

Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise

by Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss

Abstract

As jihadi violence spreads throughout the Sahel, Ansaru, al-Qaeda's franchise in Nigeria, has renewed its presence in the country's northwest. This has occurred as Ansaru's two rivals, the unaffiliated 'Boko Haram' and the Islamic State's West Africa Province, also announced their own branches or activities in northwestern Nigeria for the first time, which, like Ansaru, involved cooperation with bandits. Ansaru's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria also coincides with al-Qaeda-affiliated fighters pushing further south from their historical bases in Mali into southern Burkina Faso and Niger. These simultaneous developments raise concerns about the growth of West African jihadist movements, interactions between Nigerian and Sahelian jihadists and both of them with bandits, and the possible realization of an 'arc of insurgency' in West Africa. Ansaru's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria, amid the inability of the Nigerian state to provide security in that region, has ramifications for the growth of al-Qaeda in West Africa because it could lead to al-Qaeda's uniting its Sahelian and Nigerian jihad theaters for the first time.

Keywords: Ansaru, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Sahel, northwest Nigeria, banditry

Introduction

On January 15, 2020, six Nigerian soldiers were killed in an ambush as they escorted the emir of Potiskum from Nigeria's Yobe State through Kaduna State in northwestern Nigeria.[1][2] Few details were initially provided about the perpetrators except that the armed men wore military uniforms. Although this description would have been somewhat uncharacteristic of bandits, whose violence had been plaguing northwestern Nigeria in previous years, it was not particularly revealing given the preponderance of gangs, criminals, and small-scale armed groups in that region.[3] Two days later, however, Jamaat al-Ansar al-Muslimeen fi Bilad al-Sudan, better known as Ansaru, claimed the attack.[4] This was the group's first claimed operation inside Nigeria since 2013 and indicated the group's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria.

Released through an al-Qaeda-linked propaganda channel, al-Hijrah, Ansaru's claim was intended to demonstrate to al-Qaeda's global followership the group's return to the northwestern Nigerian jihadist scene. After January 2020, Ansaru claimed three other attacks inside northwestern Nigeria between February and August 2020. With these sporadic claims coming after a half-decade of Ansaru's being virtually dormant operationally as well as on (social) media, it was apparent Ansaru's renewed presence was not yet set in stone, but the group was on an upswing. Northwestern Nigeria's widespread banditry and record of communal violence between ethnic Fulani herders and farming communities, as well as the increasing spread of jihadist violence across the Sahel and in northwestern Nigeria since at least 2019, means Ansaru, and thereby al-Qaeda, increasingly have opportunities to capitalize on the deteriorating regional security to support and promote Ansaru's resurgence in northwestern Nigeria.

Beginning with a brief history of Ansaru and its initial demise, the article proceeds to outline its activities after going underground by 2015, following an intense three-year rivalry with Abubakar Shekau-led 'Boko Haram.' The article then describes how Ansaru as well as its rivals, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and 'Boko Haram,' are trying to establish themselves in the northwestern Nigerian jihadist scene. Finally, the article assesses the wider implications for both the Nigerian and Sahelian theaters of these developments.

Given the dangers and limitations of travel during the COVID-19 pandemic, field research was not possible for the authors. As such, this article mostly relies on primary source material from jihadist forums, publications, and websites, in addition to pre-COVID-19 interviews conducted by the authors with individuals in northern Nigeria. Other sources, such as reports from international organizations that did conduct field research for

their publications, were used where applicable to supplement relevant data points. Secondary sources, such as news reports from verified local media outlets, were also utilized. As a starting point for addressing the phenomenon of Ansaru's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria amid Ansaru's own competition with ISWAP and Boko Haram in that theater, this article hopes future researchers can continue to shed light on this development as it evolves, including through in-country research where possible.

Ansaru's Beginnings

Like most jihadist groups, Ansaru was never devoid of factions, even though its factions were not easily apparent to outsiders. On one end, Ansaru represented al-Qaeda's, and particularly al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM), expansion into Nigeria through Nigerian jihadists who had trained with AQIM and formed Ansaru's 'militant wing.' On the other end, Ansaru reflected the inability of Nigerian Salafi preachers to curb jihadism after they began promoting al-Qaeda after the September 11, 2001, attacks, which resulted in their students eventually forming Ansaru's 'theological wing.'

Two Nigerian jihadist figures, in particular, illustrate the historical trajectories of Ansaru's factions and indicate how the "new" post-2019 Ansaru is a somewhat different entity than "original" Ansaru. The first figure, Khalid al-Barnawi, reportedly met Usama bin Laden or his deputy Muhammed Atef (Abu Hafs al-Masri) in Sudan in the 1990s and then fought with AQIM's earliest predecessor, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), in the Sahel.[5] This occurred after the GIA, under Afghan jihad veteran Hassan Allane, expanded GIA smuggling operations into Niger and eventually also into Nigeria in 1994.[6] Al-Barnawi later joined the GIA's successor, and AQIM's predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), in the late 1990s and became Mokhtar Belmokhtar's driver and companion.[7]

Al-Barnawi initially had little involvement in Nigeria-based jihadism. However, in 2003, Nigerian security forces cracked down on Nigeria's several-hundred-member-strong jihadi movement based in Kanama, Yobe State. It was led by Muhammed Ali, who had also been in Sudan and studied with young al-Qaeda ideologues, including Abu Yahya al-Libi, and facilitated his Nigerian followers' training with the GSPC and Sudanese paramilitaries in the mid-2000s.[8] Although Ali and his top disciples were killed in the Kanama crackdown, some surviving followers fled to the Sahel where they met al-Barnawi. There they trained and fought with the GSPC and later with AQIM.[9] Other followers of late Ali hid in Borno State, which borders Yobe, and launched several reprisal attacks on the army in late 2004.[10] The ties developed between Khalid al-Barnawi and these Nigerians with GSPC/AQIM provided the foundation for what became Ansaru's 'militant wing' in 2012.

Meanwhile, Ali's co-leader, Muhammed Yusuf, who had opposed Ali's rush to jihad in Kanama in 2003, fled Nigeria and traveled to Saudi Arabia for what turned out to be a short-term exile.[11] After receiving permission from Nigerian authorities and Salafi leaders to return to Nigeria in late 2004 on condition he would stop preaching against the state and accusing Salafis of apostasy for accepting 'man-made' laws, Yusuf flew back to Nigeria.[12] Although Yusuf was more patient than Ali, he still continued calling for jihad after returning to Nigeria, which led to a Nigerian government-Salafi alliance against him and his followers by 2007.[13]

Yusuf's jihad was launched in July 2009 in response to the Nigerian government's seeing Yusuf's growing popularity as a significant threat, especially as his preaching delegitimized the Nigerian state on Islamic grounds.[14] Salafi scholars, now supportive of the state, responded by labeling Yusuf and his followers "Boko Haram," meaning "Western education is sinful," to ridicule Yusuf's preaching.[15] This was despite Yusuf not giving his following any specific name and making clear that his preaching was principally for a jihad on al-Qaeda's model aiming to establish an Islamic state, and only secondarily for prohibiting Western education, or at least aspects of it that Yusuf believed contradicted the Quran.[16]

Yusuf was murdered while in government custody in July 2009. His followers, who numbered in the thousands, were psychologically more prepared for jihad than Ali's followers had been in 2003.[17] Khalid al-Barnawi led late Yusuf's followers, who were now under the leadership of Yusuf's deputy, Abubakar Shekau. It was Shekau

who renamed Yusuf's following as Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna Li Daw'ah wal-Jihad (the group, however, was still popularly known as 'Boko Haram'). They traveled to AQIM camps along the Mali-Niger border after Yusuf's death. Under Shekau, several "waves" of Yusuf's followers received training, funding, arms, and media support from AQIM.[18] The leader of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel, and AQIM's Sahel-based commander, Abu Zeid, subsequently released statements about Boko Haram, including condolences for Yusuf's death, and oversaw the Boko Haram members' training under AQIM in the Sahel.[19] Around this time, Shekau pledged loyalty to al-Qaeda through another Boko Haram member who had previously been among Ali's followers in Kanamma. [20] With this pledge from Boko Haram's leader, Shekau, and the followers of the late preacher Yusuf's and the militant al-Barnawi brought together, the core of what would later become Ansaru's 'preaching' and 'militant' wings was formed by 2011.

Weeks before Yusuf's death, Yusuf's *shura* had selected Shekau as Yusuf's successor over Muhammed Auwal Ibrahim Gombe, among others. The young Salafi scholar, Gombe, had studied and even been supported in his youth by the family of a prominent Nigerian Salafi scholar, and future Nigerian minister of communication, Isa Ali Pantami.[21] Thus, Gombe was an astute young Salafi theologian. However, when Pantami and Yusuf debated each other and became rivals in 2006, Gombe sided with Yusuf, left the mainstream Nigerian Salafi fold, and eventually became Ansaru's first leader.[22]

Gombe represented a more Nigeria-focused and theological figure, whereas Khalid al-Barnawi represented a more global-oriented and al-Qaeda-experienced militant figure; hence they respectively led Ansaru's 'theological' and 'militant' wings. The two came together to lead Ansaru when Shekau started showing "signs of extremism and deviancy" by 2011, which forced Gombe and al-Barnawi to seek to revive Yusuf's legacy by separating from their overall leader, Shekau.[23] Al-Barnawi and other AQIM-trained Nigerians then explained Shekau's "excesses and deviance" to AQIM, which involved comparing him to the ultra-*takfiri* GIA. They ultimately received AQIM's approval to separate from Shekau in November 2011.[24]

In January 2012, Ansaru, the name chosen by AQIM, announced its formation shortly after Shekau had ordered a massive attack in Kano that killed nearly 200 people, mostly Muslim civilians.[25] Ansaru's messaging indicated it sought to defend Nigerian Muslims from Christians on the domestic level, which was consistent with the former preaching of Gombe's mentor, Pantami.[26] At the same time, Ansaru conveyed that it was aligned with al-Qaeda through its symbols and messaging. This included seeking vengeance on the West for the war in Afghanistan and responding to bans on the hijab in France.[27] Moreover, Ansaru's operations in northern Nigeria involved four kidnappings of nine foreign engineers, eight of whom were killed in rescue attempts while one managed to escape.[28] Thus, Ansaru's messaging and operations (including a prison break in Abuja and an ambush of Nigerian soldiers near Abuja who were preparing to deploy to Mali to combat al-Qaeda-aligned jihadists) reflected Khalid al-Barnawi's influence. Meanwhile, other aspects of Ansaru's messaging, and especially its theological aversion to killing Muslim civilians or even Christians who were not supporting the government or military, reflected Gombe's influence.[29]

Despite Ansaru's initial burst onto the scene with unprecedented kidnappings of foreigners in northern Nigeria, which deviated from Shekau-led Boko Haram's violent revenge campaign against Nigerian Salafis, government officials and civilians, Ansaru struggled soon after its founding.[30] Shekau further exacted revenge on Gombe by having him assassinated by Shekau's loyalists in 2013. Reportedly, Shekau even leaked details on Ansaru cells so security forces could eliminate them.[31] These events led to Ansaru's gradually becoming defunct. Some members even cooperated with Boko Haram and later with ISWAP, while others bided time in Nigeria and abroad until Ansaru could reemerge.[32]

Ansaru Underground

After the French-led military intervention in northern Mali in January 2013, Ansaru entered into a new phase of dormancy. Besides the group's problems with Shekau and with Nigerian security forces domestically, AQIM commanders who had long communicated, trained, and funded Ansaru were either killed, including Abu Zeid in northern Mali, or retreated into deep hiding, including Mokhtar Belmokhtar, in Libya.[33] Furthermore,

some Nigerian jihadists who had fought in Mali among Ansaru members, and Ansaru members themselves, including Khalid al-Barnawi, returned to Nigeria and cooperated with Abubakar Shekau, despite his previous retribution against other Ansaru members.[34] Some Ansaru members later followed Shekau into ISWAP and continued in ISWAP after Shekau's August 2016 ouster from that group, and even despite ISWAP's growing hostility toward their former group, Ansaru, which included the public execution of two of its members in 2020.[35]

Tolerating an alliance with Shekau was the result of al-Barnawi being less ideological than Gombe and understanding that in order to continue conducting operations in Nigeria, it would be necessary to find an accommodation with Shekau. As a result, al-Barnawi's fighters focused on northern Cameroon, after reaching an agreement with Shekau, which allowed al-Barnawi's fighters to conduct operations there. For example, from 2013 to 2015, al-Barnawi's fighters cooperated with Shekau's fighters and local northern Cameroonian road-robbers to conduct at least two, if not all, of five kidnappings of 22 foreigners.[36] All of these kidnappings, however, were conducted in Boko Haram's name and resulted in millions of dollars entering Boko Haram's coffers.[37]

More practically, al-Barnawi had little choice but to align with Shekau as Shekau had been killing off Ansaru members, including most notably Gombe, while other Ansaru members were beheaded by Shekau's loyalists as punishment for defecting from him.[38] Further, Nigeria's domestic intelligence services broke up key Ansaru cells, including its *shura* headquarters in Kaduna State, reportedly after receiving "tips" from Ansaru's rivals,[39] most likely Shekau loyalists.[40] Ansaru's pseudonymous leader in 2017 even claimed Shekau's loyalists had attempted to kill al-Barnawi, but had failed.[41] Thus, if al-Barnawi wanted to survive, let alone operate in Nigeria or its borderlands in Cameroon again, it was inevitable he had to subordinate to Shekau's authority.

Al-Barnawi's tacit cooperation with Shekau in northern Cameroon did not mean al-Barnawi was all-in with Shekau's agenda. However, it did mean that what remained of Ansaru lacked the operational capabilities to act more independently. Moreover, Ansaru began losing the theological agenda it once had as its main ideologues, including Gombe, were killed or forced to engage in robberies to acquire enough funds to survive. Muhammed Yusuf's son, and ISWAP's post-August 2016 leader after Shekau, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, stated in his 2018 book, that Ansaru began kidnapping hostages in Nigeria for pursuing wealth, not ideology, given their "interest was in their bellies and pockets." [42] Additionally, the remaining Ansaru members after 2014 tended to be from Kogi State, where ethnic Ebiraland Salafis had joined Ansaru in part because they welcomed its transnationalism compared to Shekau's ethnic Kanuri and Borno focus.[43]

Due to Ansaru's clandestine nature, it became difficult to track the group from 2014 onward. Among the only signs of its existence during this period was when the group established a Twitter account and released two videos in a two-week period before Shekau pledged loyalty to Islamic State in March 2015.[44] These two videos reconfirmed Ansaru's dedication to al-Qaeda's *modus operandi*, as they spoke of reviving Usman dan Fodio's precolonial caliphate and expressed aversion to Shekau's killing Muslims and his eccentric mannerisms. [45] After 2015, however, Ansaru relocated from Bauchi's forests in northeastern Nigeria to northwestern Nigeria because of continued pressure from the country's security forces.[46] This meant that Ansaru returned to the region where it had initially been based when its *shura* was located in Zaria, Kaduna State in 2012.[47]

From 2016 until 2019, however, little was heard from Ansaru while Nigerian security forces made significant gains against the group, beginning with the arrest of Khalid al-Barnawi in Kogi State in April 2016.[48] Furthermore, al-Barnawi's deputy was arrested in Kaduna near an arms stockpile shortly after al-Barnawi's arrest.[49] The deputy, a Fulani and Zamfara native, was known for cattle-rustling, which suggested that al-Barnawi had abandoned his accommodation with Shekau, attempted to restart Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria, and, accordingly, recruited a deputy familiar with that region. Despite al-Barnawi's detention, Ansaru's new pseudonymous leader's requesting God to free al-Barnawi from prison in an article in an al-Qaeda magazine, *al-Risalah*, one year later signaled that al-Barnawi remained in Ansaru's good graces.[50] Moreover, the article indicated that despite Ansaru's lack of being able to claim any attacks from 2016 to 2019, the group survived and remained within al-Qaeda's fold.

There were also several instances of Ansaru members being arrested by Nigerian security agencies before traveling to or returning from Libya in the 2016–2019 period.[51] In some cases, these members were alleged to have been allied with the Islamic State, which is unsurprising considering that some Ansaru members had reintegrated with Boko Haram or later ISWAP.[52] Other Ansaru members who had remained loyal to al-Qaeda, nevertheless also claimed to have been in Libya.[53] Thus, there were some Ansaru members in Libya, where the group remained dormant while biding time before returning to Nigeria.[54] In terms of media presence, Ansaru only released several *anasheed* (Islamic a cappella songs) in 2018, which reaffirmed the group's desire to revive Usman dan Fodio's caliphate and its desire to defend Muslim civilians.[55] It was not until late 2019, however, that the group transitioned to reactivation in Nigeria.

Ansaru's Renewed Presence in Northwestern Nigeria

While Ansaru was inactive, northwestern Nigeria was becoming the focus of large-scale violence emanating from "armed bandits" and other communal violence in the region.[56] The bandits, operating from Nigeria's Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Niger states, were responsible for many of the northwest's deadliest attacks.[57] Local researchers, including James Barnett who has conducted field research in the region, found that many of these armed bandit gangs are comprised of ethnic Fulani who have engaged in various violent crimes, as well as cattle-rustling across Nigeria's northwest.[58] Feeding into these problems are the larger communal conflicts emanating from competition between Fulani herders and the often-Christian farming communities of the region, which have also exacerbated the violence.[59]

Within this context, Ansaru was able to exploit several conditions inside the northwest and the wider Sahel to reestablish its presence in Nigeria. First, it blurred the lines between general banditry and jihadism. Nigerian journalist and researcher, Idris Mohammed, who covers the growing instability across northern Nigeria with a focus on Ansaru, found that Ansaru has often provided weapons or man power to armed gangs for many of these attacks.[60] Yusuf Anka, another Nigerian journalist focusing on armed banditry in the northwest, also found that Ansaru was mixing with bandit leaders.[61] Accordingly, Ansaru was suspected of being behind several attacks in the region, despite that it did not officially claim an operation until January 2020.[62]

Ansaru's record tracked with the larger trend in the Sahel that researcher Heni Nsaibia has dubbed the "jihadization of banditry," wherein jihadist organizations have often transformed local bandit or criminal networks into allied groups.[63] While this represents a long-occurring phenomenon between criminals and jihadists, in recent years this has become especially relevant for al-Qaeda's Katibat Macina in Mali and Burkina Faso, which has been able to utilize Fulani gangs as auxiliary forces across those two countries.[64] Ansaru is trying to replicate the success found by its Malian and Burkinabe counterparts.

Secondly, Ansaru, like its al-Qaeda allies elsewhere in the Sahel, has been able to exploit Fulani grievances to its advantage. This exploitation is most evident in reports about the group's recruiting efforts. Much like with the armed gangs, Ansaru has also facilitated and maintained relationships with the larger Fulani communities of the northwest.[65]

As a result, the jihadist group has been able to use these connections to recruit disaffected individuals for its own gain. It has also managed to build a support base needed for its comeback. In this regard, the International Crisis Group (ICG) has found, through fieldwork, that Ansaru "deployed clerics to discredit democratic rule and the state government's peace efforts, a 'hearts and minds' campaign aimed at winning support from rural communities." [66] These efforts largely conform to al-Qaeda's overall *modus operandi* of using and exploiting local grievances such as in central Mali where it has utilized preexisting communal and land conflicts to recruit, proselytize, and strengthen its own foothold in the area.[67]

Moreover, the da'wah-based approaches being used by Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria mirror similar proselytization efforts conducted by al-Qaeda groups in the wider Sahel and North Africa.[68] This approach was even broadcasted by the group itself in its first-ever Fulfulde-language [the language of the Fulani across West Africa] audio message released in May 2019.[69] That production featured a spokesman for the group

calling on the Fulani of northwestern Nigeria to support Ansaru and its efforts against the state, while lecturing about various religious aspects of the fight.[70]

Finally, the rising jihadist violence across the Sahel has facilitated a conducive environment for Ansaru to renew its presence. As the jihadist violence continues to push further south in both Burkina Faso and Niger, this has allowed Ansaru to strengthen connections with al-Qaeda's Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), of which Katiba Macina is one component. For example, the ICG also found evidence of JNIM supplying Ansaru with weapons captured from military raids across the Sahel.[71] Given the prior connections to al-Qaeda in Libya and known ties to JNIM, it is also plausible that Ansaru members have utilized JNIM bases inside the Sahel for training or as rear bases. However, due to the largely clandestine nature of Ansaru's activities, some of these claims have not yet been substantially verified.

All of these efforts, however, came into the fore in October 2019 when Ansaru began to publicly advertise its revival inside Nigeria. In late 2019, two *Telegram* channels emerged that purported to be run by Ansaru members. Posting in both English and Hausa, one channel featured commentary on events inside northwestern Nigeria next to general jihadist propaganda.[72] On October 27, 2019, al-Qaeda's Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), a propaganda outlet that acts as a clearinghouse for various groups within the al-Qaeda network, published a new photo of Ansaru members inside a forest, taken likely in northwestern Nigeria.[73] In the same statement, GIMF noted that Ansaru had created a new media foundation, Al-Yaqut Media Center, the same one that has subsequently featured on al-Qaeda's list of its own and affiliates' media channels.[74]

In November 2019, many jihadist channels on *Telegram* were shut down in a massive effort undertaken by the platform in cooperation with Europol.[75] As a response, al-Qaeda's media team created a main *Rocket Chat* server that acts as a central repository and forum for various groups within its network. Included in this server was a dedicated forum for Ansaru and its members and supporters.[76] One month later, the aforementioned *Telegram* channels posted yet another new photo of Ansaru members in an area resembling northwestern Nigeria's forest villages.[77] With these small propaganda releases, Ansaru affirmed to its supporters, and indeed the wider al-Qaeda network, that it was teasing out its eventual declaration of its renewal.

Finally, in January 2020, Ansaru officially claimed its first attack inside Nigeria since its renewal in northwestern Nigeria.[78] That attack, the aforementioned ambush on the Emir of Potiskum and his convoy in Kaduna, was posted online by two of al-Qaeda's propaganda channels, Al-Hijrah and Al-Thabat, which have continued to carry Ansaru's statements. Interestingly, the two Ansaru *Telegram* channels, while also taking credit for the attack, openly debated whether it was the right time to publicly announce Ansaru's renewed presence in the area or whether the group should remain in stealth, while also promising to free Khalid al-Barnawi and other Kogi State-origin preachers of the group from prison.[79] Nevertheless, this did not stop al-Qaeda and its supporters in widely sharing the group's claim of responsibility.

Seemingly confirming both Ansaru's responsibility for the ambush and its overall renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria, Nigerian security forces claimed that it had launched an offensive on Ansaru in early February 2020. State forces reported its units raided a large Ansaru camp in Kaduna, killing "no fewer than 250 terrorists and bandits." [80] In response, Ansaru released its own statement, claiming to have killed or wounded "more than 34" Nigerian soldiers while also shooting down a 'war plane' in the operation.[81] Although the Nigerian state did not confirm any fatalities on its side, it did, however, note that Ansaru forced a helicopter to a premature landing.[82]

Between February and August 2020, Ansaru's public communications were relatively dormant. However, on August 7, the silence was broken when it claimed another attack against Nigerian security forces.[83] In its statement, the group asserted that "more than 25 apostates were killed and 10 wounded in an attack on a position of the Nigerian army in Kaduna State in central Nigeria." [84] Three weeks later, on August 23, it claimed another assault on the Nigerian military in Kaduna, reporting that 35 troops were killed.[85] Both August attack claims remain unconfirmed by local media, as a series of violent attacks across the state that month made it difficult to pinpoint any specific incident to which Ansaru might have been referring. It should be noted, however, the claims coincided with reported bandit attacks on Christians.[86]

Ansaru has not publicly claimed an operation since August 2020. However, al-Qaeda's propaganda apparatus continues to include Ansaru within its sphere. For instance, in February 2021, a pro-al-Qaeda figure, Warith al-Kassam, who remains influential within the group's African activities, included Ansaru on a map of al-Qaeda in Africa.[87] In June 2021, the same person included Ansaru's aforementioned new media outlet, Al-Yaqut Media Center, on a list of official al-Qaeda propaganda outlets.[88] Al-Yaqut has yet to release any material, but its continued promotion within al-Qaeda's global network shows al-Qaeda recognizes Ansaru's renewal in northwestern Nigeria. This preceded a September 2021 *Daily Trust* report about Ansaru hoisting its flags in two towns in Zamfara, where bandits had previously reached a pact with farmers that allowed the bandits to access the towns' markets in return for the bandits not harassing the farmers.[89]

That Ansaru has chosen to hide or conceal many elements of its renewal in northwestern Nigeria is not surprising. This strategy follows similar attempts made by other al-Qaeda groups to hide their hand so as to limit any potential coordinated military offensives or international pressure against it. For instance, al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia, previously sought to hide its foreign connections under the directions of al-Qaeda's senior leadership.[90]

Meanwhile, in Mali, AQIM also initially sought to conceal its involvement in the 2012 takeover and occupation of the country's northern regions by organizing its units under the banner of the ostensible local jihadist group Ansar Dine.[91] However, in both cases, in Somalia and Mali, international military offensives were inevitably conducted against both al-Shabaab and AQIM. It is possible that Ansaru has learned from these other Africa al-Qaeda affiliates and has deliberately opted for a more opaque operational approach in an attempt to provide a more conducive environment for its renewal while being relatively safe from international pressure.

Implications of Ansaru's Renewed Presence in Northwestern Nigeria

Ansaru's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria involves several distinct factors that threaten not only Nigeria, but the Sahelian region writ large. First, and perhaps foremost, the dangerous cocktail of violence brewing in northwestern Nigeria between banditry and ethnic and communal violence stands to be exacerbated by further jihadist involvement.[92] As seen in other areas of the Sahel, such as in central Mali and parts of northern and eastern Burkina Faso, jihadist participation in communal conflicts has often accelerated retaliatory strikes and massacres, or has prompted more heavy-handed government responses that have in turn fueled cycles of violence.[93] Local militias such as Dan Na Ambassagou in central Mali and self-defense groups like Burkina Faso's Koglweogo or the nascent Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland have been emboldened to perpetrate crimes against rival ethnic groups and communities as a result of either state authorities failing to successfully disarm them or incorporating these outfits into their broad counter-terrorism campaigns, respectively.[94] It is not an unrealistic scenario for similar scenes to play out in northwestern Nigeria as the violence there continues to expand.

Additionally, there are worrying trends for the Nigerian jihadist scene more broadly. A sustained Ansaru insurgency in northwestern Nigeria would mean that jihadists from Nigeria's borders with Cameroon and Chad to the east and with Niger and Benin to the west will be challenging the state for control. While Nigeria has indeed launched some military operations against jihadists and other militants in the northwest, the vast majority of the military's focus, as well as the focus of the foreign troops supporting Nigeria, is predominantly on Boko Haram's jihadist insurgency in the country's northeast.[95] The relative lack of resources dedicated to containing violence in the northwest may mean there are opportunities for Ansaru to exploit security gaps as the group continues to recruit. Sustained small-scale assaults on Nigerian military outposts could further weaken the state's presence if more resources are not allocated to that front.

In anticipating growing jihadist violence in northwestern Nigeria, the country's military also needs to not only focus on Ansaru. In fact, the formerly Shekau-led Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna Li Daw'ah wal-Jihad [the official name for Shekau's 'Boko Haram' faction] announced Zamfara and Niger State branches as well as Lake Chad and Cameroon branches for the first time in 2020.[96] Considering Shekau's long history of animosity to Ansaru, it seems plausible that he sent fighters in northwestern Nigeria to rival the nascent Ansaru in that region. This

was evidenced most starkly through Shekau's claim of the kidnapping of over 300 schoolboys in Kankara, Katsina State in a video showing the schoolboys that the bandits exclusively provided to Shekau, as well as through Boko Haram's videos of militants and civilians praying in northwestern Nigeria and announcing their loyalty to Shekau.[97]

Meanwhile, ISWAP has also entered the fray and claimed its first attacks in northwestern Nigeria in October 2019. ISWAP's integration of Shekau's fighters after Shekau's death in May 2021, and ISWAP leader Abu Musab al-Barnawi's call specifically to Shekau's fighters in northwestern Nigerian to join ISWAP also means it is possible Shekau's loyalists in northwestern Nigeria will transfer loyalty to ISWAP.[98] In sum, Ansaru is now reviving in northwestern Nigeria at the same time ISWAP and Shekau's fighters, or at least his former fighters, are establishing their own presence in the region. This warrants significant attention from Nigerian security forces because ISWAP is, after all, a more lethal and larger fighting force than Ansaru and has a record of incorporating Ansaru defectors into its ranks while killing those who resist. At the same time, the continued fighting between ISWAP and late Shekau's fighters in northwestern Nigeria who have not reintegrated into ISWAP could distract both groups from their expansion plans in northwestern Nigeria, leaving Ansaru with more space to operate without either of those two groups interfering with Ansaru's operations.

Finally, a rising Ansaru fits into al-Qaeda's broader agenda for the Sahel and West Africa. Violence perpetrated by al-Qaeda's affiliate, JNIM, continues to expand out of Mali and into its neighboring states.[99] Over the last year, JNIM's attacks have pushed deeper into Burkina Faso and are now threatening to reach into several littoral West African states, including Ivory Coast, Togo, and Benin.[100] Ties between JNIM and Ansaru have already been documented by local researchers.[101] However, as Ansaru continues to grow and expand in northwest Nigeria, it is possible its long-term goals consist of trying to integrate its insurgency into a contiguous theater for al-Qaeda in West Africa, especially to compete against ISWAP, whose reincorporation of Shekau's fighters has been heavily promoted by Islamic State, including its spokesman and media wing in an ISWAP video.[102]

All of these factors, however, remain in flux. The future of Ansaru depends on whether it can sustain a renewed foothold inside northwestern Nigeria. However, given the current state of both the rising overall violence in the region and Nigerian military impotence in the northwest, the al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist group may indeed find favorable conditions to successfully mount a comeback inside Nigeria. Whether this will occur, or ISWAP will become the dominant jihadist group in northwestern Nigeria, remain key questions for scholars, analysts, researchers, and especially the Nigerian government and its international partners to answer.

About the Authors:

Jacob Zenn is author of *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*, which was published in April 2020 by Lynne Rienner in association with the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St. Andrews. Zenn is also senior fellow on African Affairs and editor of *Terrorism Monitor* at The Jamestown Foundation and an adjunct assistant professor on African Armed Movements at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program. Follow @BokoWatch

Caleb Weiss is senior analyst at the Bridgeway Foundation where he focuses on the spread of the Islamic State in Central Africa. He is also research analyst at FDD's *Long War Journal* where he focuses on jihadism across the African continent. Weiss is a graduate of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. Follow @Weissenberg7

Notes

[1] In using 'northwestern Nigeria,' the authors are referring to the geographical area of Nigeria that includes the states of Kaduna, Niger, Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Kebbi. While Nigeria does have a national region called the 'northwest,' which includes additional states to the ones listed above, the term strictly refers to geography for the purposes of this article.

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