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ISWAP Expands into Ondo and Edo in Southern Nigeria

Jacob Zenn

Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP) has developed new tactics and strategies since ejecting Abubakar Shekau from the eponymous "Boko Haram" Shekau faction in 2016. These have included conducting roadside ambushes on the military to secure rural territory in 2017, expanding to northwestern Nigeria in 2019, and conducting an operation in coordination with Islamic State (IS)'s central leadership to kill Shekau himself in 2021 (Terrorism Monitor, July 18, 2020). This year, ISWAP's unprecedented

development is its undeniable expansion not only to the capital, Abuja, and other central Nigerian states like Kogi and Taraba for the first time, but also even to the South-West and South-South regions, which are near Nigeria's oil-producing sites.

On September 22, ISWAP claimed its first ever attack in Ondo State, South-West region, which borders Lagos and lies along southern the Nigerian coast (Twitter/@secmxx, September 22). Not since a female suicide bomber detonated an explosive in a Shekau-claimed operation in 2014 had there been any attacks so close to Nigeria's most populous city and its oil-producing regions (thenigerianvoice,

June 8, 2014). Although ISWAP rarely makes claims of attacks it did not commit, the group released no photograph to justify the claim of destroying a police vehicle in Ondo (<u>Humanglemedia.com</u>, September 22).

Even more corroborative of ISWAP's presence in southern Nigeria, and specifically the South-South region, however, was its claim one day later, on September 23, of an attack in Edo State, which borders Ondo. This time ISWAP revealed two photographs of the destroyed and burning police vehicle, albeit not any of the policemen it claimed to have killed in the ambush (Saharareporters.com, September 24). While the Edo government denied that ISWAP conducted the attack, it provided little evidence for such a finding "investigation" from its rapid (tribuneonlineng.com, September 24).

The Edo government's pronouncement is, therefore, dubious and may indicate the state seeks to avoid a reputation for security risks from ISWAP. Nevertheless, the dual claims in Ondo and Edo on top of previous ISWAP claims in Abuja, Kogi, and Taraba suggest ISWAP is not bluffing and is now conducting attacks in the South-West and South-South regions. This expansion likely is only the final phase of years of preparation for ISWAP to target southern Nigeria.

As early as May 2019 Edo police claimed to have arrested ISWAP members in the state (vanguardngr.com, May 16, 2019). Moreover, only five months later, in October 2019, Ondo police claimed to have arrested an ISWAP cell that was planning attacks (<u>Saharareporters.com</u>, October 31, 2019). Thus, it appears at the same time that ISWAP was announcing its expansion to northwestern Nigeria publicly through videos, it was more surreptitiously doing the same in the operationally more challenging southern regions, which are predominantly Christian with few Hausas and Kanuris in contrast to ISWAP's base region of northeastern Nigeria. It is also ironic that both Edo and Ondo authorities had acknowledged an ISWAP presence in their states but Edo is now in denial about ISWAP conducting attacks, even if its capabilities are far inferior in Edo than in the northeast.

One attack that ISWAP has not claimed, but the Nigerian National Security Council (NSA) has attributed to ISWAP, is the June shooting and bomb attack on an Ondo church that killed more than 40 people (Punchng.com, June 9). Given ISWAP's claims in the region, it now appears even more likely that attack was the work of ISWAP. However, the large civilian death toll might have been too repugnant for ISWAP to claim. This is because ISWAP has been attempting to woo al-Qaeda-loyal Ansaru fighters, who ostensibly do not kill innocent Christians (as opposed to Christians who content Muslims for land rights or join the government), and ISWAP continued to distances itself from the previous abuses and excesses of Shekau lovalists.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Rwanda, Congo, and Uganda Tensions Disrupt Counterterrorism Efforts

Jacob Zenn

At the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, the Democratic

Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwandan presidents, Felix Tshisekedi and Paul Kagame, met under the mediation of French president, Emmanuel Macron (theeastafrican.co.ke, September 24). They discussed cooperating to combat the March 23 (M23) rebels, which formed in 2012 to oppose the Congolese government and occupied Goma in eastern Congo at that time (aljazeera.com, November 23, 2012). Due to the M23's primarily Tutsi composition, various international organization, including the UN, have suggested that it has been supported by Rwanda's own leadership to exert pressure on the DRC government (france24.com, April 8).

The most recent tensions between the DRC and Rwanda were sparked when Tshisekedi neighbors," blamed "some referring indirectly to Rwanda, for continuing to support the M23 occupation of some areas in eastern Congo, which he alleged was preventing national reconciliation in the DRC (monitor.co.uq, September 21). Beyond the diplomatic wrangling in New York, the DRC has other ways to call out or put pressure on Rwanda for its ties to M23. One such way, for example, was the DRC's bolstering its ties in with Uganda in eastern Congo to fight against Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP) (aa.com.tr, September 21). As Uganda is a rival of Rwanda, the DRC-Uganda defense partnership is bound to upset Rwanda, which itself has been attacked in several bombings by ISCAP (igihe.com, October 1, 2021).

The non-participation of Rwanda in the counter-ISCAP campaign across its own borders is also despite the fact that Rwanda presents itself as a key counter-terrorism partner in Africa (<u>africanews.com</u>, October 21, 2021). In particular, Rwanda has

become the primary foreign counterterrorism contingent in Mozambique. However, since Islamic State in Sahel Province (ISSP), otherwise known "Islamic State in Greater Sahara," has set its sights on Benin, Rwanda has begun planning counter-terrorism activities now also in West Africa with Benin (theeastafrican.co.ke, September 13). Although Rwanda and Uganda signed an agreement in 2019 to reduce tensions, which, if successful, could have led to their own counter-terrorism cooperation, this was undermined when Paul Kagame admitted in 2021 to using high-grade Israeli spy equipment to monitor the communications of Ugandan officials (aljazeera.com, August 21, 2019; observer.uq, July 28, 2021).

The tensions between Rwanda, DRC, and undermine regional counter-Uqanda terrorism efforts, especially against ISCAP. The lack of coordination means their unified fight against ISCAP in Congo is currently impossible. Nonetheless, the desire of the DRC and Uganda to combat ISCAP and Rwanda's continuing to support Mozambigue and newly Benin, all of which do not involve Western "boots on the ground" means these countries are taking responsibility for their own security, which itself is a welcome development for Western countries whose military resources are currently focused elsewhere in the world, such as the Russian war in Ukraine.

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The Assassination of Shinzo Abe in Japan and the Threat from Primitive Homemade Weapons

Rueben Dass

On July 8, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated while delivering a speech in Nara, Japan (The Japan Times, July 8). The suspect, 41year-old Tetsuya Yamagami, who was an ex-member of the Maritime Self-Defense Force, shot the former premier using a homemade improvised gun (The Japan Times, July 10). The fact that Yamagami successfully employed a fully homemade, but still crude, weapon using commercially available parts highlights the threat of such weapons and the ability of individuals to circumvent existing aun laws to manufacture their own.

The evolution of the threat from homemade weapons is two-fold: one that is modern and technologically driven through the ability to print 3D-weapons; and another that is more primitive as in the assassination in Japan. Abe Until Yamagami's attack, authorities worldwide had mostly been concerned about the technologically driven aspect of the threat. For example, in May 2022, both Europol and the Dutch National Police highlighted the increasing threat from 3D-printed weapons (<u>HSToday</u>, May 28).

Between 2019 and 2022, there have been at least nine known cases of violent actors possessing, attempting to make, and using homemade weapons in Europe and Australia. The October 2019 attack on a Jewish synagogue in Halle, Germany, in which two people were killed, was the first terrorist involved attack to have homemade (Independent, weapons 11, 2019). The attacker, October moreover, had a cache of guns which employed 3D-printed components. The case in Japan was the only other known case of a homemade weapon being actively used in an attack since Halle.

The Murder Weapon

The weapon used in Abe's assassination was a 40 by 20 centimeter double-barrel homemade gun comprised of two metal plumbing pipes taped onto a wood mount. The firing component featured a basic electrical wiring circuit connected to commercial batteries (<u>The Straits Times</u>, July 9). The ammunition and propellant used was likely procured commercially or self-made (<u>The Japan Times</u>, July 10).

On the whole, the pistol was constructed with commercially available, hardware store materials (<u>The Japan Times</u>, July 10). The suspect had searched for assembly methods online, including on YouTube (<u>The Japan Times</u>, July 11). The gun could have been manufactured in a matter of days with minimum knowledge and basic engineering skills (<u>The Straits Times</u>, July 9; <u>The Japan Times</u>, July 10). Yamagami was found to have made at least three more multibarreled guns from a raid on his home (<u>Twitter/@PopularFront</u>, July 8). It is unclear whether those guns were made for practice or to be used in other attacks.

Limitations of Homemade Weapons

Two main issues with homemade weapons are their durability and reliability. Due to their improvised nature, homemade weapons usually do not function for as long and as well as factory-made weapons. For example, 3D-printed guns (whose components are often made of plastic) suffer damage due to melting from heat exposure during firing and have a maximum capacity of a couple hundred rounds before it has to be cooled off (YouTube/3D Media Research Group, December 16, 2021). The guns are also vulnerable to jamming and misalignment resulting from either printing defects or melting.

In fact, the firearm used in the 2019 Halle attack had suffered from numerous malfunctions, which reduced the number of casualties (<u>The Times of Israel</u>, October 10, 2019). As for Yamagami's weapon, while it was clear the gun was only meant for use on a targeted individual, whether it would have survived more shots and a longer duration is questionable. Based on the limitations and past cases, the use of these weapons in large-scale mass casualty attacks remains unlikely unless the weapon is produced with significant quality. However, these weapons are perfectly viable in smaller-scale, limited attacks as seen in Halle in 2019 and Japan most recently.

Conclusion

The significant point that the Japanese case highlighted was the fact that a simple, crude gun made from hardware store components was able to kill a high-profile individual. The weapon did not employ much technological sophistication and all that was required to manufacture the weapon was a basic understanding of highschool physics and engineering. The proliferation of resources online, including both instructions and manuals, and component materials to manufacture weapons has reduced the capability threshold for less-skilled individuals to manufacture these weapons and employ them in attacks. The case also shows that the threat posed from this type of crude weapon, as opposed to more sophisticated ones, may have been underestimated.

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The Pakistani Taliban's Questfor a Sharia State by DemergingFATAfromKhyberPakhtunkhwa

Nadeem Shah

The peace talks between Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Pakistan security establishment are facing an undeclared deadlock since a fruitless tour paid by a top Taliban delegation to Kabul in late July (The Express Tribune, July 27). The Taliban delegation visited under the leadership of Mufti Tagi Usmani, who is considered one of the foremost clerics and tutors not only among the Afghan Taliban but also TTP, and made efforts to convince the TTP leadership to withdraw its primary demand for a demerger of the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (<u>Dawn</u>, July 31). However, the TTP rejected a compromise on this "FATA demerger" issue (The Express Tribune, July 30). Rather, the TTP handed a two-page charter with demands to the Taliban delegation, which called for the demerger and the Islamization of Pakistan, among other demands, while criticizing the Pakistani military (Twitter/@roohan ahmed July 26). Unless these demands are met by the Pakistani security establishment, any peace with the TTP may be impossible to achieve.

The TTP's Fresh Charter of Demands and Increasing Attacks

The two-page TTP charter in Urdu argued that Pakistan was created as the result of a covenant signed by Pashtun tribes under the influence of Islam in the then-newly established country. However, it claimed the Pakistani army and high-profile political families, which are the byproducts of British imperialism, have been the key obstacles preventing the imposition of Sharia. The TTP further acknowledged it did provide shelter and asylum to Afghan Taliban fighters in the former FATA tribal 9/11 to oppose reaion after the imperialistic U.S-led War on Terror that the Pakistani government had supported (<u>Twitter/@roohan ahmed</u>, July 26).

Currently, the TTP is reluctant to step back from its position on the FATA demerger while the Pakistani government has also adamantly claimed a demerger would be unconstitutional (The Express Tribune, August 22; Dawn, June 30). The deadlock has invited a fresh wave of insurgency in former FATA districts, particularly across Swat. The TTP, for example, has started attacking security forces and kidnapping soldiers and police (Dawn, June 18). Among other operations, the TTP militants set up a check post in the Swat valley and kidnapped seven police officers, including a Deputy Superintendent of Police (Aaj News, August 9).

Former Senator__Farhtullah Babar, а seasoned politician and spokesperson to former president Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari, argues that the TTP are now experiencing a rebirth (Twitter/@farhatullahb, August 7). The militants have been particularly active in Dir and Swat since penetrating Waziristan, despite the Pakistani government's claims of breaking the backbone of militants. Babar's claim is evidenced by the 24% increase in TTP terrorism from mid-2021 to mid-2022 (Dawn, May 3). The Pakistani Parliament also acknowledged the resurgence of TTP for the first time since the Taliban's Kabul takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 (Gulf News August 11).

Pakistani Demands and Meeting TTP Demands

Pakistan's security__establishment has presented its own demands to the TTP, which includes the TTP's dissolution or its renunciation of the use of arms and violence so it can become a non-violent political party that respects constitutional norms (<u>Tabadlab</u>, June 14). The Pakistani security establishment has also accepted five TTP demands and only rejected the first and main demand regarding the FATA demerger (<u>Dawn</u>, July 6). The second TTP demand for the withdrawal of the military has been accepted (<u>Aaj News Television</u>, June 2). Now the command of Malakand Division is under the Frontier Corps, and not the military, which occurred during a ceremony in Swat and resulted in the TTP announcing an indefinite ceasefire.

The third demand is related to the enforcement of Sharia in Malakand Division, which has been promulgated since 2009 (Dawn, April 14). This TTP demand, therefore, was already redundant (Dawn April 16). The fourth demand was also accepted, and the security establishment released up to 100 commanders and fighters from prison and offered a presidential pardon for two key TTP commanders, including Muslim Khan and Mehmood Khan (The Express Tribune, December 10). Both the commanders had bounties placed on their heads in 2009 (The Guardian, September 11). Muslim Khan was known as the "butcher of Swat" and a military court in Pakistan had sentenced him to death (BBC, December 29). Mehmood Khan, meanwhile, was also a TTP leader from Swat and was convicted of kidnapping two Chinese engineers for ransom and was sentenced to 20 years in prison (Gandhara May 12).

The fifth TTP demand for complete "freedom" in Malakand division has been met by silence from the government. However, many have observed а considerable increase in the number of TTP militants released from prison belonging to areas across Swat and Malakand Division. As such, it seems the Pakistani government has met this demand, albeit not publicly (Gandhara August 17). The sixth TTP demand for financial compensation to families of militants has also been met with silence. However, there have been past cases when Pakistan financially compensated TTP fighters under the Shakai Peace agreement and paid handsome compensation to militants for casualties in their ranks and collateral damage (Dawn, February 3). The sixth demand, therefore, will seemingly be met by Pakistan.

Conclusion:

The current phase of TTP insurgency and its struggle to demerge FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is one part of the TTP's ultimate goal of creating a sovereign territory where they can apply their own ideology and Sharia Law. Pakistan has evidently budged on other demands, but not this one. If it does accede to this and all the other TTP demands, it will further boost TTP morale, while not necessarily guaranteeing a long-term end to the conflict.

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Promises and Pitfalls of Tajikistan's Latest Repatriation Program for Islamic State Families from Syria

Nurbek Bekmurzaev

On July 25, Tajikistan repatriated 146 of its citizens from Syria, including 42 women and 104 children, who were stranded in the al-Hol and Roj refugee camps. The authorities stated that the operation's main goal was "to save the Tajik children from hopelessness and their return from the war-torn country to peaceful life in their native state (Khovar, July 25)." Nothing is known about their fate since arriving in Tajikistan except that they were placed in a sanatorium for recovery.

This initiative became the country's first operation in three years since the repatriation of women and children from Iraqi prisons in April 2019, and another initial operation that brought back adults. There are reportedly more than 500 Tajikistani citizens, including 286 women and children, still stranded in Syrian refugee camps controlled by Kurdish forces (<u>Asia Plus</u>, July 25). With the Tajik government's promise to get all of them home, much attention and pressure has been focused on the outcomes of the government's approach to prosecution, rehabilitation, and the reintegration (PRR) of returnees.

This article explores the prospects for the PRR of these returnees based on an analysis of Tajikistan's prior approaches in dealing with returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. It discusses both the advantages Tajikistan possesses and the obstacles standing in the way of turning this repatriation operation into a long-term success.

Takeaways from Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Women and Children Returnees

Women returnees have often allegedly followed their husbands who joined Islamic State (IS) and took their children with them. They were among the 2,000 Tajikistani citizens who left for Syria and Iraq, according to the government (Radio Ozodi, July 25). Most of the men died in battles or returned home on their own whereas the women and children ended up in prisons and refugee camps. The government responded to this issue by planning repatriation operations and issuing amnesties to citizens who turned themselves in to the authorities upon their arrival home. Thus, to understand what awaits the newly repatriated women and children in Tajikistan, it is necessary to analyze the outcomes of the program that was applied to the previously repatriated children and self-returnees.

On April 30, 2019, Tajikistan repatriated 84 children (belonging to 47 families) from Iraq, who were held with their mothers in prisons (Avesta, May 1, 2019). After undergoing an initial rehabilitation program, which addressed their immediate physical and psychological needs, the authorities placed these children at different specialized child care facilities across Tajikistan. The decision to disperse them assumed that overcoming the horrors of war would be faster and easier in a setting where they were not reminded of those horrors by fellow repatriates. These children still continue to underao rehabilitation without any clear dates on when they will be able to reunite with their other family members who have expressed their willingness to take them. The government treats all the children solely as victims and, therefore, none of them faced prosecution.

Two main takeaways can be determined from their rehabilitation and reintegration. First, it will require significant time. It has been more than three years since their return home, and the authorities insist that they remain in specialized care facilities and assert their families cannot provide the necessary specialized support. However, some reports suggest they are kept away from society out of fear of their spreading violent extremist ideas, and the majority of families have refused to accept the children out of fear of attracting unwarranted attention and harassment from security services (Asia Plus, September 12). No detailed information exists on what kind of socio-psychological support repatriated children are receiving or on how long they will remain under supervision. The newly arrived children repatriates may face a similar fate of seclusion and uncertainty as the 2019 group.

Ambiguous Pardons and Prosecutions of Self-returnees

Another group of returnees are so-called "self-returnees," adults who returned from Syria and Irag on their own and took advantage of pardons, which are issued to everyone who returns to Tajikistan from conflict zones and surrenders to the authorities. After initially labeling returning foreign fighters major threats to national security, in 2015, the government of Tajikistan arranged a pardon for them by amending the article 401 (1) of the Criminal Code and pardoning individuals who voluntarily ceased their criminal (asiaplustj.info, activities October 4, 2019). According to the Ministry of Interior, at least 600 individuals who have returned to Tajikistan from Syria and Iraq received pardons [1].

Not much is known about the fate of these self-returnees either. The authorities claim that not all of them receive amnesty due to their failure to pass risk assessment However, there screening. is no information on what percentage of selfreturnees failed to pass the risk assessment and ended up in prisons after surrendering upon return to Tajikistan. The ones who fall under amnesty allegedly have undergone а full and successful rehabilitation and reintegration program. This is doubtful, however, considering they do not receive any support from the state and fall victim to stigma and discrimination in their communities. The number of foreign fighters engaged in recidivism, which is indicative of the failure of this approach, is at least 30 individuals (<u>News.ti</u>, May 2, 2018).

There are two takeaways from the PRR of adult self-returnees. First, the decision to

issue pardons was popular among Tajikistani foreign fighters who did not engage in serious crimes and feared prosecution at home, which they deem disproportionate to the actions they have committed. It is likely that there is a sizable portion of Tajiks who regret leaving for conflict zones and some may have had minimal engagement with terrorist organizations even while abroad. Second, the most self-returnees can hope for with regards to their PRR is to receive a pardon instead of serving prison sentences. The government has abstained from providing them with any serious support and civil society does not seem to have access, means or the desire to work with them. Managing mental trauma, stigma and discrimination, employment and educational opportunities, and constant surveillance and harassment from the security services falls on the shoulders of self-returnees. If the authorities apply a similar approach to the newly repatriated women and children, the prospects of success for their PRR are not high.

Accumulated Knowledge and Experience

Tajikistan is now much better equipped to deal with the new group of repatriates than the prior groups. There are several factors that, therefore, provide a favorable starting position for the authorities. First, Tajikistan has accumulated practical knowledge, experience, and capacity in this sphere from dealing with children repatriates and adult self-returnees. In June 2021, the government adopted a guiding document for the PRR of foreign fighters and their families called "The National Program on Countering Extremism and Terrorism for 2021-2025." Its implementation plan was dedicated to activities and actions "in the field of rehabilitation and integration of persons with an extremist or terrorist past." [2] This highlights Tajikistan's progress on institutional, legal, and organizational levels.

In addition, the authorities have had a chance to learn from the achievements and mistakes of neighboring countries, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which have repatriated and reintegrated hundreds of women and children (Terrorism Monitor, October 7, 2021). Uzbekistan has employed the method of social absorption by quickly releasing repatriates back to a normal life in their familiar home communities, whereas Kazakhstan has emphasized ideological deradicalization as part of its program. Tajikistan has seen the results yielded by these different approaches and may utilize that knowledge to gain an edge and make better informed decisions on its program.

At the same time, there are still two major obstacles the government needs to address order to ensure the successful in reintegration of its newly repatriated citizens and those who will return in the next operations. The larger one is adopting a whole-of-society approach that includes all national and local stakeholders. Thus far, the Tajik government has monopolized the issue of PRR and ignored local and international non-state actors that could engage with repatriates. There are significant untapped resources available to the government from civil society but it appears the government is not cooperating with such organizations.

The lack of capacity among both decisionmaking authorities and front-line workers in the country's PRR program is related to Tajikistan's shortage of qualified social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, educators, and psychotherapists (Asia Plus, September 12). The issue of lack of knowledge and skills is applicable also to mid- and high-level officials who are responsible for strategic planning, conceptualization and coordination of the PRR program. This will burden Tajikistan's efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate returnees if civil society remains uninvolved.

Conclusion

Tajikistan faces a new and yet similar challenge of PRR for repatriates from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. The government understands that traveling to conflict zones does not automatically make someone a threat to national security and that disproportionate punishments may do more harm than good. In addition, there is ample knowledge to make better informed decisions and a comprehensive plan to follow. Whatever awaits the newly repatriated women and children, Tajikistan should have at least a basic framework to develop and implement a more effective and successful reintegration program than during the first repatriation operation in 2019.

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Notes:

[1] Author's interview with anonymous official, January 10.

[2] Ibid.