



DANGER:
the road to
MAIDUGURI

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Our researchers employed methods such as desk research and phone interviews to collate the available data. Our editors sifted through the data and prepared the report, using various proprietary tools to fact-check and copy edit the information gathered. A baseline of accurate and comprehensive historic data is collected from respondents and publicly-available information, including from research partners, newspapers and government agencies.

All images are courtesy Premium Times. All maps were plotted using Google Earth.

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A RESURGENT BOKO HARAM?

On the evening of Friday, September 7 2018, fighters loyal to the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) raised their flag over Gudumbali, the headquarters of Guzamala Local Government Area in Borno state. Following an attack which started the day before, ISWAP overran the North and West banks of the town over the following day, and by the morning of Saturday, September 8, had taken total control of the town. Soldiers of the Nigerian Army and policemen in town abandoned their positions, and in some instances discarded their uniforms as they sought to escape the advancing terrorists.

What was striking was the speed with which the military lost control of Gudumbali, a strategic town that lies on the road between Damasak and Monguno. It is also important to note that sources claimed that the impending attack was common knowledge, with some people already moving out of town as early as Tuesday, September 4. This attack happened less than a week after 145 Battalion was attacked in Zari, 51km away, leading to the loss of 48 soldiers.

Belatedly, the military launched a counter-attack to retake the town on the evening of Saturday, 8 September. As of the time of writing this report, the operation is still ongoing with ISWAP putting up heavy resistance, and with fighting having spread as far as Kukawa, 43km away. Sources say that the terrorists were caught on the back foot as they did not expect a Nigerian counter-attack so quickly, but their main objective, weapons and ammunition, had been achieved.

THE YEAR OF REVERSALS

2018 is likely to go down as the year of the debacle – the year in which the gulf between official claims of Boko Haram’s technical defeat or degradation by the Nigerian military and the sordid reality of a resilient insurgency that is unlikely to end soon was cruelly exposed. The unravelling of official propaganda has come at the tragically steep cost in the lives of men and women of the armed forces.

Last week’s attack on Gudumbali in Guzamala Local Government Area of Borno State was a milestone in a series of reversals that has been inflicted on the Nigerian Army over the past six months. These reversals have coincided with the offensive launched by ISWAP, the faction of Boko Haram led by Abu Musab al Barnawi, which favours a streamlined ruthlessness that targets the armed forces and other agents of the state. The group’s approach differs from the indiscriminate bloodlust of the faction led by Abubakar Shekau which has resulted in many civilian casualties and was one of the issues that led to the factionalisation of the insurgency.

The ISWAP offensive has seen a mounting spate of ambushes of military convoys and attacks on military bases that are estimated to have claimed the lives of at least 600 Nigerian troops this year so far, and this does not take into account the Gudumbali attack.

In the whole of 2017, the army recorded 300 casualties.

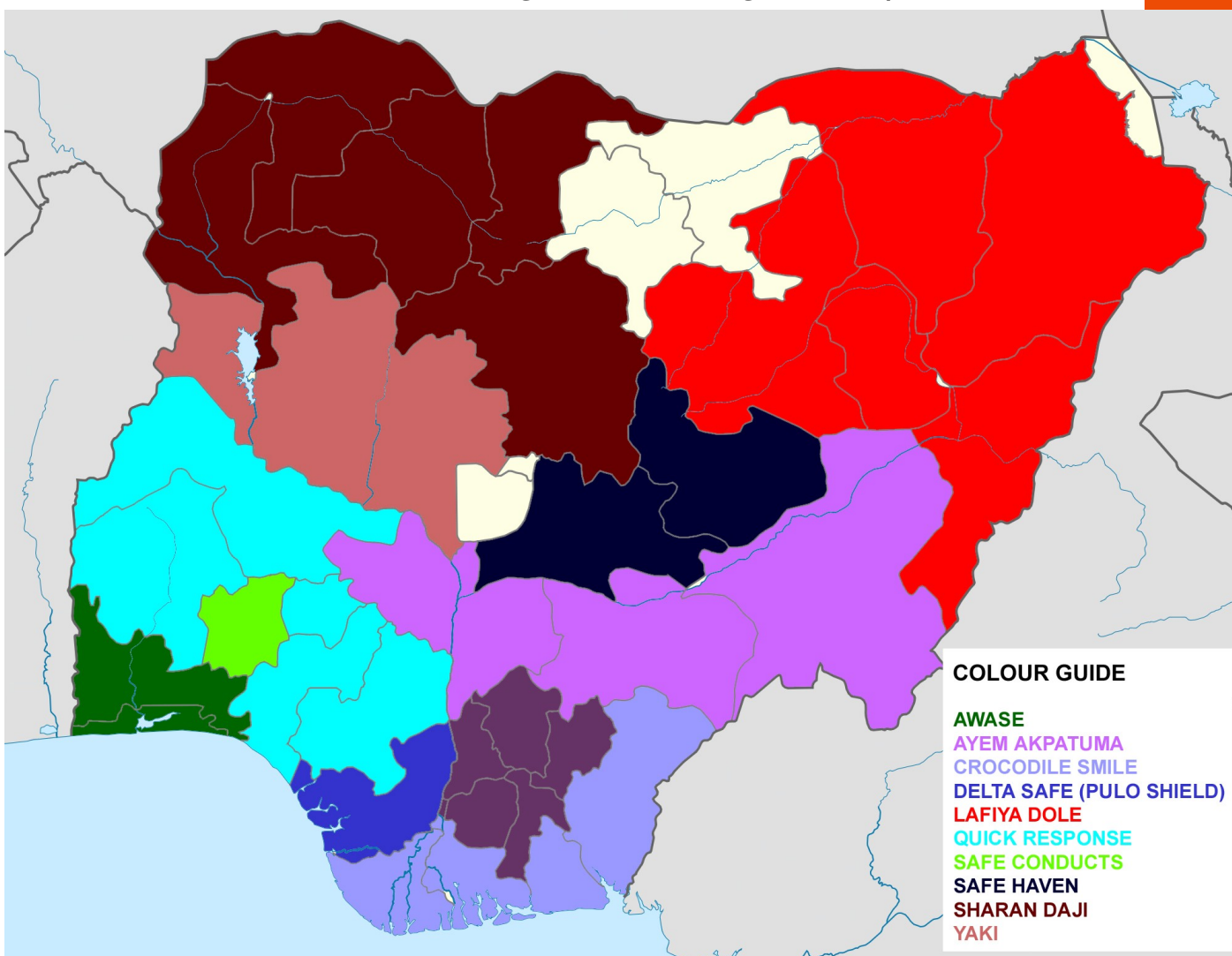
Date	Location	Killed	Unaccounted for
March 2	Rann, Borno	4	
June 20	Gajiram, Borno	9	
July 13	Boboshe, Borno		62
July 14	Jilli, Yobe		200
July 21	Tarmuwa, Yobe	8	
July 24	Yajiwa, Borno	7	
July 26	Jakana, Borno	4	
July 27	Bunari, Borno	11	
August 8	Garunda, Borno	17	
August 30	Zari, Borno	48	

Table: military casualties since March 2018. Source: Premium Times

If 2014 – 2016 represented the peak of military successes in degrading the insurgency and forcing it into a retreat, 2017 to 2018 has witnessed a relapse into what resembles the dark days of 2012 and early 2014 when Boko Haram expanded its footprint across Borno and established its caliphate in Gwoza. A feature of ISWAP's attacks has been the seizure of uniforms and armaments from sacked bases adding to the group's already formidable arsenal. This has happened in attacks in Boboshe, Gajiram, Garunda, Jilli, Zari, and also in Gudumbali where various sources confirmed that large quantities of weapons and ammunition were seized from the military as the ISWAP fighters overran the base.

STRATEGIC CONUNDRUM – WEAKER NEIGHBOURS OF A WEAK STATE

These setbacks are driven by a number of factors. Even with up to half of the army's infantry currently stationed in the north east, the army which is also presently deployed in 30 states of the federation, is spread too thin and cannot establish a footprint adequate enough to secure the vast expanse of Borno which at almost 71,000km², is Nigeria's second largest state by landmass.



Map: a busy military. Nigeria's army has been involved in various internal security ops across the country over the last few years stretching its abilities.

In addition, Borno's unguarded borders with three other countries – Cameroon, Chad and Niger – enables insurgents to move fluidly across borders and hibernate in pockets of territory while Nigerian forces are unable to exercise any right of pursuit across those borders. For all intents and purposes, the Nigerian military is confronting a transnational insurgency which now transcends binary categories of either internal insurrection or international conflict. Its enemy is nimble and mobile, and able to flow through permeable boundaries in ways that the army cannot.

This is a strategic conundrum exacerbated by the operational inadequacies of the Multinational Joint Task Force, a regional military collaboration hobbled by poor funding and lack of political will, and the fact that on the other side of the

border in Cameroon, Chad and Niger, are themselves spaces of derelict governance. With vast ungoverned spaces spanning four countries, the insurgency has more than ample room in which to retreat, hibernate and regroup.

Diffa, an administrative region in the Republic of Niger, has been a favourite haunt of the insurgents and Nigerien forces have been unable to secure their own territories from ISWAP. In short, Nigeria may be a fragile state but the fact that she shares borders with states that are even more anaemic complicates the scenario.



UNGOVERNED SPACES, UNSUPPORTIVE SKIES

The counter-insurgency campaign also suffers from the lack of adequate air support. In 2014, the presence of STEPP, the South African private military contractor retained by the Nigerian government early in 2015 added a vital air power component that led to the routing and dislodgement of insurgent forces in many areas. The discontinuance of the contract with STEPP after power changed hands in mid-2015 has vastly reduced the air-strike capabilities of the Nigerian forces, and diminished the threat to the insurgents. A full spectrum strategy would involve satellite surveillance and drone reconnaissance over the north east for intelligence and early warning with rapid air-strike capabilities. It must address the question of securing Nigeria's highly vulnerable borders and must also deepen covert intelligence assets in the region with a specific focus on mapping and disrupting the insurgents' recruitment and funding pipelines which evidently remain intact and account for the resilience of the insurgency.

HEARTS AND MINDS – ASSURING CIVILIAN POPULATION

Some reports claimed that the attack on Guzamala recorded no civilian casualties as the insurgents were said to have declared that they were targeting only the military. Even so, it is bound to have repercussions for the planned return on displaced persons to their communities.

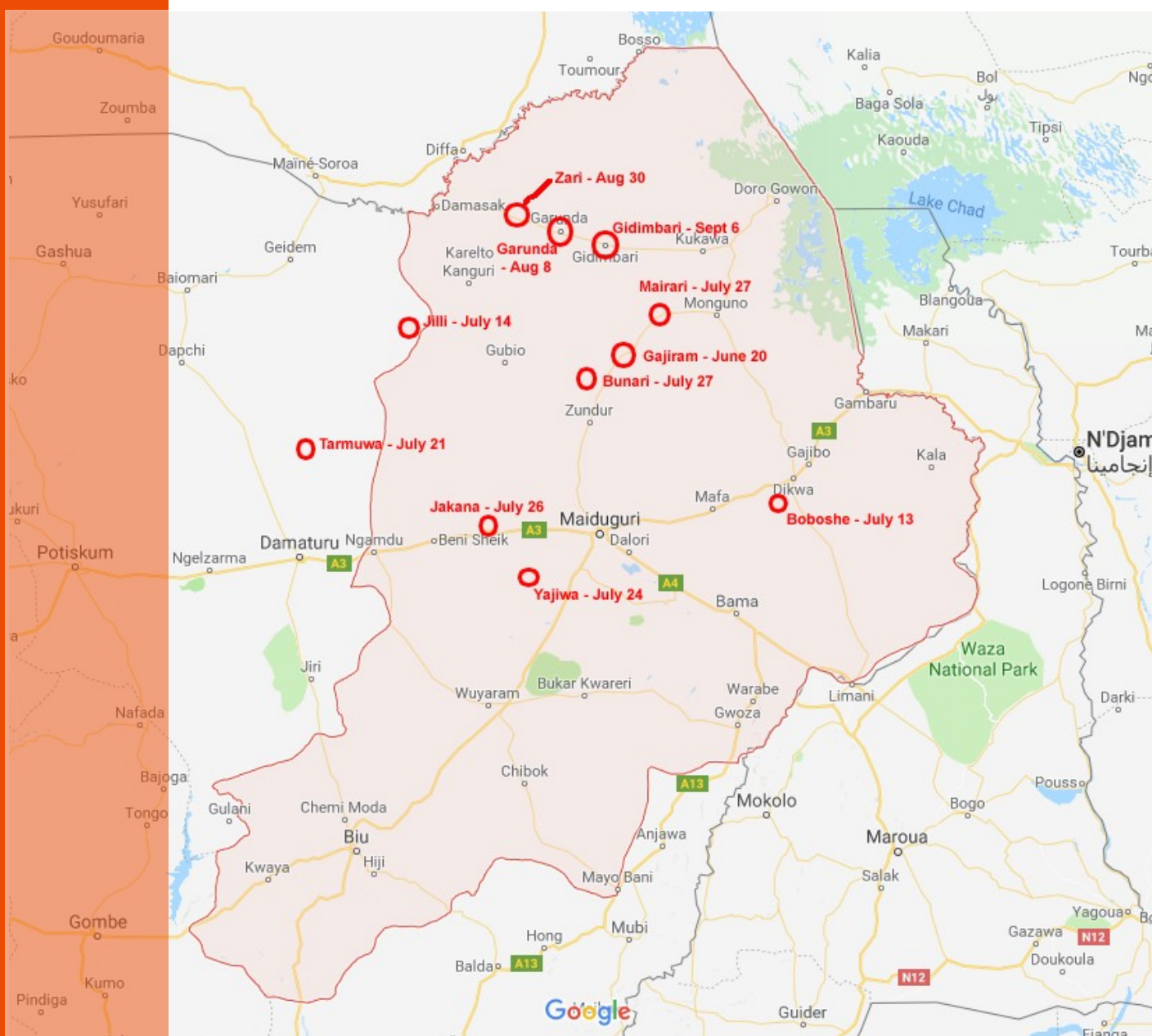
Earlier this year, some 2000 displaced persons returned to the town in what was expected to be the first wave of returnees. Last week's attacks lend credence to concerns that a mass return of displaced people to areas where security remains fragile will set the stage for disaster. Public confidence in the ability of the government to organise a safe, secure and sustainable return of IDPs can only have been diminished.

It appears that with the new stance, ISWAP is telling the civilian population that it is more capable of keeping them safe in the volatile environment than the government is able to do. It will be a serious victory for the insurgents if they are successful with this messaging and the people begin to return to their homes, not in obedience to the government, but believing the assurances of the insurgents.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN GOING FORWARD?

Going forward, it is important to ask what the objective is of ISWAP in this series of attacks.

It is possible that although they are supposed to be rivals, Abubakar Shekau's Boko Haram, and Al-Barnawi's ISWAP are in fact complementary in the wider strategic viewpoint. On the one hand, ISWAP is a belligerent in the traditional military sense, taking out military installations and assets for the protection of the community, while on the other, Boko Haram swinging at community morale through its attacks on civilians such as the kidnap, on September 5, of 10 civilians on the road between Maiduguri and Gwoza.



Map: attacks by ISWAP on military formations since mid-June, 2018.

Through its operations ISWAP degrades the morale and capabilities of a poorly led military to protect the communities under attack from Shekau's people. Through their operations, the Shekau's faction saps the morale of the community to work with or support the military. As long as this tag team effort continues, the likelihood of the collapse of Maiduguri and Borno State grows. If this continues, the possibility exists that people will shift allegiance increasingly to ISWAP. We believe that ISWAP knows this, and is counting on it with an assault on Maiduguri likely to come sometime in Q1 2019, when the Nigerian military is even more distracted by the 2019 General Elections. It must be noted that July 2019 makes it exactly 10 years since the murder of the founder of the movement, Mohammed Yusuf, and this is a significant anniversary. The capture of Maiduguri at that time will be a huge morale booster for the insurgents.

CONCLUSION

The only positive is that at 70,898km², the assets required to take and hold it Borno state are realistically beyond the capability of either the government of Nigeria, or any of the factions of Boko Haram. Strategic realism demands a recognition of the fact that it is impossible to regain control of the entirety of Borno State. Any effort to return vulnerable persons must focus on a phased resettlement of such persons in a few areas designated as safe havens which would then be rapidly fortified and scaled up to accommodate an influx of civilians. The vast open spaces of the north east and its unpoliced borders make regaining full control of the region a medium term endeavour that would tie into a larger programme of stabilisation and security for the Sahel.

There is as yet no evidence of a comprehensive strategy that trains and mobilises non-military components of the national security and defence establishment to secure communities in Borno. After a meeting of the National Security Council in August, the minister of defence, Mansur Dan-Ali urged the Nigerian Police and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps to deploy personnel to patrol areas liberated by the military. Such deployments would free the military to concentrate its resources on combat. No such mobilisation has occurred. In the interim, the military continues to bear the impossible burden of carrying out combat operations, policing and escort services. The result is the escalated risk of burnout as well as diminishing morale. Last month's protest at the Maiduguri airport by special forces troops rejecting their deployment to Marte was a sign that morale and discipline are being strained to breaking point. The Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Tukur Buratai also warned senior officers not to abandon their positions or flee engagements with the enemy. This is not a statement that can be reconciled with the supposed exploits of an army that purportedly has the upper hand. If the present tide of the insurgency is not reversed, ISWAP's territorial sphere of influence will expand. But we could also witness the spread of mutinous discontent among the forces stationed in north east.

The risk then is that with so many ungoverned spaces, community leaders in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa North, will be sucked into a system of shifting alliances, making the region the equivalent of the fiefdoms that govern so many parts of Somalia as an example.

That outcome, is now very possible.

ABOUT SBM INTEL

SBM Intel is an Africa-focused market intelligence and communications consulting firm focused on addressing the critical need for market data and big data analytics.

We employ various methods of data collection such as personal interviewing, telephone, mail and the Internet. Depending on the survey design, our methods can be used separately or combined. Our Data Collection Methodology (DCM) team advises on data collection methods for all ONS social and business surveys. With clients both within the business and the wider government community, we aim to provide expert advice on data collection procedures and carry out research leading to improvements in survey quality.

Our firm's strategic communication services are designed to influence the stakeholders critical to our clients' objectives. We are a lean and fast machine that combines creative messaging and the right channels to deliver measurable and competitive business results.

We help organisations identify opportunities, keep an eye on the competition and be informed about market trends. We also combine our in-depth understanding of the Nigerian market with 360 degrees strategic communication skills to influence those that matter most to our clients

