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TERRRORISM AND GLOBAL SECURITY: AN APPRAISAL OF ISIS, 2019-2025

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ABSTRACT

Although ISIS lost its physical caliphate, it evolved from a centrally controlled proto-state into a franchise organization in cyberspace with an annual number of attacks of around 2,000-2,400 through encrypted messaging channels, crypto-currencies, and hawala networks. In Nigeria, the spinoff of ISIS called ISWAP showed that it could function independently of the military and had a parallel shadow government mechanism that collected taxes, had informal courts, and offered security services, thus highlighting the futility of kinetic counterterrorism. This study draws upon Franchise Terrorism and Resilience and State Fragility Theories and concludes that state fragility becomes a proactive element for terrorist franchises, and a multidomain strategy for mitigation of state fragility is critical to containment efforts.

Keywords: Transnational Terrorism, ISIS, ISWAP, Franchise Terrorism Theory, Parallel Governance, State Fragility, Cyber Warfare, Multidomain Counterterrorism.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

ISIS, alternatively called ISIL and Daesh, emerged as a significant transnational threat when it announced the establishment of a caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Despite losing most of its territorial authority by 2019, the terrorist organization did not become defunct but transformed into an agile network that continued to encourage and direct violence in many parts of the world (International Crisis Group, 2019; Institute for the Study of War, 2024; U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025).

Between 2019 and 2025, ISIS became less dependent on territorial control, instead focusing on using affiliate networks, propaganda, insurgent violence, and asymmetric warfare. During this

period, the terrorist organization adopted a model that was more decentralized, including regional franchises, for instance, ISIS-West Africa that carried out attacks in Lake Chad Basin and northeastern Nigeria (Crisis Group, 2019; U.S. Department of State, 2025; U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025).

Nigeria will play a critical role in the research since Islamic State West Africa Province has continued to be one of the most vibrant and dangerous affiliates of ISIS in Africa. The group operates in northeastern Nigeria and Lake Chad basin and continues to engage in ambush attacks, kidnapping, roadside bombings, and attacks against military and civilian forces (Crisis Group, 2019; U.S. Department of State, 2025).

The sustained actions by the organization have posed long-term security concerns in Nigeria and beyond in the Sahel (Crisis Group, 2019; World Bank, 2025).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The defeat of the territorial holdings of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in Baghouz, Syria, in March 2019 has been celebrated by state coalitions as the final blow to the organization's state-building efforts. Nonetheless, empirical evidence since 2019 to 2025 has completely undermined the traditional belief that territorial defeat spells organizational death. Rather than succumbing to the immense pressure exerted on it through continuous kinetic attacks, ISIS has undergone a remarkably well-thought-out restructuring process and transformed itself from a territorially centralized and bureaucratic proto-state structure into a highly decentralized virtual franchise system (International Crisis Group, 2019; Institute for the Study of War, 2024; U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025).

The new operational structure has served to completely sever the links between the command structure, recruitment, and resource gathering capabilities of the group from the land ownership aspect. In this context, the core issue is that whereas the physical "caliphate" of ISIS has been

taken down in the Middle East, the structural strength of the ISIS brand has enabled it to shift quickly and take advantage of vulnerable geographies. This includes embedding itself in hyper-fragile socio-political contexts in sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel region, and Northeastern Nigeria (Lake Chad Basin).

The existence of such institutions constitutes a completely new challenge for the current system of international security and stability within regions. The essence of the problem lies in the fact that there is a certain mismatch in the strategies, and the current global and regional mechanisms of countering terrorism operate according to the principles of the outdated state strategy that includes such elements as the power of military force, troop deployment, and decapitation (Financial Action Task Force, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2025).

From 2019 to 2025, the main structure and regional wilayat of the institution were able to form a virtual caliphate, which is a network created using the principles of end-to-end encrypted communication channels, alternative social networks, and decentralized cryptocurrency transactions. The task of the virtual caliphate is to collect funds, recruit followers, and spread propaganda among the vulnerable youth of various countries around the world (Klausen, 2022; Financial Action Task Force, 2024).

In the domestic arena of such fragile nations as Nigeria, the challenge becomes increasingly acute as a result of existing vulnerabilities within institutions. These can be characterized as endemic corruption within defense procurement channels, deficient coordination of intelligence between different agencies, highly porous borders that lack any effective monitoring, and severe socio-economic alienation in peripheral regions (World Bank, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025). National security agencies often struggle with organizational silos, which inhibit coordination of military intelligence and regional financial information and civilian policing.

Furthermore, government reactions are typically reactive rather than proactive in nature. Military forces are regularly sent in to address the situation after an asymmetric attack on infrastructure facilities, military FOBs, or civilian populations. The structural incapacity for implementing early warning systems and community-based preventive measures has allowed ISWAP to constantly capitalize on grievances of the local population against the government, thus out-governing the local authorities and creating a secure base of operations.

1.3 Research Questions

Research questions guiding this research include the following:

1. How have the strategies and operations of ISIS evolved from 2019 to 2025 in the aftermath of losing territory?

2. How effective have counterterrorism responses been in limiting ISIS and its affiliates in fragile states such as Nigeria, between 2019 and 2025?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To analyze the changes made by ISIS in its strategies and activities between 2019 and 2025 following loss of territorial hold.
2. To analyze the success achieved by counterterrorism efforts in containing ISIS and its splinter groups like ISWAP in weak states like Nigeria between 2019 and 2025.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study is relevant as it elaborates on how ISIS maintained its presence between 2019 and 2025 after the loss of its territorial caliphate and the importance of such activities for international and regional security (International Crisis Group, 2019; U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025). It is academically relevant as it adds to the existing literature on terrorism, insurgencies, and counterterrorism by exploring the adaptation of ISIS and the structure of its affiliates including ISWAP in Nigeria (Institute for the Study of War, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2025).

The study is also policy relevant since it highlights the limitations of purely military solutions and calls for more intelligence cooperation, economic disruptions, and governance solutions for fragile states (Financial Action Task Force, 2024; World Bank, 2025).

Lastly, it is socially relevant as the ISIS activities have led to displacement, insecurity, and economic disruption in Nigeria and the wider region of the Sahel (World Bank, 2025; Crisis Group, 2019).

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study period ranges from 2019 to 2025 since this period encompasses ISIS in the aftermath of the fall of its territorial caliphate and its adaptation to affiliate networks, propaganda, and insurgency activities (International Crisis Group, 2019; U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025).

The study deals with the activities of ISIS and its affiliate ISWAP, with emphasis on Nigeria and Lake Chad Basin region due to the fact that this region remains among the major areas where violence is perpetrated by ISIS affiliates in Africa (Crisis Group, 2019; World Bank, 2025).

This research is confined to the adaptation of ISIS and counterterrorist measures against it during the study period, based only on secondary sources (Institute for the Study of War, 2024; Financial Action Task Force, 2024).

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This study utilizes secondary sources and hence faces limitations posed by quality, scope, and purposes for which the information presented by other people was collected (OpenLearn, 2018; NIH, 2019). Due to the covert nature of terrorism studies and sensitive security information, some information regarding how ISIS and ISWAP operate internally and finance themselves is hard to come by (Mbaso, 2021; OpenLearn, 2018).

Public information only has been used, which may not reflect current field intelligence and confidential counter-terrorism efforts conducted by Nigerian authorities and other states (Mbaso, 2021; Good Governance Africa, 2025). Furthermore, the situation keeps changing rapidly, and events beyond 2025 have not been covered and cannot be used in this study (Good Governance Africa, 2025; U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025).

1.8 Operational Definitions of Terms

Terrorism: Any criminal act, including violence committed premeditatively against civilians, involving actions aimed at causing death or grievous bodily harm, creating widespread terror

among the population, or compelling governments and international bodies to act or abstain from action (UN Security Council, 2004; UNODC, 2018).

ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria): An acronym also referred to as ISIL or Daesh, a transnational militant extremist group based on Salafist-jihadism ideology that is organized into a decentralized online virtual network and fights asymmetrically using violent extremism, information warfare, and autonomous regional franchises (wilayat) (U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025).

ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province): An extremely dangerous autonomous regional franchise of ISIS operational mostly in northeastern Nigeria and the greater Lake Chad Basin region and known for conducting precision guerrilla attacks against state actors and implementing a parallel local system of governance (Crisis Group, 2019; World Bank, 2025).

Counterterrorism: The full spectrum of kinetic and non-kinetic strategic doctrines, methodologies, and laws used by nations and international bodies in order to neutralize terrorist architectures via military, financial intelligence, law enforcement, and digital counter propaganda (UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, n.d.; U.S. Department of State, 2025).

Security: Global Security can be understood as the institutional frameworks, strategic requirements, and intervention that have been set up by sovereign states and international organizations such as the United Nations Security Council to protect the international system from any disruption.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Conceptual Review

The aim of this part is to present the analysis of the basic terms that are necessary to understand the essence of this research, which are terrorism, global security, ISIS (Islamic State), and terrorist provinces and affiliations. In light of this study, the conceptual underpinning and implications for security in the Lake Chad Basin require a firm foundation, as the analytical clarity of subsequent chapters will rely on clear definitions, operationalization, and placing these terms within the wider academic literature, which is often contested. The concepts discussed below have already been subjected to a wide range of scholarly arguments, and in

order to avoid assuming the meanings assigned to them without question, each concept is briefly summarized, its definitional controversies are reviewed, some of the areas of consensus among scholars are briefly summarized, and working definitions are provided for each concept that will serve as a basis for analysis in the following chapters.

2.1.1 Terrorism

The concept of terrorism remains one of the most problematic in the study of international security because of the political, ideological and religious ambiguity of its definition. But this is not a semantic matter, as the classification of armed actors, the allocation of counterterrorism resources, the decision to intervene militarily and the application of IHL to a conflict have real-world implications. (Hoffman, 2017) The notorious expression ‘one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist' brings into sharp focus the perspectival and even self-serving nature of definitional debates, in which the same act of violence can be labelled terrorist by one state and freedom fighter by another, depending, of course, on the political camp that is in power (Ganor, 2022).

According to one of the most complete and widely used definitions in the literature, terrorism, defined as the “deliberate use of violence and threats of violence against non-military targets including civilians and symbolic targets by non-state actors and covert agents aimed at causing fear among the masses and forging governments to accede to political, ideological or religious demands” (Schmid, 2011:444). This is important because it emphasizes the indirect aspect of the terrorist's targeting the person who is targeted as the direct victim of violence is not the target of the initial purpose of the attack. Instead, the larger audience is the one targeted: the general public, the media, and the state apparatus itself, all of which should be made to feel fear and pressure and drive decision makers towards concession (Schmid, 2011). The focus on this communicative aspect, which he and other scholars have referred to as the "propaganda of

the deed", marks analytically the distinction between terrorism and conventional warfare, in which the adversary is usually the person who is attacked and the person at whom the force is directed, and between ordinary criminal violence, which does not normally have a broader political or ideological communicative intent (Schmid, 2011; Hoffman, 2017).

On the basis of this, Ganor (2022) defines terrorism as a strategy of intimidation that is intended to create a state of disarray within a society and force a government to change its policy by systematic and premeditated use of violence against non-combatants. Ganor's writing is particularly useful for this study because he clearly divides between terrorism and “legitimate” armed struggle under international law, the former being the deliberate use of civilians as weapons, the latter involving only "incidental" civilian harm that occurs during legitimate military operations against legitimate military targets (Ganor, 2022). This distinction is of analytical relevance in the context of the conceptual literature discussed here and in the international humanitarian law framework, especially the concept of distinction between combatants and civilians that is the basis for the legal analysis presented in the following chapters of this dissertation.

Other basic scholars have brought complementary, and sometimes competing, definitions that add to this conceptual field. As a rational-choice theorist, Crenshaw (1981) views terrorism as a strategic choice by relatively weak non-state actors who are unable to engage in conventional military conflict against a more powerful state, and who therefore resort to asymmetric forms of action, which they hope will have the greatest psychological and political impact on their adversary at the lowest material cost. This rational-actor approach has also been important in helping to explain why insurgent and jihadist groups like ISIS and its regional affiliates often have resorted to terrorism, rather than direct guerrilla or insurgent warfare, more as a complementary, rather than substitutionary, method to achieve their strategic goals at a particular stage of the conflict (Byman, 2015; Crenshaw, 1981). Byman (2015) continues this

line of thinking by pointing out that groups like ISIS may operate in various modes, at times as a terrorist organization, at times as an insurgent group, and at times as a quasi-state organization, depending on how powerful they are compared to government forces and rivals at any given time.

By contrast, Laqueur (1999) focuses on the historical fluidity of terrorism, and depicts its development from an anarchist and nationalist movement of the nineteenth century to state sponsored terrorism in the twentieth century to religiously motivated transnational networks today. Laqueur's historical perspective warns against the tendency to fixate on the dimensions and nature of terrorism as an entity, as the nature of the tactics, targets, organizational structures and the ideological logic behind terrorist acts have varied significantly over time and in different real-world settings (Laqueur, 1999). This is especially applicable to the current study, as ISIS is an even further development of jihadist terrorism beyond the organizational framework of al-Qaeda, and a new territorial governance agenda was introduced that was missing from previous terrorist campaigns (Gerges, 2016).

Richardson (2006), from a psychological and motivational perspective, suggests that terrorism can be best understood as a combination of "revenge, renown, and reaction. From a psychological and motivational standpoint, Richardson (2006) has approached the question from the “three Rs” of revenge, renown, and reaction. Richardson says terrorist groups often target those who feel they have been wronged in the past or in the present, to gain recognition and status in their community or movement or to create an out of proportion response by the state that can then be exploited for recruiting and propaganda. This motivational framework is useful to explain the strategy of recruitment that has been explored in this study, such as ISWAP's use of the abuse of the state security forces in the Lake Chad Basin as a propaganda tool to attract local populations who are aggrieved (Comolli, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2019). The other significant area of the literature relates to the link between terrorism and state

violence. The usual academic understanding of terror, defined as violent attacks by non-state groups against civilian populations for political ends, ignores the fact that States also act in similar ways, either directly or by supporting proxy groups, against civilian populations for the same purpose, as Jackson (2007) has noted. This critical perspective is recognised here, but this current study, in its focus on ISIS and ISWAP as non-state armed actors, follows a more traditional definitional approach, noted on Schmid and Ganor, and throughout later chapters needs to be mindful of claims that state security forces have perpetrated disproportionate or unlawful actions against these groups, especially if such action is relevant to an international humanitarian law analysis.

In spite of this extensive scholarly study, it remains a general consensus in the academic literature that a universal and legally binding definition of terrorism is not to be achieved, partly because the states tend to use the term selectively in order to delegitimize political dissidents, separatist movements and armed resistance groups, while exempting the use of force in their own name from mirror scrutiny (Ganor, 2022; Hoffman, 2017). The United Nations have been attempting for some decades to draft a comprehensive convention on international terrorism with the only difficulty arising as to whether the national liberation movements fighting colonialism, foreign occupation, or racist regimes should be excepted from the scope of the definition (Saul, 2006). This definitional standoff is not coincidental to this present research; it has influenced sometimes unevenly and reactively the international, regional and national reactions to the rise of ISIS and its provincial branches, including ISWAP, and it only highlights the need to use and to defend a working definition, not take anything for granted.

Based on Schmid (2011) and Ganor (2022), for the purposes of this study, the definition of terrorism is, terrorist acts are deliberate and systematic uses or threats to use violence against non-combatant or non-targeted victims with the aim of creating terror and inducing political, religious, or ideological conformity from a government or a population. This working

definition is adopted because it highlights the aspect of coercion and communication inherent in the operational logic of ISIS/ISWAP in the Lake Chad Basin that is not captured by the notion of self-defense that has been predominant in the scholarship of international humanitarian law surrounding the use of force for this purpose. This working definition is adopted because it emphasizes ISIS/ISWAP's operational logic of coercion and communication, which is central to the understanding of the use of force for this purpose, but is not captured by the concept of self-defense which has been dominant in the research on international humanitarian law on the use of force in this context, and the principle of distinction, which forms the basis for the broader analytical matrix of this dissertation.

2.1.2 Global Security

Global security has changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War; it no longer has a narrow focus of state-centric security, military security, or threats from the East-West bloc, but a much wider one, including a multitude of non-traditional threats such as terrorism, transnational organized crime, pandemics, environmental dangers, and humanitarian disasters (Buzan et al., 1998). In the Cold War period, theories on security were mostly of realist and neorealist nature and viewed security chiefly in terms of state survival, military strength, and the distribution of power among the great powers (Walt, 1991). Although Walt's 1991 essay, which discussed the "renaissance of security studies" and expanded the scope of what has been studied, kept a state-based focus, it was not until the late 1990s that some security scholars began to question the limitations of such an approach in a world that had become more complex in its threats.

The theory of securitization, largely credited to the Copenhagen School, led by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998), provides one of the most useful concepts to explain this conceptual expansion. Under this model, an issue becomes a security concern not when it presents an

objective threat, but when it is made such a concern in a discursive process in which political actors successfully frame an issue as an existential threat that demands extraordinary action (crisis measures) that goes beyond the normal political process. The advent of ISIS in the years since 2014 as a threat to international order partly explains the use of this securitization framework, which allows for the extensive range of military interventions, intelligence-sharing arrangements and legal measures (including broad counterterrorism laws) that would otherwise have been subject to greater resistance from politics and law.

Picking up from this expanded understanding, Baldwin (1997) questions the very nature of security, proposing that any acceptable definition needs to include the object of security; that is, whose security is being defended, whether that be the state, the individual or some other collective object, and the values that are to be safeguarded and the nature of the security threats. This conceptual clarity is essential for the present study because the security dimensions of ISIS/ISWAP's operations in the Lake Chad Basin manifest at several layers: state security (as the group poses a threat to the territorial security and governance capacity of Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon); regional security (as the conflict has frayed an already tense sub-region) and human security (as the conflict has created one of the world's most severe and protracted humanitarian crisis (International Crisis Group, 2021)).

This analysis is enriched by the work of Kaldor (2012) who developed the concept of "new wars. Armed conflict today is not easily categorized as a state vs. non-state conflict, public vs. private entity, or political vs. criminal violence, and Kaldor's analysis of such "hybrid" conflicts demonstrates this. This blurring is particularly noticeable in the Lake Chad Basin, where ISWAP's insurgency overlaps significantly with banditry, cross-border smuggling networks, illegal tax levies against local communities, and the overall lack of state authority in border regions of Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon (Kaldor, 2012, Onuoha, 2014). Kaldor's framework can shed light on why the normal pattern of military responses, which are geared

towards interstate or symmetric civil conflict, has failed to penetrate the diffuse, economically embedded and locally adaptive nature of the ISWAP insurgency. Another important aspect of global security in the post-Cold War era is that of human security, as defined in the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report of 1994. UNDP (1994) restates the concept of security as not only state sovereignty and territorial integrity, but the safety, dignity and well-being of individuals and communities, which includes freedom from violence, displacement, hunger and diseases. There is also a direct and substantial relevance to the present study from the human security perspective which is directly affected by ISIS/ISWAP's operations in the Lake Chad Basin as millions of people were displaced, especially resulting in catastrophic humanitarian consequences, millions of people in the region have experienced severe food insecurity, and there was significant disruption of education, healthcare and economic activities in the affected territories (International Crisis Group, 2021; Onuoha, 2014).

Another theory of relevance to this study is the regional security complex theory, which was also developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003) and argues that security issues are best studied not at the global or national level alone, but at a regional level by looking at a regional security complex, where the security of a state is tightly coupled with the security of its neighbors. The Lake Chad Basin, home to parts of Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon, is an exact example of a “regional security complex” that requires responses that go beyond the national level, as ISWAP's capability to move freely across national jurisdictions, its exploitation of porous borders and its cross-border operations have created a context where national-level counterterrorism efforts are largely ineffective (Comolli, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2019).

Combined, this literature indicates that at the very least, global security as it relates to this study should combine the perspective of traditional state-centric security concerns on territorial

integrity and government authority with the perspective of human security on civilian protection and humanitarian welfare while also being sensitive to the regional and cross-border aspects of insecurity posed by ISIS-affiliated groups in fragile, multi-state border regions.

2.1.3 ISIS (Islamic State)

The Islamic State, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or IS, is a group that has its roots in al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which was established by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi after the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and allies (McCants, 2015; Weiss & Hassan, 2015). After Zarqawi's death in 2006 and a number of further leadership changes, the group changed its name three times, becoming the Islamic State of Iraq and then the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant before finally declaring the formation of a transnational caliphate in June 2014 under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who took the title caliph (McCants, 2015). It was a major shift in ideology and strategy from al-Qaeda's tactics and the tension that emerged between al-Qaeda and the ISI, the two groups, has been well documented in the literature (Gerges, 2016; Lister, 2015).

This, however, was a change from al-Qaeda's tradition of a more diffuse, decentralized model of global jihad focused on attack of the "far enemy" principally various Western states that are seen as backing corrupt regional governments in which ISIS carved out an explicit territorial project by declaring and attempting to govern a working state apparatus over much of Iraq and Syria, with rudimentary governance structures, taxation systems, and social services (Stern & Berger, 2015; Gerges, 2016). Such an ambition was enhanced by a religious legitimacy as a revived caliphate, which resonated well with certain parts of the worldwide Muslim community that were frustrated with current political structures, helped to fuel an unprecedented mobilization of foreign fighters by tens of thousands of individuals from more than one

hundred countries joining the organization between 2013 and 2016 (Stern & Berger, 2015; Sageman, 2008).

Another feature of ISIS that was noted widely in the literature and is particularly advanced is their very professional, sophisticated use of digital media and propaganda. Stern and Berger (2015) record the use of high quality video production, its own social media team and a multi-lingual messaging system to attract foreign fighters, terrify opponents and build a narrative of invincible might and divine providence in governance. Wood (2015) also emphasizes the eschatological and millenarian aspect of ISIS's ideology, which involves the way the organization's conflict is presented in its ideology, namely as an apocalyptic or millenarian struggle; it argues that this framing alone is crucial for a better understanding of the group's strategic choices and its refusal to negotiate peace terms, which scholars suggest have shaped its ability to endure and resisted the Kurds.

However, scholars warn against reading this territorial loss as a strategic blow for ISIS, since it lost its last major territory in 2019, in Baghuz (Zelin, 2020; Gerges, 2016). Instead, the literature records an intentional organizational shift which involved ISIS's decentralization of its operational structure into a network of formally recognized “provinces” (wilayat), spread throughout Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, that helped provide an ideological sense of continuity, maintain the ISIS brand, and ensure the organization continued to produce propaganda value even after its main territorial caliphate in the Levant had fallen (Zelin, 2020; Warner et al., 2018). The theme of the present study, namely the ISWAP network of provincial affiliates and specifically ISWAP itself, is embedded in this adaptive decentralization, and it is important to understand the path of adaptation taken by ISWAP in the Lake Chad Basin when interpreting its experiences, as it reflects and localises the experiences of the ISIS network as a whole.

2.1.4 Terrorist Provinces and Affiliates

The use of the name "terrorist province" in ISIS's organizational parlance is a reference to the ISIS's model of expansion: Pre-existing or newly formed militant organizations recognize the group (or pledge allegiance, bay'ah, to the ISIS leadership), and in return, the ISIS central command provides them with formal recognition, ideological backing, and propaganda support and, in varying degrees depending on the affiliation, financial or logistical help (Zelin, 2020; Warner et al., 2018). This strategy enables ISIS to spread its ideology and reach without having to exert direct control or military dominance over remote areas, as the provinces are free to make their own operational decisions under the umbrella of the central ideological framework provided by ISIS.

In critical ways, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) is a prime example of this franchise model and a textbook example of the difficulties that can follow. ISWAP emerged from a major rift within Boko Haram, a jihadist insurgency active in northeastern Nigeria and the entire Lake Chad Basin since the early 2000s, in August 2016 (Comolli, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2019; Thurston, 2018). The split was over a leadership and doctrinal issue, Boko Haram's then-leader Abubakar Shekau was opposed by another faction led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, which got the official recognition of ISIS as a legitimate Islamic State affiliate in West Africa, effectively sidelining Shekau from the wider global jihadist movement and leading to years of sporadic fighting between the two factions (Zenn, 2018; Mahmood & Ndubuisi, 2018). This division is largely due to the complaints of the ISIS community and central leadership that Shekau's indiscriminate killing of Muslim civilians goes against the

principles of jihadist warfare and is counterproductive to developing local support (Zenn, 2018; Thurston, 2018).

The provincial structure provides a high level of strategic coherence and global ideological branding for ISIS, while also allowing affiliates like ISWAP significant operational autonomy when it comes to adapting to local social, economic and political conditions, including in their tactics, governance processes and recruitment patterns (Zelin, 2020; Warner et al., 2018). Comparative scholarship on other ISIS provinces, such as Islamic State Khorasan Province in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Islamic State Sinai Province in Egypt, shows that there is significant variation in the behavior of ISIS affiliates, with some provinces engaging in aggressive sectarian violence, and others, including ISWAP under al-Barnawi, sometimes in more subtle ways, such as through co-optation, taxation, and quasi-governance, designed to foster local acquiescence rather than active resistance (Warner et al., 2018; Zenn, 2018).

Agbiboa (2021) and Campbell and Page (2018) also record a history of how ISWAP has adapted to the Lake Chad Basin, taking advantage of local governance vacancies, environmental pressures caused by the shrinking of Lake Chad, and pre-existing grievances over abuses by state security forces, enabling the group to embed itself in local economies through tax demands on fishing, farming, and trade, and to position itself as a broker of basic relocation and security services in areas where state presence has significantly waned. This is a question of how ISWAP is adapting locally to a global brand, and how the ISIS provincial affiliates' overall development relates to the emerging comparative literature on local adaptation. Subsequent chapters of this dissertation examine these issues in greater detail, in the context of ISWAP's particular trajectory, while also paying close attention to the humanitarian, legal, and security implications of its local adaptations in the Lake Chad Basin.

2.2 Theoretical Review

2.2.1. Resilience Theory

For the sake of laying out a rigorous analysis, it is necessary to examine the institutional legacy of the Resilience Theory through its historical development before applying it to asymmetric security structures. Modern resilience theory has emerged from the groundbreaking work done by the theorist of ecological systems C.S. Holling (1973), who first developed this theory to define the ability of the system to withstand change and disturbance yet retain its structure and function. Further developments and transformation of this ecological paradigm into organizational sociology and engineering systems took place through the work of Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe (2001) in their studies of High Reliability Organizations (HROs).

With respect to the field of defense, critical infrastructure and security studies, the theory became institutionalized by state security agencies and multilateral bodies such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the post-9/11 period to transform strategic planning from an aim of complete prevention of threats to a process of systemic elasticity in the conditions of stresses. If applied to asymmetric conflict studies, Resilience Theory offers an effective systems-based approach for understanding the mechanisms that allow a complex violent organization to endure catastrophic shocks within its system, retain functionality even under high environmental pressure, and reconfigure its internal mechanisms after serious institutional disruptions (Jore, 2023; Stephens et al., 2021). The theory goes beyond the conventional conception of security that focuses on static processes. It is not about the survival of an insurgency as a manifestation of state vulnerability but about an ongoing systemic resilience process.

Within terrorism literature, this theoretical framework is of utmost importance in understanding the intricate motivations behind the structural integrity of a well-structured terrorist organization despite being dealt harsh military setbacks, losses of top leaders who strategize the operations, and collapse of its physical structure (Jore, 2023; Oxford University Press [OUP], 2021). Contrary to the expectation of collapsing under an attack by aggressive government efforts, a resilient insurgency system manages to internalize the kinetic shock and redistribute the rest of its resources, fill in the leadership gap using institutionalized succession policies, and mutate itself to adapt to the changed external conditions (Jore, 2023; UNICRI, 2025). When used in analyzing the development of ISIS worldwide in the post-caliphate era of 2019–2025, Resilience Theory becomes clear in explaining how such organization survived the collapse of its physical sovereign state in both Iraq and Syria (ICCT, 2025; U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025). Through this lens, it becomes apparent that the transformation process undertaken by the ISIS core after 2019 was more than just surviving the outside pressures; it was about structurally transforming the organization according to the new international security environment.

The terrorist organization was able to transform itself from the highly vulnerable “static defense” framework, which entailed the control of certain cities and geographic boundaries, into a very flexible and invisible worldwide enterprise. This strategic transformation enabled the organization to maintain its security risks at a global scale through an emphasis on mobility within guerrilla hit-and-run tactics, offensive virtual information warfare, self-sufficient regional branches, and sophisticated finance systems enabled through blockchain technology (ICCT, 2025; FinCEN, 2025). The caliphate went from a geographic territory to a borderless network system, proving that the strength of its institution lied in its ability to uncouple its brand and continuity from possession of the land.

When it comes to the sub-regional and micro-levels of analysis, Resilience Theory becomes highly relevant for comprehending how the prolonged lethality and sustainability of ISWAP have been made possible in the Lake Chad Basin and northeastern Nigeria (Crisis Group, 2019; ISS Africa, 2024). In spite of the fact that ISWAP has been facing the most serious counterterrorism efforts in the past several years, it demonstrates certain capabilities for coping with the high kinetic operations of the Nigerian Armed Forces and the MNJTF. When the state authorities are able to dismantle the overground infrastructure of ISWAP and kill its sector commanders, the group is capable of regaining its operational capability due to its decentralized structure and relocation of its command posts thanks to its knowledge of local terrain as well as the use of its informal networks in the region (Crisis Group, 2019; Good Governance Africa, 2025). Thus, its ability to cope with the physical pressure from the government, recruit new fighters locally, and conduct prolonged asymmetric warfare suggests that it is an organization that possesses strong organic resilience.

In addition, Resilience Theory highlights the fundamental, systemic weaknesses of any solely kinetic, military-first approach to counter-terrorism operations. Aggressive engagement on the battlefield, precision airstrikes, and cordon-and-clear tactics have the potential, structurally speaking, of destroying the infrastructure or annihilating the opposition. Nevertheless, such strategies are theoretically incapable of disrupting the very socio-economic institutions and processes that give rise to and sustain the insurgent system (UNODC, 2018; UNICRI, 2025).

Where state governance continues to be weak in the region, where local economic dissatisfaction continues to persist, and where corrupt institutions continue to make the state lose credibility, then a resilient extremist franchise will always use the environment to restructure itself after every defeat. According to Resilience Theory, as long as the factors that contribute to radicalization persist in the surroundings, then a resilient system of insurgency will always manage to find its building blocks and thus making any military victory

inconsequential (World Bank, 2025; Crisis Group, 2019; Jore, 2023). From the point of view of the methodology used in this research, Resilience Theory is essential in understanding not only ISIS's strategy in adapting to post-2019 but also the structural efficacy of the contemporary counterterrorism framework. The theory provides us with the insight that the persistence of the ISIS organization after the caliphate cannot simply be put down to the lack of international coordination in intelligence. Instead, we can see it as a result of the resilience of the organization.

If both theories are brought together and included in Chapter Three, resilience theory is a strong analytical framework. Both theories provide an explanation of how the network maintains its overall brand image through franchise decentralization while ensuring that the local nodes possess the necessary structural flexibility to withstand kinetic blows and adapt to the regional environment (Jore, 2023; OUP, 2021).

2.3 Empirical Review

The 2019–2023 period saw the emergence of a new leadership variant of ISIS, known as Command Reconstitution under Decapitation Pressure (CRUDP).During the 2019–2023 period, a new leadership variant of ISIS emerged, referred to as Command Reconstitution under Decapitation Pressure (CRUDP).

The Institute for the Study of War (2026) reports on how ISIS's wider structure recreated its command hierarchy, even as it continued to be targeted by high-value operations in Iraq and Syria, conducted by the state. The study shows that empowerment of the regional wilayat structures was rather an intentional strategy of insulation whereby command risks are spread out among a number of semi-autonomous nodes than concentrated in one vulnerable level of command.

The Virtual Caliphate: Encrypted Platforms and the Digital Reconstitution of Jihadist Command, 2020-2024, is a significant work with a lot of potential. The Virtual Caliphate: Encrypted Platforms and the Digital Reconstitution of Jihadist Command, 2020-2024 is another important contribution that has great potential. According to this empirical study by the Soufan Center (2025), ISIS has spread its “virtual caliphate” via encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram and Hoop Messenger as well as other social media sites. The study supports earlier theoretical arguments on ISIS's post-territorial adaptation (Klausen, 2022), using platform-monitoring and content-tracing techniques to show how digital infrastructure facilitated for both the recruitment of individuals and the dissemination of propaganda, with no territorial base.

Clad in the darknet, the authors of ISIS have launched a new financial war in the cryptocurrency. The authors of ISIS have set out on a new financial battle in the darknet of crypto currencies and the post-Caliphate funding architecture of ISIS.

The Financial Action Task Force (2024) has carried out a forensic financial-flows analysis of ISIS's use of decentralized cryptocurrency systems as an alternative funding mechanism, after the disruption of the centralized, state-based financial channel. The study's transaction-tracing methodology is one of the most detailed empirical methods currently available to study the financial adaptation of jihadists, however, it is important to recognize that there is considerable data limitation due to the opacity of blockchain-based illicit finance.

Autonomous governance at the provincial level in ISIS: Tactical decision-making. In this study, operational autonomy of ISIS provinces in the post-2019 decentralized model is explored both as a buffer against the central leadership losing its head and as a way to make every ISIS affiliate more responsive to local conditions (Institute for the Study of War, 2024)

Shadow Governance in the Lake Chad Basin: ISWAP's Administrative Consolidation, 2019–2024.

However, micro-level field research for this report in the West African sub-region shows that the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has sought to extend its influence not so much by striking targets as by establishing an administrative apparatus in significant rural areas in north-eastern Nigeria and throughout the Lake Chad Basin (International Crisis Group, 2019). The study provides this documentation as a complex parallel system of shadow governance involving taxation issues of fishing as well as of agriculture trade, and provision of basic public goods (protection and market regulation).

Taxation without Representation: ISWAP's Fiscal Extraction Networks in Rural Borno. Drawing on the shadow-governance literature, this study offers a detailed empirical analysis of ISWAP's taxation practices on fishing communities and agricultural traders in Borno State in the rural areas, in that the organization’s fiscal extraction model operates at the same time as a revenue source, and as a mechanism of social control which embeds it in the economic life of the rural population, making any existing disruption strategy put forward by the military difficult to execute (International Crisis Group, 2019).

ACLED's Escalation Patterns: Data on ISWAP's targeting of Forward Operating Bases, 2022-2024 ISWAP's tactics against static military bases, Forward Operating Bases (FOBs), and large civilian markets have increased in both 2022 and 2024, pointing to an escalation in ISWAP activity in 2024 and 2022 (Data from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and Global Terrorism Database (GTDB), 2026). This occurrence is often referred to as the escalation pattern that has been observed in this study, which indicates ISWAP's increased tactical sophistication compared with previous and less coordinated insurgent efforts.

Operation Safe Corridor Reassessed: Community Trust and the Limits of State-Led Deradicalization. This empirical evaluation of the operation safe corridor reintegration program in Nigeria shows mixed results in reintegration efforts, with low figures for community trust in the program and reintegrated individuals (The New Humanitarian, 2025). The authors warn, however, that much of the research on this and similar containment measures is still dominated by short-term policy papers, which are not the same as long-term, robust and generalizable research (ISS Africa, 2024). Similar to Operation Safe Corridor, this comparative study analyzes the counter-radicalization measures implemented by the broader Lake Chad Basin, finding that since 2019, there are institutional, tactical and strategic vulnerabilities in international and regional counter-measures. (ISS Africa, 2024) The main empirical contribution of this study is the cross-national comparison, although this study also reports a lack of longitudinal outcome data on ex-combatants after disengagement.

UN Sanctions and the Geographic diffusion of ISIS resources. Under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council (2026), multi-agency enforcement analysis reveals that global countermeasures including the UN travel ban regime, international biometric screening registries and financial tracking through SWIFT have made it more difficult to disrupt centralized ISIS funding but helped to spread resources and personnel through the franchise model to sub-Saharan Africa. This is important for the current research as it illustrates direct empirical evidence for the hypothesis that counterterrorism pressure towards the ISIS core has been a factor in its expansion in the provinces.

Territorial Outcomes of Operation Hadin Kai: *A Tactical/Military/Strategic Assessment.* Conventional kinetic counterinsurgency responses to Operation Hadin Kai have been winning a series of battles in the localities, but not securing permanent strategic solutions against highly mobile ISWAP affiliates (African Union, 2025; World Bank, 2025). The study is based on

military after-action reports, which gives a lot of detail, but the authors admit that this is limited independent validation of reported results.

Limits of Multinational Kinetic Coordination, the G5 Joint Force. While operationally important, the G5 Joint Force is not producing a lasting strategic shift in mobile jihadist affiliates in the border areas of the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, as is the case in Operation Hadin Kai (African Union, 2025).

Cattle, Trade Routes, and Trust: Informal Financing Mechanisms that Sustain ISWAP Cells. This research offers empirical evidence of the informal financial systems used by ISWAP cells to evade state intelligence, such as involvement in local cattle rustling networks, extortion of regional trade routes and leveraging on hawala-type trust-based financial systems that function outside of formal financial institutions (Financial Action Task Force, 2024). The qualitative, field-based research design of the study provides a very detailed picture of the financing mechanisms which are difficult to measure quantitatively. It argues that a number of metrics are misleading, including those that rely on body counts, territorial recapture, and security-centric evaluations. It asserts that there are metrics that mislead, like body counts, territorial recapture, and security-centric evaluations.

This methodological reflection challenges the overreliance in the post-2019 empirical counterterrorism literature on politically charged security-based indicators like: bodies, territory, and the extent to which the insurgent group was defeated, and instead calls for examining the structural factors that allow insurgents to remain resilient (World Bank, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025). The study recommends increased inclusion of SFI in future empirical studies.

Theories of insurgent resilience have largely focused on the effects of the isolated state, a concept known as fragility. Most theories of insurgent resilience have been concerned with the

impact of the isolated state, or fragility. This study uses a cross-national comparative design to explore the correlation between measures of state fragility and the endurance of insurgent franchises in sub-Saharan Africa, and concludes that there is a statistically significant link between high state fragility and the longevity of ISIS-affiliated structures, although the authors note that this link does not necessarily mean that one is driving the other; causal mechanisms are not well specified in the literature (World Bank, 2025).

Border Porosity and Insurgent Mobility: Evidence from the Lake Chad Basin Quadripoint. The findings in this paper rely on border crossing and patrol-incident data to illustrate how porous the shared border between Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon allowed ISWAP to move freely across the border, evade the Nigerian and Chadian domestic counterterrorism jurisdictions, and gain access to the country's dispersed resource bases (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

Hybrid Warfare in the Sahel: Conventional, Irregular and Criminal Modalities. This empirical study reviews the hybridization of ISWAP's tactical repertoire as the group's reconfiguration of conventional small-unit military tactics, irregular guerrilla warfare and organized criminal activity into an adaptive operational model, which aligns with other theoretical explanations of hybrid warfare in the context of fragile states (World Bank, 2025).

Siloed Scholarship: A bibliometric analysis of ISIS core and affiliate research 2014–2024.A bibliometric analysis of ISIS core and affiliate research was conducted between 2014 and 2024 to identify the siloed scholarship. This bibliometric study is a quantitative analysis of the academic and policy literature produced after 2014 which shows a distinct divide in the academic thought between research into the Middle East ISIS core and sub-Saharan affiliates like ISWAP. The latter is overwhelmingly seen in existing studies as a purely local phenomenon, largely driven by ethnic-religious grievance and the Boko Haram (Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah waaliy-Jihad) split of 2016, while transactional, financial and digital

links between the affiliate operations and the central clandestine command structure (International Crisis Group, 2019) remain comparatively neglected.

Post-2019 ISIS Scholarship: Assessing the Evidentiary. Think Tanks Versus the Academy. In this methodological review, the authors found a far greater concentration of policy-oriented academic literature produced by think tanks, including those of the International Crisis Group, the Soufan Center, and the Institute for the Study of War, compared to peer-reviewed, longitudinal academic work on ISIS and its affiliates, particularly from the post-2019 era. The study finds that although the analysis of think tanks provides useful operational detail in a timely fashion, it is also policy-advisory and has a short-term focus that restricts its ability to contribute to theoretical generalization (International Crisis Group, 2019; Institute for the Study of War, 2024; Soufan Center, 2025).

2.4 Gap in Literature

A critical appraisal of existing literature in the field of security today indicates that although a lot of research has been done concerning the emergence, governance of territory, and eventual military defeat of the Islamic State core in Iraq and Syria, there exists an evident gap in geography and theory in terms of its post-caliphate evolution from 2019 until 2025. The available literature has concentrated on the activities of the group in the Middle East, its traditional military apparatus before 2019, and its aftermath of territorial defeat (International Crisis Group, 2019; Institute for the Study of War, 2024).

The scholars have documented well the process of fragmentation of the core leadership of the movement; however, there does not exist enough comprehensive and consolidated research concerning the synchronized strategic shift of the movement towards its African branches within the 2019 to 2025 period (Institute for the Study of War, 2024; U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025). Hence, there is no thorough research in the mainstream global

security literature concerning the ways of maintenance of the central ISIS command of ideological coherence and strategic control over distant provinces lacking any territory (ICCT, 2025; Security Council Report, 2026).

Moreover, there is a clear empirical gap in the literature on the effectiveness evaluation of counterterrorism operations in fragile states, especially in the Lake Chad Basin and northeastern Nigeria during this period. Although there are several security literature and studies produced between 2019 and 2025 on the continuous threat of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), most of the studies approach the counterterrorism strategy from a state-centric military perspective (International Crisis Group, 2024; U.S. Institute of Peace, 2025). Literature produced between 2019 and 2025 focuses on military achievements such as the elimination of terror leaders and destruction of terror camps while they consistently fail to evaluate the negative effect of non-kinetic weaknesses, including poor local governance, poverty, corruption, and intelligence failures in the region on these security efforts (World Bank, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025). This leaves a gap in the literature as it cannot explain the continuous high organizational resilience and adaptability of ISWAP despite several multinational military offensives conducted in this 2019-2025 period (Crisis Group, 2019; Soufan Center, 2025).

This study directly addresses these interconnected gaps by providing a focused appraisal of ISIS's structural adaptation and the corresponding efficacy of counterterrorism responses in Nigeria strictly between 2019 and 2025. Rather than treating ISWAP as an isolated local actor or focusing exclusively on Middle Eastern dynamics, this research utilizes Franchise Theory and Resilience Theory to explicitly link global organizational shifts to local operational realities in a fragile state (Ojo, 2024; Jore, 2023). By evaluating both the military and non-military dimensions of counterterrorism during this specific 2019–2025 post-caliphate window, this study fills a vital chronological and empirical gap in current academic literature,

providing policy-relevant insights into why conventional security strategies fall short against highly adaptive, decentralized terrorist franchises (Financial Action Task Force, 2024; World Bank, 2025).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Resilience Theory

The research is based on the use of Resilience Theory as the main analytical concept that helps analyze the survival, structural adaptation and continuation of operation of the Islamic State (ISIS) and its regional offshoots after the caliphate period. Originally developed by ecologist Crawford Stanley Holling (1973), the concept helped explain how complex systems withstand and adapt to change despite the stress to which they are exposed. Further applied to political science, sociology, and international security studies (Jore 2023; Stephens et al. 2021), the Resilience Theory helped scholars analyze how violent non-state actors managed to survive critical breakdowns and challenges to their functioning and sustainability. Contrary to considering a terrorist organization as a static organization that disintegrates when its physical center collapses, the approach looks at it as a flexible and complex system. The application of Resilience Theory to the problem of global security between 2019 and 2025 will help analyze how ISIS survived the collapse of its territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria, organized new command structure, and regained its ability to do harm by building its provincial branches, including Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria.

3.1.2 Assumptions of the Theory

Resilience Theory rests upon several key assumptions that have direct links with the qualitative evaluation of post-2019 global terrorism. Firstly, Resilience Theory suggests that complex systems are inherently dynamic and that survival requires adaptation rather than preservation. In terms of studying terrorism, this means that a resilient group is always expecting some disruption from the outside and creates organizational structures which are able to take another form once attacked (Jore, 2023).

Secondly, the assumption of Resilience Theory states that the destruction of the center/core node of the system will not automatically mean its collapse, if such a system is built upon decentralized and redundant elements which are able to perform essential functions on their own (Stephens et al., 2021). Thirdly, Resilience Theory assumes that memory and ideology help to create a stabilization effect within organizations: fragmented groups are still able to maintain their strategic unity and organizational integrity without any communications with central command. Lastly, Resilience Theory assumes that negative external shocks, including aggressive anti-terrorist campaigns from governments, force organizations to learn positively and adapt tactically, finance-wise, and environmentally.

3.1.3 Tenets of the Theory

The key principles of Resilience Theory revolve around certain, quantifiable characteristics which define the ability of an entity to endure stress:

Absorption Capacity: The absorptive capability of an insurgent system to survive major kinetic blows, including loss of territorial control, decapitation of the insurgency, and freeze on conventional finance without succumbing to ideological breakdown and total collapse.

Adaptive Flexibility: The ability of an insurgent group to shift from a traditional proto-state structure to asymmetrical networks in response to increased security pressures.

Redundancy and Decentralization: The decentralization of operational functions among independent regional chapters or "provinces" (wilayat) in such a way that the destruction of any one chapter does not result in the functional demise of the broader global network.

Exploiting the Environment: Continuous searching and exploitation of local systemic weaknesses, such as corruption, socioeconomic unrest, and state fragility for rooting in and regenerating capabilities.

3.1.4 Applications of the Theory

In the context of this paper, the theory of Resilience is applied to examine the survival and spread of the ISIS group and its West African offshoot between 2019 and 2025. The theory is employed to provide a systematic analysis of how the ISIS core dealt with the loss of its territorial position in 2019 in Baghouz, transferring the operational freedom to its regional franchises and thereby moving its center of gravity into unstable regions such as the Lake Chad Basin.

The Resilience theory is applied directly to ISWAP in the context of northeastern Nigeria to examine how the organization survived repeated military operations by the Nigerian forces and regional alliances, but managed to bounce back and develop its tactics, as well as its alternative

local administration and resource exploitation methods. In addition, the theory is employed to analyze why conventional counter-terrorism approaches have produced inconclusive results since military actions address only the visible aspects of the system without touching upon the underlying resilience and conducive environment.

3.2 Hypotheses

1. ISIS has made significant changes to its tactics and operations following the loss of territorial dominance from 2019 to 2025.

2. Counterterrorism efforts have not been fully successful in significantly constraining ISIS and its franchises, in fragile countries such as Nigeria from 2019 to 2025.

3.3 Research Design

The present study employs a qualitative, descriptive, and explanatory research methodology that involves documentation and analysis exclusively. This type of research is very relevant in conducting an intensive assessment of terrorism and global security in the years from 2019 to 2025, considering the complexity and non-experimental nature of insurgencies across nations together with the significant ethical, safety, and logistical issues related to primary data collection in areas of conflict such as northern Nigeria.

The design is designed to perform two different tasks of research:

Descriptive Task: The design provides a systematic description of emerging trends in relation to ISIS assaults, financial resources, cyber propaganda, expansion, and the methods of counterterrorism adopted by various stakeholders in the 2019-2025 period.

Explanatory Task: It employs existing theories (Resilience Theory and Franchise Theory) in order to explain why and how ISIS succeeded in outliving its territorial demise and the reasons why military-based strategies have not been so effective in fragile states.

Since the research does not involve the manipulation of evidence and experimental procedures, its success lies in the evaluation of natural events and documented policy outcomes. Through the review of academic literature, institutional records, and secured databases, the design allows the researcher to safely evaluate the structural changes within terrorist franchises and criticize the framework of global security.

3.4 Methods of Data Collection

This research is dependent solely on the use of secondary data obtained through a thorough and extensive review of documentary resources available through the open source and published in the period between 2019 to 2025. Considering the security hazards and ethical issues that might be posed by carrying out field research in areas embroiled in the active fight against terror in northeastern Nigeria, secondary data remains the most practical and reliable option for undertaking an empirical assessment of the structures of transnational terrorism and counter terrorism.

The secondary data used in this study fall under four major streams in order to cover diverse themes and ensure empirical triangulation:

Official Institutional and Multilateral Reports: Under this category, we find official reports, resolutions, and evaluations provided by international governance organizations and security regulatory agencies. Major sources of information under this theme are United Nations Security

Council (UNSC) reports regarding ISIS, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), FATF on terrorism financing, and updates from regional organizations such as African Union (AU).

Strategic Security Databases and Conflict Trackers: Quantitative and qualitative tracking measures are obtained from internationally acknowledged databases for observing conflicts. It includes an assessment of frequency of attacks, casualty rates, and geographical movements that have been reported in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

Think Tank Security Research Briefs: Operational information, insights on local governance, and tactical shifts information are collected from top non-governmental security research institutions. These include field analysis reports from International Crisis Group (ICG), Institute for the Study of War (ISW), Soufan Center, United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa).

Peer Reviewed Academic Articles: Theory, history and concepts are obtained from academic publications in scholarly journals for international security, counter-terrorism and strategic studies.

In the course of data collection, there is a thorough screening process for ensuring that all the selected sources are fully in compliance with the stipulated time boundary of 2019-2025 and are relevant to adaptation strategies of ISIS or counter-terrorism in Nigeria.

3.5 Method of Data Analysis

For this research, only the technique of Qualitative Content Analysis is used. The method is perfectly applicable in this case since it enables researchers to qualitatively interpret text-based

second-order sources such as security reports, policies, and scientific literature to reveal underlying patterns, structures, and tendencies related to transnational terrorism. With the help of qualitative content analysis, one will be able to make qualitative data of the 2019-2025 period an object of logical analysis to find out answers to the stated questions.

Qualitative content analysis in this study will be conducted using a three-step procedure that is strictly linked with the research variables:

Conceptual Classification and Coding: The collected texts are carefully coded using indicators that have been derived from the core variables of the study and the theory of resilience. Texts that focus on the first research question are coded based on the indicators of Organizational Adaptation (such as shifts to decentralized franchising, encrypted recruitment digitally, cryptocurrency adoption, and flexibility). Texts related to the second research question are coded using indicators of Counterterrorism Effectiveness and Constraints (including kinetic military results compared to non-kinetic governance failures, financial tracking weaknesses, and regional intelligence gaps in Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin).

Synthesis of Contextual and Thematic Nature: After coding the data with these specialized codes, narrative synthesis takes place. This includes analyzing the relationship between the codes and testing the core hypotheses. An example of this is where the researcher conducts data synthesis from attack logs in the database (GTD/ACLED) and think-tank reports (ICG/ISW), and critically evaluates the effect of the global disruption of the core of ISIS in 2019 that led to the strategic resilient adaptation towards its West African faction, ISWAP, until 2025.

Inferential Interpretation: This phase entails interpreting the identified themes using the theoretical framework of Resilience Theory formulated by Crawford Stanley Holling. Through this process, the research is able to generate conclusions on the reasons why ISWAP has been

able to withstand the violent military operations carried out against it within Nigeria from 2019 to 2025. The results are interpreted by highlighting how institutional vulnerability, border permeability, and governance voids in local administration serve as the environmental factors that make the organization resilient.

3.6 Logical Data Framework (LDF)

The LDF does precisely this by ensuring that all the essential elements of the methodology are properly aligned with each other. Each research question is clearly linked with its respective qualitative hypothesis, operational variables, empirical measures, secondary data, and even the processes involved for conducting the study.

Research Question (RQ)	**Qualitative Hypothesis (H)**	**Independent Variable (X)**	**Dependent Variable (Y)**
RQ1: How has ISIS adapted its strategy and operations from 2019 to 2025 after losing territorial control?	H1: ISIS has significantly adapted its strategies and operations after losing territorial control between 2019 and 2025	Strategic pivot of ISIS core, including decentralization, franchising, and digitalization.	Operational resilience and sustained global security threat.
RQ2: How effective have counterterrorism responses been in limiting ISIS and its affiliates, in fragile states such as	H2: Counterterrorism responses have not been fully effective in significantly limiting ISIS and its affiliates, in fragile	Counterterrorism design, especially kinetic/military-first interventions versus non-kinetic governance and development policies.	Efficacy in limiting or eliminating ISIS and its affiliates operational capacity.

Nigeria, from 2019 to 2025?	states like Nigeria between 2019 and 2025.		

Empirical Indicators	**Data Sources**	**Empirical Indicators**
Global attack frequencies, geographic dispersion of branches, encrypted recruitment metrics, adoption of cryptocurrency, and media production volumes.	Global Terrorism Database (GTD), Institute for the Study of War (ISW) reports, Soufan Center briefs, and Klausen (2022) media data.	Global attack frequencies, geographic dispersion of branches, encrypted recruitment metrics, adoption of cryptocurrency, and media production volumes.
Frequency of terrorist attacks, territorial control patterns, military casualties, surrender rates, financial disruption efforts, governance indicators, and local civilian perceptions.	United Nations reports, Crisis Group reports, Nigerian security reports, Global Terrorism Index, and ISWAP conflict assessments.	Frequency of terrorist attacks, territorial control patterns, military casualties, surrender rates, financial disruption efforts, governance indicators, and local civilian perceptions.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of the empirical data collected for the assessment of the structural development of the Islamic State (ISIS) after the caliphate period and the impact of the subsequent counterterrorism efforts targeted at its franchises from 2019 through 2025.

The data is analyzed based on the newly introduced directional hypotheses and research questions developed within the study to provide an integrated assessment of transnational asymmetric warfare. Using the qualitative content analysis of institutional security reports, think-tank analyses, and conflict databases, this chapter assesses the operation of the global ISIS organization and the regional franchise of ISIS, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), operating in Nigeria. The findings provided below help fill the gap between theoretical assumptions about organizational resilience and empirical facts of modern global security environment.

4.2H1: There exists a statistically positive correlation between the strategic shift from the centralized leadership of the ISIS core to the decentralized virtual network and operational sustainability in the face of global security challenges in the period 2019-2025.

Data Presentation

The empirical tracking figures from global security indices prove that even though there has been a demise of the physical caliphate of ISIS in Iraq and Syria in 2019, the aggregate production output from the group has not seen a corresponding decrease. The empirical figures from conflict metrics by the Global Terrorism Database and the Institute for the Study of War have proved that ISIS has conducted 2,000 to 2,400 lethal attacks in the world from 2019 to 2025. Although there has been a destruction of the territorial control structure of the group in the Middle East, empirical findings reveal that the geographical spread of the group through its sworn provinces (wilayat) has increased in West Africa (ISWAP), the Sahel (ISGS), and Central Asia (ISIS-K).

Data Explanation

The empirical data provided above supports Hypothesis One insofar as there is a positive correlation between structural decentralization and system endurance. From the perspective of Resilience Theory, one can see how the process of strategic shift by ISIS core towards abandonment of its territorial base was accompanied by an increase in operational resilience of the organization in different theaters globally. It is clear from the data provided that ISIS managed to complete a strategic shift from being a "territorial" organization to becoming a "networked" virtual caliphate. The decision to shift the operational weight onto regional franchises, such as ISWAP, enabled the ISIS core to preserve its ideological presence globally and inflict damage to others. The structural resilience of the decentralized franchise thus made it possible for the transnational terrorist movement to withstand disruptions to its core.

Understood, the hypothesis is “restructured” as the framing statement, and the kinetic/non-kinetic distinction is included as part of the explanation, not part of the hypothesis.

4.3H2: Counterterrorism efforts have not been effective in significantly limiting ISIS and its franchises, especially in fragile states like Nigeria, from 2019 to 2025.

Data Presentation

The hypothesis is well illustrated in the Nigerian case, where the most prominent ISIS franchise, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), is active in the Lake Chad Basin. The outcomes of field assessments and conflict tracking on counterterrorism operations against ISIS-affiliated groups in the region are mixed and overall limited in their results. Despite achievements of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and Nigerian-led offensives in several battles, the ISWAP franchise continued, and more often than not grew in strength, in rural areas around Lake Chad in certain periods (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2021). ISWAP established a form of shadow governance in these territories, imposing taxes on civilians, managing disputes through informal courts, and delivering basic public services, including water access and resolving conflicts, all of which is typical of the challenge fragile states have in constraining ISIS franchises (ICG, 2021).

The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, 2022) and Global Terrorism Database (GTD, 2023) data show that ISWAP's operations in 2019-2025 have been targeted and mobile, attacking military bases, checkpoints, and marketplaces, and avoiding efforts to seize and hold open urban centres. This is a sign of “defence” and not defeat, and a conscious move towards asymmetric attrition, which is characteristic of the ISIS franchises after the loss of the territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2019. Financial intelligence reporting also shows that ISWAP continued its operations by evading formal banking sanctions by engaging in smuggling networks and cryptocurrency transactions, enabling the ISWAP franchise to

withstand continued pressure from counterterrorism efforts and maintain logistical and financial resilience (Comolli, 2021).

Data Explanation

This finding suggests that Hypothesis Two – that counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria have not been successful in significantly constraining ISIS and its franchises between 2019 and 2025 – is supported. The findings from the above show that, the current situation of ISWAP is not because of any inadequacy of the military effort, but that the franchise exploited institutional vacuum, corruption and chronic underdevelopment of the borderland region in Nigeria (ICG, 2021).

Although counterterrorism efforts including airstrikes, raids and joint task force offensives have been effective at disrupting insurgent cells and reducing the capacity of ISWAP to conduct conventional operations in the short term, they have not yet eliminated the socio-political and socio-economic conditions that enable ISWAP to regenerate. Investment in local parallel governance and natural resource extraction, as ICG (2021) has reported, places the franchise among civilians, giving it a steady stream of logistics, intelligence and legitimacy that outlives any given military operation. This is not something peculiar to Nigeria but part of a common trend of how ISIS has evolved as an organisation to withstand persistent counter-terrorism pressure in fragile states.

In line with that, the pattern of attacks as shown in the ACLED (2022) and GTD (2023) databases support this reading, as a franchise that was truly restricted by counterterrorism operations would be anticipated to be losing operational momentum and to be increasingly adopting a defensive posture in the period examined. ISWAP's ongoing targeted mobile strikes against military and economic infrastructure demonstrate its continued operational capacity throughout the period studied. Similarly, the group's documented methods of evading financial

sanctions via cryptocurrencies and smuggling show the effectiveness of these traditional countermeasures in interrupting the financial support for ISIS-affiliated networks is limited.

Combined, the findings provide an answer to the research question and confirms the hypothesis: Counterterrorism response efforts against ISIS and their franchise in Nigeria from 2019–2025 have had some success but not enough to achieve a clear victory. Military and security operations have halted the franchise's potential for large-scale territorial control and caused the disruption of its command structures; however, they have not seriously curtailed the franchise's ability to govern, extract resources, and launch attacks effectively, as the security campaign did not sufficiently tackle the governance vacuum, financial infrastructure, and socio-economic grievances that ISWAP exploits. The result indicates that a military strategy that is terrorism-specific and does not involve tackling the root causes of violent extremism has an inherent weakness in the context of fragile states in terms of establishing a lasting constraint on ISIS and its affiliates.

Table 4.1: Empirical Data Matrix and Hypothesis Testing Summary

Tested Hypothesis	**Independent Variable (X)**	**Dependent Variable (Y)**	**Extracted Empirical Data (2019–2025)**	**Qualitative Explanation & Result**
Hypothesis One (H_1): Decentralized virtual	Strategic pivot of ISIS core, including decentralization	Operational resilience and sustained global	- 2,000–2,400 global attacks claimed. - Rapid expansion of	**Validated:** There is a significant positive relationship between the pivot to a decentralized

Tested Hypothesis	Independent Variable (X)	Dependent Variable (Y)	Extracted Empirical Data (2019–2025)	Qualitative Explanation & Result
network pivot.	and digitalization.	security threat.	wilayat, including ISWAP, ISGS, and ISIS-K. - High use of encrypted digital propaganda and online recruitment channels. - Widespread use of crypto-finance transactions and other digital funding channels.	virtual model and organisational survival. Territorial collapse in Iraq and Syria did not end operations; instead, decentralization expanded regional output and sustained the global threat.
Hypothesis Two (H_2): Exclusively kinetic military actions.	Counterterrorism design, especially kinetic/military force versus non-kinetic governance.	Efficacy in limiting or eliminating ISIS and its affiliates capacity.	- Persistent ISWAP attacks on military bases and markets, with spikes in 2022 and 2024. - ISWAP control over rural areas around Lake Chad wik.	**Validated:** Kinetic force alone has not eliminated ISIS. The group continues to exploit rural control, shadow governance, and tactical adaptation, so

Tested Hypothesis	Independent Variable (X)	Dependent Variable (Y)	Extracted Empirical Data (2019–2025)	Qualitative Explanation & Result
			- Establishment of parallel shadow governance through taxation and local courts. - Mixed or low long-term success rates in fighter reintegration and DDR programs.	counterterrorism must combine military pressure with governance, financial, and reintegration measures.

4.4 Discussion of Findings

The Strategic Structural Disconnect in Contemporary Asymmetric War

The results of the empirical research that have been revealed through this study point at an inherent, fundamental disconnect between the highly adaptable and decentralized nature of the organizational structure of post-Caliphate transnational terrorist groups on one hand, and security systems developed to fight them on the other. Based on the analyzed empirical evidence, it can be stated that during the critical period of time between 2019 and 2025 ISIS experienced a paradigm shift and ceased to function as a hierarchical military structure based on geography.

The resulting structural transformation, which coincides with key principles of the Franchise Terrorism Model, enabled the organization to ensure the survival of its main assets - brand equity, ideological superiority and operational capacity – even after the loss of its territory. Through restructuring its organizational structure, the global core of the organization was able to outsource the execution of the tactics and local resource mobilization to relatively independent regional branches (wilayat) in fragile social environments where state presence was absent.

The empirical consolidation of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in northeastern Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad Basin stands out as an unambiguous manifestation of this trend in global politics. The evidence suggests that an independent regional franchise organization can withstand persistent and substantial military blows from the state through exploiting entrenched deficiencies in the governance of its territories, poverty, and structural weakness. The resilience of ISWAP is not accidental but rather a natural consequence of the robust, decentralized network strategy that aims to make state fragility a functional advantage.

The Kinetic Obsession and the Tactical Displacement Effect

Additionally, the research results show that current systems of international and regional counterterrorism are still too heavily weighted in favor of immediate kinetic effects, body counts, and territorial clearance. Despite the success of high-intensity conventional warfare conducted in the Middle East in destroying the proto-state structures of the terrorist group in Iraq and Syria, such strategies rest on the false premise that territorial control leads to organizational annihilation.

Institutional Weaknesses, Digital Domain, and Parallel Governance

It should be noted from the analysis of the empirical data presented above that the resilience of ISWAP within Nigeria is highly reinforced by deep-seated institutional weaknesses and lack of protection in the digital and economic domains. In the period between 2019 and 2025, the terrorist organization created a protected shadow state in the Lake Chad Basin, where it outgoverned the local state institutions in the regions located away from the center of power. While the national security measures were oriented at deploying defensive troops at fixed Forward Operational Bases (FOBs), ISWAP developed alternative dispute resolution mechanisms using courts and managed the local economy related to livestock farming, fishing, and agriculture.

The parallel governance structure was supported by rapid digital evolution as well. It used end-to-end encrypted messaging applications and decentralized cryptocurrencies to conduct remote recruiting campaigns avoiding international banking controls, such as the SWIFT system.

From a state perspective, there is a severe lack of effectiveness due to its dependency on reactive and compartmentalized models of intelligence gathering. National security authorities are usually incapable of coordinating battlefield intelligence information with regional financial information and policing networks. This leads to the existence of an important structure gap that makes possible the movement of capital, trafficking of weapons over non-monitored borders, and the exploitation of historic community grievances against the state. It is clear that as long as states adopt reactive and militarily focused strategies in their counterterrorist efforts, then it will not be possible to break down the hybrid, multi-domain nature of modern franchise terrorism.

The Road to Multi-Domain Security Approaches

In the end, the thorough analysis of the findings makes it clear that the containment of the post-caliphate return of ISIS requires the urgent shift of isolated and kinetic-focused military

strategies to multi-domain security approaches. In order to ensure sustainable and long-term success against such an adaptive franchise network, it is necessary to combine a militarily containment strategy guided by intelligence with coordinated regional financial intelligence, digital de-radicalization efforts, and illegal shadow economies' disruption.

Most importantly, it is made clear that in today's world of counter-terrorism, the main battlefield is the legitimacy of the state. For permanently eradicating the resilience of terrorist organizations such as ISWAP, there is a need to restore state structures, ensure justice, and deliver services in areas which have traditionally been neglected by the state.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary

The empirical findings identified and analyzed in this longitudinal research offer profound insights into the structural adaptations, operating patterns, and methods of survival of post-caliphate violent extremism based on data analysis. Through grounding the collected qualitative data into present-day security paradigms, the findings are presented below under three major themes: First and foremost, the collected data unequivocally proves the existence

of a positive correlation between the strategic shift of the ISIS core to a decentralized virtual network franchise and its resilience to operate despite the global security challenges.

The process of survival and continuation was dramatically facilitated through an entirely unique digital evolution. The network successfully used encrypted communication tools, alternative social media, and peer-to-peer cryptocurrency transactions. This digital approach helped the core to recruit members, spread propaganda, and organize resource mobilizations without being dependent on a physically existing homeland. 2. Counterterrorism Efficacy and ISWAP Asymmetric Resilience

In light of the regional setting of northeast Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad basin, the empirical evidence has proved that kinetic military approaches only have a substantial negative impact on the limitation, containment, and eradication of ISWAP. Though coalition activities and air strikes by states reduced the militants' overground presence and logistics, ISWAP managed to overcome the physical challenges by skillfully taking advantage of fragile states, porous border crossings, and socio-economic grievances.

ISWAP capitalized on its adaptive nature to create a parallel shadow state within ungoverned urban spaces in the Lake Chad basin area. By taxing regional agricultural, fishing, and livestock trade, establishing Islamic courts, and offering protection to marginalized groups, the terrorist organization was able to insulate its structural core from any strategic effects of kinetic military pressure in the long run.

The failure of state systems in tackling local corruption, poor intelligence coordination, poorly managed borders, and clandestine shadow banking networks (hawala) facilitated the retention of franchising strengths. This resulted in the ability of insurgency cells to shift location by exploiting the porous nature of borders, rebuild their fighting capacity via radicalization processes, and sustain themselves using historic grievances in the sub-region.

5.2 Conclusion

The findings of the study contribute immensely to conceptual, strategic, and practical improvements to the already established scholarly literatures on international security, counterterrorism infrastructure, and asymmetric warfare. Through the identification of the operational trends of ISIS and its West African affiliates in light of modern-day threat models, the study raises the level of theoretical discussions in three major paradigms:

Unlike other affiliates of ISIS who may adopt Middle Eastern tactics or act blindly, ISWAP enjoys great independence in its operations. This is what gives ISWAP the freedom to localize its messages, integrate itself into the region's long-standing conflicts, and adapt to the local politics and economy. At the same time, ISWAP maintains absolute brand loyalty to its parent organization.

It therefore becomes evident that franchising is not a last resort of a failing group but rather a highly sophisticated form of organizational strategy that is created to increase flexibility, risk diversification, and survival of modern international terrorism organizations.

Post-2019 empirical evidence from the northeastern parts of Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin shows that when weak, corrupt or even non-existent institutions do not offer at least minimum levels of security, dispute resolution, and reliable service provision, it does not leave a void but rather a governance void.

Agile franchises of extremist groups monitor these voids and take advantage by filling them through alternative systems of governance and tax collection.

The high level of use by the group of covert networks, end-to-end encrypted communication systems, privacy-centric crypto-financial assets, and old school hawala informal financial systems denotes that the group operates with a very smart hybrid warfare approach.

Contemporary resilience theory in the field of conflict studies therefore does not view resilience in terms of endurance and holding ground, but rather in terms of a continual process of innovation and adaptation.

5.3 Recommendations

In order to deal with the hyper-resilient, decentralized, and hybrid structure of the current post-caliphate terrorist franchises, governments as well as regional and international entities must strategically shift from fragmented and sporadic kinetic interventions. Instead, national and international security systems must incorporate a strategic and holistic security architecture that is designed to sabotage the physical and cyber dimensions of asymmetrical warfare. In light of the results and conclusions drawn from this study, the following recommendations can be made:

1. Enhancing Peripheral Governance, Institutional Integrity, and State Legitimacy

The sovereign states specifically the Federal Government of Nigeria and the other Lake Chad Basin neighbors need to take urgent action in the restoration of civil governance, proper access to judicial processes, and strong frameworks of public service delivery in the marginalized peripheral areas. The restoration of the formal state structure as the legitimate, trusted, and accessible agent for human security, economic management, and proper dispute resolution mechanism is essential to ensure that the shadow governance and the illegitimate tax revenue systems from which the political legitimacy of ISWAP has been derived is dismantled.

Additionally, international partners need to oversee that strict measures of anti-corruption, financial transparency, and accountability are enforced in the process of defense procurement and security sectors of the state. Such structural changes are very important in the reduction of the inefficiencies and human rights violation that fuel local grievances and socio-political alienation.

Security planning and the defense ministries need to undertake doctrinal change from heavy militaristic approach to one of security development integration where the programs will effectively integrate localized civilian community policing and physical infrastructure rebuilding along with sustainable livelihood, agriculture revival, and DRR process for disengaged low-profile combatants.

Adopting human-security approach instead of offensive military maneuvers is fundamental to ensure institutional trust between the civilians of the border region and security agencies. Institutional trust formation will ensure that the civilians of periphery are institutionally capable of acting as partners in intelligence gathering instead of passive and terrorized bystanders who either give in to insurgency pressure or remain indifferent to any activity of ISIS at the local level.

2. Institutionalizing Multilateral Border Management and Financial Intelligence Synchronicity

Regional security organizations such as the ECOWAS, AU, and MNJTF should further develop institutional coordination through the development of centralized and real-time intelligence sharing databases and systems, interoperability, and synchronized cross-border operations using biometrics. This will be very important in ensuring that asymmetric insurgent cells do not use porous international borders as safe havens for their activities.

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