful mobility; external partnerships must reinforce African institutions; and justice and reintegration policies must distinguish culpability from coercion. Most importantly, governments must compete successfully with ISWAP in providing order, fairness, and economic opportunity. Terrorism affects international relations because it exploits the gap between legal sovereignty and effective governance. Closing that gap is the central task of the Lake Chad states and their partners. This study is limited by its documentary design and the difficulty of independently verifying events in inaccessible conflict zones. Future research should combine geocoded conflict data, cross-border trade indicators, elite interviews and community surveys to estimate how specific forms of violence affect bilateral cooperation and public trust. Comparative work with Islamic State branches in the Sahel, Somalia, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo would also clarify when global affiliation strengthens local insurgent governance and when it becomes primarily symbolic.

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