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## Boko Haram faction demonstrates parallels with Cold War-era revolutionary insurgents

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Different 'Boko Haram' factions display contrasting militant strategies to achieve their goals. While the original faction Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad (JASDJ) is one of the world's most violent militant movements towards civilians, a breakaway faction, Islamic State West Africa Province, mixes extreme violence with efforts to win over local Muslim populations. This approach demonstrates surprising parallels with Cold War-era communist models of revolutionary warfare.

When one thinks of the places that **jihadists** look for inspiration, Cold War-era communist strategists of insurgent warfare, such as Mao Tse-Tung or Che Guevara, do not necessarily spring to mind. However,

jihadi groups are in practice often very pragmatic on matters of **strategy** and more than happy to learn from and adapt non-Islamic sources of military thinking.

Academics have identified the links between revolutionary warfare as advanced by Cold War-era **communists** and contemporary **jihadists**, such as the Islamic State (IS). These links can be seen foremost in the works of influential **jihadi strategists** such as Abu 'Ubeid Al-Qurashi, Abu Mu'sab al-Suri, Abu Bakr Naji and Abd Al-Aziz al-Muqrin, who have all advocated models of revolutionary insurgency that reflect adapted forms of Maoist guerrilla practice, especially Mao's three stages of insurgency and the need to win over populations to the cause. These models are suggested as a template for the establishment of control of territory and the establishment of extremist Islamist political orders.

These ideas have also been translated more directly into jihadi theory. The Islamic State's first edition of its *Dabiq* magazine highlighted a model for the establishment of an 'Islamic State' that closely mirrors the work of Abu Bakr Naji, who was influenced by Maoist military thinking.

This revolutionary warfare lens has, however, been applied less to groups outside of the al Qaeda and Islamic State 'cores' and has not been used to compare the two main, often competing, factions of the wider 'Boko Haram' movement. In a **recent article** for *African Security* I examined the public statements and politico-military actions of both major 'Boko Haram' factions and compared them to the wider historical practice of revolutionary warfare. The objective was not to prove an exact overlap between Cold War-style revolutionary war and the factions of Boko Haram, but rather to use this framework to examine differences in the politico-military character of these factions.

## What is revolutionary warfare?

While there is no one single definition of 'revolutionary warfare', most discussions of the term rest on three elements (echoing those advocated by Mao): 1) a revolutionary ideology that requires the seizure of territory in order to establish a new socio-political order; 2) a strategy for the development of popular support for a violent approach to achieving this objective; and 3) a military strategy that sees a phased escalation from rural guerrilla actions to conventional military activity to control territory. The development of popular support is essential to the model. Indeed, developing popular support both provides opportunities for the promotion of revolutionary ideology and provides material support and recruits for the phased escalation of the insurgency.

In 2015, the Boko Haram group (JASDJ) was listed as **the world's most deadly terrorist organisation**, with the group killing more people in 2014 than the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Under leader Abubakar Shekau, JASDJ remains an extraordinarily brutal organisation targeting both the Nigerian security forces and Nigerian citizens, including Muslims. While focused on Nigeria predominantly, they have also attacked communities in other countries in the Lake Chad Region. Numerous documented attacks describe raids by JASDJ on population centres, with men, women and children killed indiscriminately and whole swathes of towns razed to the ground. The most infamous example is probably the attack on the Nigerian town of **Baga in 2015**. The group is also notorious for its treatment of women, seen in both the well-publicised kidnapping of the Chibok Girls and its use of young women and girls as suicide bombers.

The group justifies its violent approach through an extreme '*takfirist*' position, which essentially declares anyone who does not seek to join their group to be '*takfir*' – an apostate who in their view can legitimately be killed. This violence is not solely motivated by doctrine, however. Violence also coerces civilians to join their group, evidenced by **threats**

made to some communities [warning – graphic content] who decided not to join JASDJ before they were attacked.

It has also been suggested that attacks on civilians push security forces to spread themselves thinly, making them easier targets and in turn reducing military pressure on the group. While JASDJ is certainly a revolutionary group with revolutionary goals, this mixture of *takfirist* doctrine and strategic practice precludes a Maoist-style revolutionary warfare approach as it hinders the development of popular support (a point also noted recently by Alkali Omeni).

Since its split with JASDJ in 2016, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has taken a quite different approach more in line with population-centric revolutionary warfare practice. In so doing, it has arguably created a more sustainable and potent insurgency. Former ISWAP leader Abu Musab al Barnawi was very public in his criticism of JASDJ's attacks on Muslim civilians, arguing in public statements for a more moderate position on questions of *takfir*. Unlike JASDJ's targeting of both Muslim civilians and the military, ISWAP has focused largely on the latter, ramping up its attacks against security forces since mid-2018 in a pattern of escalating insurgency.

ISWAP has sought not only to avoid targeting Muslim civilians but to actively win them over, opening markets, promoting commerce and farming and providing rudimentary security. In return the group taxes citizens and business, raising revenue and binding citizens into their form of rule. In so doing, they are potentially creating a more sustainable base for insurgency. Despite Abu Musab al Barnawi being replaced by Abu Abdullah Ibn Umar al-Barnawi in early 2019, the new leadership does not appear to have radically changed the strategy.

This strategy also more effectively capitalises on mistakes made by the Nigerian armed forces than the JASDJ approach. Cruelty or atrocities committed by security forces compound the strength of the alternative

presented by ISWAP. Likewise, the military's closure of some markets may be counterproductive in that they deprive local populations of their **livelihoods** (unlike ISWAP who encourage such activity within limits). Crucially, I am not suggesting that ISWAP are the 'good' jihadists or that they are moderates – they certainly are not. They remain a brutal, extremist organisation both to the non-Muslims they capture and towards Muslims who have crossed them (not to mention the military). They also appear to be increasing their targeting of Christians, demonstrating a vicious sectarianism long-present within the wider Boko Haram movement. They are, however, more selective, and arguably more strategic than JASDJ, in terms of the targeting of their violence.

This analysis shows that the ISWAP faction demonstrates a military strategy and a use of force that appears far more in line with the practice of revolutionary warfare than JASDJ. In so doing it reflects a position that is closer to the forms of strategy advocated by Cold War communist insurgents, such as Che Guevara and Mao, and shows similarities with the strategy advocated by Naji and other jihadist strategists. The JASDJ faction under Shekau, by contrast, has shown the capability to seize significant territory in the past but with a military approach that remains heavily focused on civilian attacks. This approach is based almost exclusively on coercion (rather than the mix of coercion and co-optation seen in ISWAP's tactics) and thus largely rules out a politically-based popular support strategy consistent with revolutionary warfare practice.

Looking beyond 'Boko Haram', a key finding of this study – that even two factions originating from the same jihadist movement conduct insurgency quite differently – highlights the variation in jihadist strategic practice. While jihadist strategists and both Islamic State and al-Qaeda have proffered strategic views based on quasi-Maoist principles, further comparative research into the extent to which forms

of revolutionary warfare are practiced by 'affiliates' and Islamic State 'provinces' would further our understanding of the strategic commonalities and differences between jihadist groups.

*Photo: Nigerien soldiers practice vehicle contact movements in a special forces training exercise designed to strengthen the ability to counter violent extremist organisations. 'Flintlock 2018 Training in Agadez, Niger' by Richard Bumgardner is licensed under creative commons (CC BY 2.0).*

## About the author



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