

# A Bird's-eye view of the *Jihadist* insurgencies in Africa. Towards understanding the place of ASWJ-Mozambique in the wider *Jihadist* landscape ☐

Alexander Zhukov\*

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## Introduction

The contemporary landscape of insurgent movements in Africa presents a complex tapestry of interconnected yet competing networks. These insurgent groups share one similar trait: they have become extremely resilient and adaptive to changing conflict environments, skilled at navigating between local grievances and predatory interests of various powerful actors. *Jihadist* armed groups in Africa fit into this general paradigm like any other insurgent group, notwithstanding their adherence to specific political ideology. Over the past decades, the African continent has witnessed the rise and transformation of various *Jihadist* groups, each aligning itself to mainstream networks shaping the wider *Jihadist* landscape. The rivalry between Islamic State group (ISg) affiliates and *al-Qaeda* (AQ) organizations has created a particularly dynamic environment where ideological competition intersects with practical concerns over territory, resources, and recruitment. The significance of mapping these *Jihadist* networks extends beyond academic inquiry. As these groups adapt to military pressure, exploit governance vacuums, and forge new alliances, their evolution directly impacts regional stability and international security efforts. The rivalry between the affiliates of the Islamic State group and *al-Qaeda* has created a particularly dynamic environment, where ideological competition intersects with practical concerns over territory, resources, and recruitment. Understanding these dynamics provides essential context for assessing the trajectory of specific conflicts, including the insurgency led by *Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a* in northern Mozambique-Cabo Delgado (ASWJ-Mozambique).

This article provides a brief overview of major *Jihadist* groups currently active across Africa, examining their affiliations, operational areas, and interconnections.

We will not seek answers to frequently asked questions about foreign roles in the setting up of *Jihadist* insurgencies – in Cabo Delgado or elsewhere in Africa. Nor will we focus on the counter-insurgency operations and the involvement of extra-regional governments in particular. These questions lie beyond the scope of this study.

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\* CEAUP.

Instead, we will attempt a birds-eye view of the ongoing *Jihadist* dynamics within their regional contexts. We also hope that this perspective will shed some light on the current position of ASWJ in the informal hierarchy of the *Jihadist* armed groups in the wider regional landscape. Or that it will help us demystify the issue of how different *Jihadist* groups relate to each other through their networks (in this case, the ISg and AQ).

## The *Jihadist* landscape: competition and fragmentation

The current configuration of *Jihadist* groups in Africa reflects deep ideological rifts and organizational rivalries that have shaped the movement since the emergence of the Islamic State group. The competition between ISg and *al-Qaeda* extends beyond mere territorial disputes or resource allocation; it represents fundamentally different approaches to *Jihadist* strategy and governance. This rivalry has created a fractured landscape where groups must navigate not only their conflicts with state forces but also their relationships with competing *Jihadist* factions.

The circumstances surrounding ISg's emergence have intensified these divisions. Many ISg affiliates in Africa originated from defections within established *al-Qaeda* networks, creating bitter personal and organizational animosities. These defections often split existing groups, with former comrades-in-arms becoming enemies. The resulting fragmentation has produced varied outcomes across different regions: in some areas, competing groups engage in direct military confrontation, while in others, they choose non-violent coexistence and deliberately avoid possible clashes - to focus on their primary adversaries.

### North Africa

North Africa's long history with *Salafist* ideology and *Jihadist* movements provides the historical foundation for understanding current dynamics. The region's experience, from the Algerian civil war (1992-2002) to the connections between international *Jihadists* and Sudan's *al-Bashir* government in the late 1990s, established patterns that continue to influence contemporary movements.

### Al-Qaeda in North Africa

*Al-Qaeda* in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) remains the cornerstone of *al-Qaeda*'s North African presence. Despite being substantially weakened within Algeria, AQIM maintains operational capacity through low-profile insurgency activities in the Kabylie mountains and Sahara region, supported by clandestine networks across the broader region. As an umbrella organization, AQIM has incorporated various regional affiliates, including Tunisia's *Uqba Ibn Nafi* Battalion and historically larger entities from neighboring countries. These mergers often reflected political and ideological calculations as much as tactical considerations, with AQIM's proximity to *al-Qaeda*'s central leadership enhancing its status within the network's hierarchy.

AQIM's influence extends well beyond North Africa's borders, reaching into the Sahel belt of West Africa, where it has played a crucial role in supporting and coordinating *Jihadist* activities.

## ISg in North Africa

During its peak (2014-2017), the Islamic State group established several official provinces (*wilayat*) in North Africa, notably *Wilayat Sinai* in Egypt and three provinces in Libya that eventually consolidated. However, the collapse of ISg's caliphate project and declining revenues severely impacted these affiliates' operational capabilities. Both *Wilayat Libya* and *Wilayat Sinai* continue low-profile insurgencies, but their current capacity remains far below their former strength.

The Islamic State in Algeria (*Wilayat al-Jazair*), prominently mentioned by ISg leadership between 2014-2017, has effectively disappeared from official communications and it seems to have always been more of a symbolic ally. *Wilayat Sahel* (formerly Islamic State in the Greater Sahara - ISGS) maintains historical connections to Libya while operating primarily in the Sahel zone, conducting cross-border raids along the southern margins of North African states.

The cross-border activities of both ISg and AQ-aligned groups extend beyond military operations to include illicit arms trafficking across the Sahara, fueling conflicts throughout West Africa and beyond.

## West Africa

West Africa's *Jihadist* landscape centers on two primary operational zones: the western Sahel belt (encompassing parts of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) and the Lake Chad basin. These areas serve as launching points for *Jihadist* expansion throughout the broader region.

## The AQ Network

*Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) serves as *al-Qaeda's* primary vehicle in the western Sahel. Formed in 2017 through the merger of AQIM's local branch with *al-Mourabitoun*, *Katibat Macina*, and *Ansar Dine*, JNIM represents a strategic alliance designed to counter ISg expansion while maintaining pressure on regional governments and international forces. Currently among the few *Jihadist* groups experiencing growth, JNIM continues expanding its operational reach beyond Mali into neighboring territories.

In the Lake Chad region, *Boko Haram* factions loyal to *al-Qaeda* operate in opposition to the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The movement remains deeply fragmented, consisting of multiple factions with varying operational capabilities. According to the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Boko Haram* maintains an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 fighters across its various factions, operating primarily in the Lake Chad basin region. The group employs traditional guerrilla tactics including ambushes, raids on military outposts, and attacks on civilian settlements, while maintaining a loose organizational structure that complicates counter-insurgency efforts.

## The ISg Network

The Islamic State's West African presence revolves around two key organizations: ISWAP and *Wilayat Sahel*-ISGS. ISWAP emerged from *Boko Haram* when *Abubakar Shekau* pledged allegiance to the Islamic State caliphate in 2014-2015. Subsequent factional splits resulted in some elements returning to *al-Qaeda* alignment, creating the current divided landscape.

ISWAP maintains between 4,000 and 7,000 fighters according to various estimates, operating from bases in the Lake Chad area. The group employs sophisticated attack strategies including complex ambushes, raids on military bases, and targeted assassinations of government officials. Significantly, ISWAP hosts the *al-Furqan* office, one of ISg's regional administrative centers that serves as a crucial hub for financial transfers and logistical coordination across the regional network. This office facilitates money transfers between different ISg entities and enables operational cooperation across West Africa.

In 2024, UN officials reported ISWAP deployed 2,000-3,000 fighters to support ISGS operations in Mali and Burkina Faso, demonstrating increased operational coordination between ISg affiliates (Seldin, 2024). This collaboration highlights the growing interconnectedness of ISg's West African network despite geographical distances.

Wilayat Sahel-ISGS originated from *al-Mourabitoun/AQIM* defectors in 2015 and currently operates across parts of Niger and Mali while attempting expansion into Burkina Faso and Gulf of Guinea states. The group maintains an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 fighters engaged in mobile warfare across the Sahel's vast territories. UN monitoring reports from 2024 indicate ISGS's eastward expansion efforts, including renewed attacks northeast of Niamey and strengthening of the Ménaka-Tahoua logistical corridor to the Nigerian border. The potential for closer ISGS-ISWAP coordination, particularly if ISGS establishes a foothold in northwestern Nigeria, could create a unified ISg front across the Sahel-Sahara region.

The Sahel remains one of the few global regions where ISg and al-Qaeda affiliates still engage in direct military confrontation. UN reports indicate that ISGS-JNIM clashes caused hundreds of deaths between 2022-2024, particularly in Mali's Ménaka and Gao regions.

## East Africa

### The AQ Network

*Al-Shabaab* represents *al-Qaeda*'s most potent affiliate in the Horn of Africa, demonstrating remarkable resilience despite sustained military pressure from Somali government forces, the African Union Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), and US military operations. The group maintains territorial control in southern and central Somalia, operating sophisticated state-like structures including *sharia* courts, taxation systems, and administrative apparatus. With an estimated 7,000 to 12,000 fighters, *al-Shabaab* conducts complex urban operations including coordinated attacks on hotels, restaurants, and government facilities in Mogadishu, inflicting significant casualties while maintaining rural territorial control through mobile warfare tactics.

The group's territorial administration includes functioning judiciary systems based on strict *sharia* law implementation, which paradoxically provides a form of dispute resolution that some local populations view as more efficient than government alternatives. However, *al-Shabaab* has experienced a notable decline in foreign fighter recruitment, reflecting both increased border security measures and the group's focus on local grievances.

A significant recent development involves *al-Shabaab*'s collaboration with Yemen's *Houthi* movement (*Ansar Allah*). According to a report (CTC, 2024), a confidential agreement between *Ansar Allah* and *al-Shabaab*, likely mediated by *al-Qaeda* in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), took shape in 2023 to target their shared adversaries.<sup>2</sup> This accord reportedly included provisions for collaborations at sea (in planning and conducting maritime operations). Interestingly enough, what followed this accord was a temporary surge in attacks on merchant vessels off Somalia's coast. While direct *al-Shabaab* involvement in

those attacks remains unconfirmed, this possibility cannot be discounted either. The growing relationship between *al-Shabaab* and the *Houthis* reveals the increasingly pragmatic nature of alliances between insurgent groups in the conflict environments marked by the presence of *Jihadist* networks. Unlike AQAP, historically the sole ally to *al-Shabaab* among the Yemeni groups, *al-Shabaab* had no previous experience of interaction with Shi'a movements such as *Ansar Allah*. This development demonstrates that pragmatic interests now often override ideological considerations.

## The ISg Network

ISg-Somalia has its roots in a splinter faction from *al-Shabaab* led by a former *al-Shabaab* regional commander *Abdul Qadir Mu'min*. *Mu'min's* faction pledged collective allegiance to the Islamic State group in 2015, which forced the group to separate from *al-Shabaab* and establish its own operational base in the hills of northern Somalia. ISg-Somalia carried on with its tactics of low-scale operations for about three years before it was granted official recognition as a new 'province of the Islamic State' (2018). There are conflicting reports as to the size of this group nowadays. According to UN sources, in 2024 it included between 300 and 600 fighters. Despite its relatively small size, ISg-Somalia's significance derives from hosting the *Maktabat al-Karrar* (*al-Karrar* office), a critical node in ISg's African financial network.

ISg-Somalia experienced a rapid growth in foreign recruits, which nearly doubled the size of the group. Recruitment campaigns targeted regional countries and Yemen, attempting to integrate foreign fighters into its existing structure. However, within the same year, the UN body reported that the recruitment of foreign fighters by ISg-Somalia "had slowed due to difficulties integrating fighters into narrow clan-based structures, cultural barriers and the severity of conditions." (UNSC, 2024). As a result, there are indications that many of those foreign fighters eventually defected or disappeared from the scene.

The *al-Karrar* office serves as more than a financial hub; it functions as a coordination center linking ISg operations across East, Central, and Southern Africa. The office relies on extensive financial networks reaching South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania, with connections to Somali diaspora communities in Gulf countries. According to an analysis (Weiss & Rosenblatt, 2023), *al-Karrar* has been instrumental in exporting ISg's taxation and extortion business models to other provinces, including Mozambique. The office's primary influence operates through the deployment of financial advisors rather than direct cash transfers, with ISg-Core reportedly continuing to send advisors to operations in Congo, Mozambique, and Sahel countries.

The network's key operative, *Bilal al-Sudani*, killed in a January 2023 US airstrike, had worked directly under *Abdul Qadir Mu'min*, managing financial transactions between ISg entities and recruiting foreign fighters. His death disrupted but did not destroy the financial network, which continues operating through clan-based business networks, particularly those allegedly connected to the *Ali Saleban* clan.

ISg-Somalia's foreign fighter experience provides important lessons for understanding Jihadist operations in Africa. UN Monitoring Team reports indicated that foreign fighters once comprised nearly half of ISg-Somalia's strength, recruited from various conflict zones where ISg maintains presence. However, significant challenges emerged: language barriers requiring constant interpretation, cultural conflicts disrupting unit cohesion, and difficulties integrating foreign fighters into local community structures. These challenges led to a substantial reduction in foreign fighter recruitment, as the ISg-Somalia leadership most likely arrived at a conclusion that the costs outweigh benefits.

Relations between *al-Shabaab* and ISg-Somalia have evolved from initial hostilities to an atmosphere of “cold neutrality.” While *al-Shabaab* previously pressured the ISg affiliate, both groups now avoid escalation, facing sufficient challenges from Somali security forces and US airstrikes. Neither group can afford to divert resources to inter-Jihadist conflict while confronting existential threats from government forces (Warner & Weiss, 2017).

## ISg-linked insurgencies in the Great Lakes Region and Southern Africa

While insurgencies in these regions operate at lower intensity compared to the Sahel or Horn of Africa, ISg claims a full province: *Wilayat Ifriqiya al-Wusta* (Islamic State Central Africa Province - ISCAP). In reality, ISCAP comprises two geographically separated groups: the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF/MTM) in eastern DRC and *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jama'ah* (ASWJ) in northern Mozambique.

### ADF (DRC)

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), officially rebranded as *Madina at Tauheed Wal Muwahdeen* (MTM), operates in the eastern part of the DRC and has historical connections to Uganda and broader East African *Jihadist* networks. Despite sustained military pressure from Operation *Shujaa* - a joint DRC-Uganda military campaign launched in 2021 - UN sources estimate the group maintains between 800 and 1,300 adult male fighters. The ADF demonstrates operational resilience through suicide bombings and sophisticated hit-and-run attacks in densely populated areas, adapting to counter-insurgency pressure through increased mobility and dispersed operations.

The group's operational environment presents unique challenges: based in a region where Muslims constitute a small minority within a predominantly Christian population, the ADF must navigate complex ethno-religious dynamics while maintaining its Jihadist ideology. This demographic reality shapes both its recruitment strategies and its relationship with local communities.

### ASWJ

*Ahlu Sunnah wal Jama'ah* operates in Cabo Delgado province, a region characterized by mixed Muslim-Christian populations and complex ethnic dynamics. In 2024, UN sources estimated that ASWJ maintained between 200 and 300 adult male fighters, conducting asymmetric warfare through ambushes, raids on security forces, and attacks on civilian infrastructure. The group's tactics reflect adaptation to local conditions, including the use of maritime routes for movement and supply. ASWJ's external connections reveal a pattern of regional networking predating the current insurgency. The group maintains historical links to Tanzanian Jihadist networks and connections to *Salafi* preachers across the broader region. Eric Morier-Genoud's research shows the pre-insurgency connections between Salafi circles in Cabo Delgado and ideologically close elements in the DRC, suggesting these networks have deeper historical roots than the current conflict might indicate (Morier-Genoud, 2023).

Contemporary connections operate mainly through the webs of al-Karrar office, supposedly giving ASWJ access to ISg's financial infrastructure. These connections extend to countries hosting *al-Karrar's* financial operations, particularly South

Africa, where established networks facilitate money transfers and logistical support. While ISg recognizes ASWJ as part of its Central Africa Province rather than an independent *wilaya*, technically subordinating it to MTM-ADF, this hierarchical position has not prevented ISg media from celebrating ASWJ operations. During 2017-2019, ISg's official media outlets, including *Amaq News Agency*, regularly featured ASWJ attacks, though the term "Islamic State in Mozambique" was more a media construction than an official designation (GWUPE, 2025 - Accessed).

### Comparative networks and operational approaches

The operational differences between *al-Qaeda* and ISg affiliates reflect fundamental ideological distinctions. *al-Qaeda's* approach has never prioritized immediate territorial control or state-building, unlike ISg's caliphate model. This philosophical difference translates into practical implications: *al-Qaeda* affiliates developed self-funding mechanisms earlier in their evolution, making them less vulnerable to their central leadership's crises. ISg affiliates' historical dependence on core funding created vulnerabilities as the *caliphate* project collapsed, forcing adaptation and increased reliance on regional networks like the *al-Furqan* and *al-Karrar* offices.

### Changing rules of the game for Jihadist armed groups in Africa

The current transformation of both ISg and *al-Qaeda* networks reflects fundamental shifts in how transnational *Jihadist* movements operate. These changes have profound implications for understanding the trajectory of groups like ASWJ and the broader security landscape in Africa.

### The crisis of central leadership visibility

The opacity surrounding both networks' central leadership represents a significant departure from previous eras. The identity of the ISg leader, known only by his alias *Abu Hafis al-Hashimi al-Qurashi*, remains unclear. Rumors suggesting that ISg-Somalia's *Abdul Qadir Mu'min* might hold this position have been dismissed by multiple sources as lacking credibility. *Al-Qaeda* faces a similar crisis of transparency: three years after Dr. *Ayman al-Zawahiri's* assassination by US airstrike in summer 2022, the organization has neither announced a successor nor formally acknowledged his death.

While operational security considerations clearly drive this lack of transparency, the absence of visible leadership affects the networks' image within the wider *Jihadist* community, including among rank-and-file fighters. This leadership vacuum erodes trust and weakens the traditional vertical command structures that once characterized these organizations.

### The weakening of vertical ties

The relationship between core leadership and regional affiliates has become increasingly tenuous. Vertical links that once defined the Core-Region relationship no longer play the central role they once did. Instead, regional actors are developing horizontal ties not only within their ideological paradigm but increasingly across traditional factional boundaries. This shift represents a fundamental restructuring of how *Jihadist* networks operate, with regional pragmatism increasingly overriding ideological purity.

## The transformation of financial support models

This trend particularly affects the ISg network, though *al-Qaeda* affiliates face similar pressures. Direct funding from the Core to affiliates has steadily decreased over the past 5-7 years. As the *caliphate* faced mounting pressure and territorial losses between 2017-2019, ISg attempted to compensate by creating decentralized fundraising and money laundering networks outside its Syrian-Iraqi heartland.

The quest to decentralize ISg's financial apparatus led to the establishment of regional offices (*maktab*) hosted by stronger regional affiliates. These offices were designed to create autonomous financial mechanisms that would pool resources within larger regions and distribute them based on need, independent of central leadership. This transition to the regional pooling model was officially completed by 2022.

Two of these regional offices operate in Africa:

- *Maktab al-Karrar*, covering Somalia Province and the Central African Province, hosted by ISg-Somalia;
- *Maktab al-Furqan*, covering the West African Province, hosted by ISWAP.

However, the capacities of these offices have proven extremely limited. Despite official adoption of the regional pooling model, provinces often have no alternative but to rely on local revenue-generating activities. This reality particularly impacts peripheral groups like those in the DRC and Mozambique's Cabo Delgado, but affects any organization finding itself on the margins of ISg's web of affiliates (Weiss; Weiss *et al.*, 2023).

These structural changes — leadership opacity, weakening vertical ties, and financial decentralization — change the ways in which Jihadist groups operate in Africa. The implications extend beyond organizational charts, affecting recruitment strategies, operational planning, and the very nature of Jihadist insurgency in the continent.

## Conclusions

### ASWJ's position in the informal ISg hierarchy

The weakening or even demise of some ISg-aligned groups in Africa, particularly in the northern subregion, has not altered ASWJ's fundamental position. Its place in the unofficial hierarchy of ISg affiliates in Africa remains very low. This position is unlikely to change unless there is an absolute game changer in the conflict dynamics.

The lack of recognition of "the Islamic State in Mozambique" as a province in its own right means ASWJ remains technically subordinate to MTM-ADF (eastern DRC) within the Central African Province. This subordinate status diminishes ASWJ's standing not only within the wider ISg network but also within the area of responsibility of the *al-Karrar* office. Given the high competition for the limited financial resources, ASWJ faces poor prospects for securing increased external funding from *al-Karrar* through ISg-Somalia's financial web, at least in the short-to-medium term.

## The question of foreign fighter influx

Despite existing concerns that Cabo Delgado might follow the tragic fate of other war-torn regions that experienced influxes of “international *Jihadists*” from the ISg network, the reality suggests little chance of this occurring. ASWJ’s current status within the network and its limited access to ISg funds from the regional pool hardly make it an attractive destination for international *Jihadists* and other mercenaries.

Other groups in the African landscape, such as ISWAP or *Wilayat Sahel-ISGS*, offer far more attractive opportunities for foreign fighters seeking active Jihadist fronts. Moreover, ISg-Somalia’s recent experience with foreign fighters suggests that regional groups may now be less motivated to recruit foreign fighters *en masse*. The evidence indicates that risks outweigh potential gains, making large-scale foreign fighter recruitment an increasingly unattractive proposition for groups like ASWJ.

## Looking forward

Understanding ASWJ within this broader context reveals it as a locally-rooted insurgency with limited but real connections to transnational Jihadist networks. Its evolution will likely depend more on local dynamics in Cabo Delgado than on any potential influence from other ISg entities based in foreign countries, in or outside Africa. As the broader Jihadist landscape in Africa continues evolving, marked by further weakening of vertical ties and localization, ASWJ leadership may still explore new partnerships. However, any such partners may not align ideologically or share long-term goals.

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