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## WEAPONIZATION OF THE WEST AND ITS ATTRIBUTES BY LOCAL NIGERIAN JIHADISTS\*

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*The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which local Nigerian jihadist groups, including the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)\*, Jama 'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Daw 'ah wal-Jihad (JAS)\*, widely known as Boko Haram\*, and Ansaru\*, refer to the West and its attributes in their publications, and its wider implications. Qualitatively, purposeful sampling and content analysis were used in data gathering and selection, respectively. Video and audio publications were obtained from an online archive, and Western-related words and phrases were observed and recorded. Interpretive hermeneutics were employed to analyze the data obtained. The findings of the study indicate that these Jihadist groups in northern Nigeria not only frequently reference the West and its attributes in their publications, but also seem to be aware of all current affairs regarding the West, despite their purported dwellings in remote forests. In addition to the rediscovery of a veteran Jihadist narrative expressing staunch antagonism towards the United States and democracy, the study found relevant convergent worldviews regarding the West that the Jihadists share with the local Muslim population. The study concludes that such convergence, including the perception of Yahudawa (Jews) as bearers of Western immorality, could also benefit the Jihadists in the long run.*

**Keywords:** *northern Nigeria, ISWAP\*, Boko Haram\*, jihadists, Western Attributes, democracy.*

### Introduction

The jihadist phenomenon, or terrorism, as governments across the globe have characterized it, has often been viewed in northern Nigeria as a local issue that originated in Maiduguri, a city known for its significant religious and commercial centre. This perception stems from the fact that members of the Jihadist group, Jama 'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Daw 'ah wal-Jihad (JAS), commonly known as Boko Haram\*, are local preachers of Islam in the area. Following a series of clashes with Nigerian security forces in 2009, when Mohammad Yusuf, their leading preacher, was executed, this once peaceful movement transformed into a violent force that continues to devastate northern Nigeria. While the phenomenon may appear local, it has attracted global attention, partly because of its connections with international Jihadist movements, such as al-Qaeda\* and

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the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)\*. The global aspect of the Nigerian Jihadist phenomenon also results from the involvement of the West, led by the United States, in its 'war on terror,' initiated after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The cooperation between local authorities and the West in combating the Jihadists of JAS\*, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)\*, and Ansaru\* further highlights the adversarial conflict between the West and Jihadists. This study examines how these local Jihadists have weaponized Western involvement, by analyzing how frequently they refer to Western attributes in their audio and video contents.

The Jihadist phenomenon in northern Nigeria came to the international spotlight in 2014, when Jihadists from JAS\* kidnapped over 200 schoolgirls from Chibok (Peters 2014). Relatedly, the international community was drawn to this event and a popular social media hashtag was created and disseminated across the globe (Olson 2014), calling for the release of the kidnapped schoolgirls. Michelle Obama is well-known for publicly promoting this hashtag and activism that ensued (Dadas 2017). During this incident, the Jihadists of JAS\*, widely known as Boko Haram, published videos justifying the kidnapping and enslavement of the schoolgirls with religious arguments. From their justification, the Jihadists condemned Western attributes such as the United Nations (the UN) and human rights for speaking against their enslavement of the schoolgirls. Furthermore, JAS Jihadists once threatened that the Nigerian security forces would not be able to match them, and that even the United States could not crush them (CNN 2013). It should be noted that this threat by the Jihadists was made in the absence of any pragmatic or prospective Western military intervention in Nigeria, as it was in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq. Why then are the local Jihadists citing the West and its attributes as a form of weaponization in their efforts to create an Islamic state in northern Nigeria?

These fragments and traces of Western attributes found in the jihadists' audio and video publications, have generated academic interest and driven this study into the troves of archival material of the Jihadists for further investigation. The trace of a local Nigerian Jihadist group referring to Western attributes in their speeches, which some see as a localized insurgency, has been enough to spark a search for further study into the frequency of such references. This study has examined numerous audio and video publications by the Nigerian Jihadist groups (JAS\*, ISWAP\*, and Ansaru\*), and discovered that the references to the West and its attributes are numerous and significant to varying degrees. While some of the findings analyzed are typical and expected common Jihadist narratives that antagonize the U.S.-led West in its fight against Jihadists worldwide, other, non-traditional narratives were also assessed as they appeared in the findings. For example, the Jihadists' reference to the Jews (Yahudawa) and their characterization as the root of all immorality and decadence in the world are assessed in relation to a shared mainstream Muslim worldview, which northern Nigerian Muslims are not an exception to.

Therefore, weaponizing Western attributes by Jihadists is intended to draw sympathy and support from the Muslim community in the north of the country. One should also note the late Abubakar Shekau's obsession with the West. His frequent use of Western phrases in his speeches and its implications is also analyzed in detail in the

discussion section of this paper. The analysis of the Jihadists' audio and video publications in this aspect, allows this research to focus on the international dimension of the Jihadist phenomenon in northern Nigeria. The reference to Western attributes by Jihadists from JAS\*, ISWAP\*, and Ansaru\* in their audio and video materials, represents a form of 'weaponization' that supports the overall Jihadists' project of creating an Islamic state\* in northern Nigeria.

### **Literature Review**

The peak and fame of the modern Jihadist phenomenon can undoubtedly be traced back to the events of September 11, 2001, the terrorist attacks in the United States. Even before this incident, there has been ongoing Jihadist activity in modern times, especially in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion of the country in the 1980s (Edwards 2002). The Jihadist phenomenon proliferated after the September 11 incident and the US-led war on terror in its aftermath. Connectedly, the US-led invasion of Iraq provided a favorable atmosphere for Jihadist groups to surge. These groups aimed to drive the Americans out of Muslim-majority countries they invaded. In Afghanistan, the Taliban\* was also emboldened to pursue the same mission as the US-led invasion aimed to eradicate Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda\*, who were accused of carrying out the 9/11 attacks.

These interconnected incidents have since been a source of the proliferation of numerous Jihadist groups because Al-Qaeda\* has somehow convinced some Muslims that America is at war with Islam (Bergen 2011: 21). In Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)\*, which later became the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)\*, or the Islamic State (IS), entered the Syrian war that started in 2011. The US is still at war with ISIS\* and its affiliates around the globe under the 'war on terror' initiative and the more recent global coalition to defeat ISIS (United States Department of State 2021). In Somalia, Al-Shabaab\* has also been a Jihadist group that the US has been consistently fighting since the 2000s when the group emerged (Klobucista, Masters, and Sergie 2022).

Relatedly, in Nigeria, a group of young Muslims were also motivated by Al-Qaeda\* and responded to the call to renounce the Western system of governance and way of life in general. These youths were led by a Muslim cleric, Muhammad Yusuf, who founded Boko Haram\* in Maiduguri, a religious and commercial hub in northern Nigeria (Kyari 2014: 9). Although Muhammad Yusuf began as a preacher, his students later became armed like their counterparts in Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Boko Haram\* is a phrase in the local Hausa language that translates to 'Western Education is Forbidden.' Boko Haram has since evolved into multiple splinter groups, including Ansaru\* and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)\* (Omenma, Abada, and Omenma 2020).

It is closely entwined with both global geopolitics and specific frustrations that the connection between Western influence, Nigerian government forces, and jihadists in Nigeria has such a nature. Nigeria has steadily extended its cooperation with Western countries, particularly the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and France (Onapajo, Uzodike, and Whetho 2012; Gray and Adeakin 2015). Since the events of September 11, 2001, there has been a global war on terror. However, these relationships have also exposed the state to criticism from jihadists who see it as a tool of Western imperialism (Maiangwa, Suleiman, and Mickler 2019). As a result, Nigeria's military

capabilities have been reinforced through these alliances. Western military training, intelligence cooperation, and financial backing for Nigeria's counter-terrorism forces have become grist for jihadist propaganda, which claims that the Nigerian government is a puppet of foreign powers (Oguejiofor and Agbaenyi 2023). This propaganda has been used to justify the funding of Nigeria's anti-terrorist forces.

According to Ekumaoko and Ezemenaka (2020), jihadists have been able to generate narratives of betrayal against the Nigerian state by utilizing Western influences. They argue that democracy, as it is practiced in Nigeria, is nothing more than an extension of Western colonial legacies. Furthermore, to resonate with local audiences, jihadists draw on the long-standing concerns of Muslims against the cultural and military intrusions on the part of the West in places throughout the world that are predominantly Muslim, such as Palestine, Iraq, and Syria (Zenn 2020). In addition to Western nations, jihadist ideologues frequently use the term 'Dar al-Kufr,' which literally translates to 'abode of unbelief,' to designate the Nigerian state. This is because the Nigerian state is committed to Western democratic norms and a secular administration.

Specifically in northern Nigeria, where widespread poverty, political marginalization, and the perception of neglect by the federal government make many communities ideal ground for jihadist recruitment, this narrative of betrayal has acquired support at the domestic level. According to Kyari (2014), the early discourse of Boko Haram centred not only on attacking Western education, but also on lambasting democracy as an 'alien' system that was imposed upon Muslims by political authorities from the West. According to CNN (2013) and the International Crisis Group (2022), their propaganda expanded to include references to prominent Western leaders, such as Barack Obama, Emmanuel Macron, and George W. Bush. This served to demonstrate their ideological opposition to the international order that is dominated by these personalities.

Remarkably, Islamist organizations such as ISWAP have honed this propaganda by connecting local complaints with larger tales of Muslim suffering around the world. They draw parallels between past injustices, such as the exploitation of colonial lands by Western powers like France, and the current military alliances formed between Nigeria and Western democracies (Schofield 2022). As a result of its colonial history and ongoing military presence in West Africa, the French government, in particular, is regularly invoked in jihadist propaganda throughout the world. According to Omenma, Abada, and Omenma (2020), the framing of the resistance movement known as ISWAP portrays its battle not only as a rebellion against the Nigerian state but also as a part of a global Islamic resurgence challenging Western rule.

Additionally, the jihadists' ability to manipulate narratives surrounding foreign intervention in Muslim societies further deepens their ideological appeal. By framing Nigeria's alliance with Western powers as a modern extension of imperial control, jihadists present their struggle as not merely local or national, but as part of a sacred global duty to defend Islam from cultural erosion and political subjugation. This strategic framing appeals not only to radical elements but also to segments of the conservative Muslim populace who view Western cultural influence with suspicion. The perceived alignment of the Nigerian state with global powers accused of destabilizing Muslim countries allows jihadist groups to portray themselves as defenders of Islamic

purity against external threats. As a result, even individuals who may not initially sympathize with violence can be gradually radicalized through the cumulative power of these carefully constructed ideological narratives (Oguejiofor and Agbaenyi 2023; Ekumaoko and Ezemenaka 2020).

It is essential to get a grasp of the ideological longevity of Nigeria's jihadist groups in order to comprehend the convergence of local concerns and global anti-Western sentiment. For a long time, notable Islamic clerics in northern Nigeria have argued that secular democratic governance is incompatible with Islam (Miles 2000; Maishanu 2024). Furthermore, the rejection of democracy and secularism resonates beyond jihadist groups alone. As a result of this overlap of conservative Muslim worldviews with jihadist discourse, efforts to combat terrorism become more difficult since it makes it difficult to differentiate between mainstream religious conservatism and violent extremism.

Against this background, the current study examines the ways in which Nigerian jihadist groups intentionally refer to Western governments, leaders, and ideological frameworks in the publications they produce. This rhetorical tactic has two purposes: first, it diminishes the legitimacy of the Nigerian state, and second, it strengthens their appeal to disillusioned portions of the Muslim community in northern Nigeria. Furthermore, by embracing both historical grievances and modern global injustices, these jihadists effectively put their local insurgency within a larger transnational jihadist goal. This is accomplished by incorporating both religious discourse and anti-colonial sentiment into a single ideological framework.

Now that the contours of this intricate relationship between Western influence, Nigerian state power, and jihadist ideology have been established, the study will now turn to the specific data collected from Nigerian jihadist publications in order to investigate the manner in which the West and its attributes are cited, framed, and ultimately weaponized in their propaganda campaigns. This should give clarity on how this study contributes to the existing literature, especially those focused on the external dimension (Onapajo, Uzodike, and Whetho 2012; Gray and Adeakin 2015; Maiangwa, Dan Suleiman, and Mickler 2019; Oguejiofor and Agbaenyi 2023; Ekumaoko and Ezemenaka 2020; Zbytovsky and Prouza 2024) of the phenomenon. Connectedly, this study goes further to cover all three major Jihadist groups in northern Nigeria.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework employed by this study to investigate the weaponization of Western attributes by Jihadists is the 'Long War.' A US military official coined the term 'Long War' to propose that the war on terror cannot be fought and won by military means alone (Pernin *et al.* 2008). This proposal arose from an acknowledgment of the ideological underpinnings of the Jihadist phenomenon. The adversaries outlined by the proponents of Long War (*Ibid.*: 24) include Jihadist groups considered by this study.

The proponents of the Long War argue that three main aspects constitute their theoretical underpinnings. According to Pernin *et al.* (2008: 10), the constituents of the Long War are governance, terrorism, and ideology. Poor governance is said to facilitate

the terrorist activities of adversaries (Jihadists) wherever they operate. Terrorism is seen as the means by which they physically project their ideology. These three elements combine to create this long war and ensure its endurance. Ahmad (2021) also deliberated on the relevance of the Long War in explaining how Jihadists withstand serious setbacks and persist in Somalia. Hansen (2021) called it 'forever wars,' when describing the evolutionary patterns of Jihadism in Africa.

This research grounds its deliberations and analyses within the framework of the Long War, specifically the ideological aspect of the Long War. Jihadist ideology includes the conviction that they must establish God's law on Earth and rule by it by any means necessary. In doing so, they vehemently oppose any attribute or actor whom they deem to stand in their way. Therefore, this study uses the ideological dimension of the Long War to explain why Jihadists in northern Nigeria might weaponize the involvement of Western attributes or actors in the affairs of Muslims. The ideological component of the Long War is suitable for explaining why local Jihadists might be interested in Western leaders' names and leadership when their actual fight is against local authorities.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research design was adopted for this study due to its interpretive nature. Purposeful sampling was employed to locate relevant and appropriate data aligned with the research question. Consequently, data concerning Boko Haram\*, Ansaru\*, and ISWAP\* were specifically sought based on their availability. A total of 27 audio and video materials featuring these Jihadist groups were deliberately selected from hundreds reviewed. The titles of the materials were important in determining which ones were used in this research. Titles that convey messages from the Jihadist groups to those they regard as adversaries, including Western governments, were given priority.

In line with this, the data collection method employed in this research is the primary source of data collected through a content analysis technique. The archival video and audio materials from these Jihadist groups in northern Nigeria were obtained from websites such as [unmaskingbokoharam.com](http://unmaskingbokoharam.com) and [Jihadology.net](http://Jihadology.net), spanning the years 2012–2023. Due to availability, a disproportionate data sampling technique was adopted. This paved the way for the use of more Boko Haram data than the other two Jihadist groups. This is also because there are more Boko Haram video and audio materials since they are the first Jihadist group to emerge in northern Nigeria.

These archived video and audio materials were translated into English from the local Hausa language spoken by Jihadist groups in the aforementioned materials. The materials were carefully observed and the content was analysed. This data collection method was employed to extract words associated with Western governments, attributes, and/or actors from the speeches and statements of Jihadists. Additionally, observation was directed towards tracking the frequency of utterances of words related to Western governments, attributes, and/or actors by Jihadists. This aims to determine whether the Jihadist groups in question used these words by chance or with the intention to convey a specific message.

The data analysis technique employed in this study is interpretive hermeneutics, as it seeks to extract meaning from the Jihadists' words within the socio-political context of the phenomenon. The Long War theory is also used to complement interpretive hermeneutics in the data analysis because of its historical and conceptual foundations related to the research subject. By examining the intersection of ideology, governance, and terrorism in the Long War, the research can analyze Jihadists' words in relation to specific interactions they are linked to. The historical background of the Long War specifically guides certain aspects of analyses towards an appropriate and contextual understanding of the words and phrases used by the Jihadists in question.

## Results

Table 1 below presents the findings of this research through documented words from Jihadist groups that reflect their weaponization of what they perceive as Western involvement in Muslim affairs. In the Table, the first column lists the names of the Jihadist groups whose video or audio materials were evaluated. The second column indicates the release date of the video or audio, while the third column details the Western-associated words and phrases (attributes, agents, actors, leadership, government) articulated by the Jihadist group in the assessed material. The fourth column shows how often specific Western-related words and phrases were mentioned in a given video or audio material.

Table 1

**The Western-related Words Uttered by Boko Haram\*, ISWAP\*, and Ansaru\***

Jihadist Group	Date of Media Release	Western-related Word	Frequency
ISWAP	Feb 2023	Democracy	5
ISWAP	Jan 2022	Democracy	2
		Andalusia	1
ISWAP	Mar 2022	America	1
ISWAP	Apr 2022	France	1
ISWAP	Jun 2021	France	1
ISWAP	Feb 2020	America	1
		Trump	1
ISWAP	Jun 2015	Barack Obama	1
		Fransua Holland	1
		Margaret Thatcher	1
		Benjamin Netanyahu	1
ISWAP	Feb 2017	France	2
		America	1
		Britain	1
		Vatican	1
ISWAP	Nov 2015	America	1

Table 1 continued

Jihadist Group	Date of Media Release	Western-related Word	Frequency
Ansaru	Dec 2021	America	1
Ansaru	Nov 2021	America	13
		Western World	1
Ansaru	Jun 2022	Dollar	1
JAS/Boko Haram	Jan 2010	America	2
JAS/Boko Haram	July 2020	Democracy	1
		Democratic	1
JAS/Boko Haram	Sep 2020	France	4
JAS/Boko Haram	Oct 2020	Macron	3
JAS/Boko Haram	Jan 2017	Bush	1
		Obama	2
		Fransua Holland	2
		Democracy	2
		Queen Elizabeth	1
JAS/Boko Haram	Apr 2020	Trump	1
		Democracy	1
		Federalism	1
		French	1
		Pope	1
JAS/Boko Haram	Mar 2020	America	13
		Trump	2
		Israel	1
		Democracy	1
JAS/Boko Haram	Sep 2019	Democracy	1
JAS/Boko Haram	May 2020	Benjamin Netanyahu	1
		Trump	1
		France	1
		G7	1
		England	1
		BBC	1
JAS/Boko Haram	Oct 2019	Democracy	1
JAS/Boko Haram	Mar 2013	France	3
		French	1
JAS/Boko Haram	Aug 2013	America	1
		Obama	1
		Fransua Holland	1
		Benjamin Netanyahu	1
JAS/Boko Haram	Sep 2013	Obama	2
		Benjamin Netanyahu	1
		Fransua Holland	1
		Queen Elizabeth	1

Table 1 continued

Jihadist Group	Date of Media Release	Western-related Word	Frequency
		Margaret Thatcher	1
		Democracy	2
JAS/Boko Haram	Jan 2015	Democracy	1
JAS/Boko Haram	Jan 2015	Israel	4
		Britain	1
		England	1
		America	3
		Democracy	6
		France	9
		Fransua Holland	4
		United Nations	1
		Charlie Hebdo	3
JAS/Boko Haram	June 2014	Obama	17
		George Bush	15
		Clinton	3
		Fransua Holland	3
		Democracy	17
		Human Right	5
		United Nations	2
		Ban Ki-moon	3
		Same-Sex Marriage	3
		Abraham Lincoln	4
		America	3
		France	3
		Germany	3
		Israel	2
		Rome	2
		Britain	1
		England	1
		Italy	1
		Margaret Thatcher	1
JAS/Boko Haram	May 2014	Obama	4
		Fransua Holland	1
		Democracy	6
		America	2
		American	1
		Globalization	2
		Global	2
		Israel	1
		United Nations	1
		Federalism	1
		Capitalism	1

Table 1 continued

Jihadist Group	Date of Media Release	Western-related Word	Frequency
		Israel	1
		United Nations	1
		Federalism	1
		Capitalism	1
		Socialism	1

Source: author's compilation.

#### Ten Most Frequently Uttered Words/Phrases

In Table 2 below, the ten most uttered Western-related words or phrases have been distilled and tabulated from the main table above.

Table 1

#### Ten Most Uttered Western-related Words by Boko Haram\*, ISWAP\*, and Ansaru\*

Western-related Word	Frequency
Democracy	46
America	42
Barack Obama	27
France	23
George Bush	16
Fransua Holland	13
Israel	8
Trump	5
Britain	5
Human Right	5

Source: author's compilation

### Discussion

#### *Jihadists' Attack on Democracy May Gain Wider Popularity in Northern Nigeria over Time*

The jihadists of the JAS\*, known by the infamous name Boko Haram, have faced widespread condemnation in northern Nigeria for their rejection of Western education. Their dismissal of Western education and their encouragement for others to do the same has been perceived as a precursor to further decline in the region. Consequently, even the most conservative Muslims in the area, who typically hold reservations about Western lifestyles, have rejected the jihadist call to abandon Western education. However, this may not apply to the jihadists' demand for the rejection of democracy. The jihadists portray democracy as Western interference in Muslim affairs and this may gain traction due to existing antagonism towards the political system in northern Nigeria.

Observably, there have been calls from influential Muslim clerics in northern Nigeria to be replaced the democratic system of governance with an Islamic system (sharia).

Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, the Muslim cleric considered one of the pioneers of modern Sunni Islam in northern Nigeria was said to have called for the Islamization of the region until his death in 1992 (Miles 2000). Similarly, other Muslim clergy in the region, including the influential and controversial (Maishanu 2024) Sheikh Idris Abdulaziz and his followers, have been openly calling for this change. Their reason has always been that the democratic system is not compatible with the Islamic tradition of Northern Nigeria and its majority Muslim population. They often refer to democracy as an act of associating partners with God (shirk), which is considered a major sin in Islam. These are Muslim clerics with a wide audience and vast followership in northern Nigeria and beyond.

Moreover, the repetitive mention of democracy by Jihadists and its demonization could be a deliberate move away from the initial backlash they faced in the northern Nigerian Muslim community when they lashed out at Western education. The Jihadists of ISWAP, JAS, and Ansaru may have learned a lesson from the failure of Boko Haram's total rejection of Western education in the past. As a result, denying democracy has become a hallmark of their propaganda and their most weaponized element of pursuit against what they view as Western involvement in Muslim affairs. Therefore, democracy, will continue to be one of, if not the, most weaponized Western attributes used by the Jihadists.

#### *The Late Abubakar Shekau's Obsession with the West*

Even though the Jihadists in their entirety outwardly reject the West and its values, the late JAS leader Abubakar Shekau referenced the West and its attributes plentifully in almost all his speeches. According to the data collected, the most frequently used Western-related words, such as democracy, America, and George Bush, are attributed to Abubakar Shekau. Additionally, from the data analyzed, he is also the only person who has uttered the most Western-related words in a single speech, in particular, democracy and Obama were mentioned 17 times each, as seen in Table 1 above. The same could be said of the frequency of utterance of the word America (see Table 1). It is worth noting that even though the fight of Boko Haram was primarily directed against the Nigerian government, its leader was fond of referring to the West quite often.

To illustrate further, in 2013, one of the most brazen threats issued to the West was heard in video still circulating online. In it, Abubakar Shekau said, 'We can now confront America comfortably' (CNN 2013). To echo the extent to which he referenced the West in his speeches, it is important to note that this statement was made even before the Jihadist group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)\* in 2015. The merger of the group with ISIS also meant that they would be antagonized by the United States' (U.S.) fight against ISIS and thus urged to confront the US. In other words, Boko Haram prioritized the expression of hostility towards the US after the group merged with ISIS. However, even before this association with ISIS, Abubakar Shekau had already referenced the West in many of his speeches.

In other instances, he would respond to what he called lies spread by Nigeria and Western media about JAS's convictions and operations in the region. In one video, he mentioned the BBC, England, France, and the G7 along with the Nigerian authorities,

accusing them of disseminating falsehoods, when they claimed that his group was weakened or that he misinterpreted Islamic texts and that he excommunicated all Muslims (Zenn 2020). In the same video, he also accused the West and its local counterparts of being behind the COVID-19 virus which forced mosques to close for regular daily congregational prayers. This suggests that Abubakar Shekau was well-informed and up-to-date on international issues, despite being isolated from much of the world and residing in a remote forest in northern Nigeria. For instance, the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in France was extensively covered in one of his audio messages, as shown in Table 1 above. This also strongly indicates the late JAS leader's weaponization of the West in his Jihadist endeavors. Even when confronting local authorities and their representatives, he did not escape remarks about the West and its characteristics. Moreover, it is ironic to note that despite his rejection of Western education and his lack of formal enrollment, Shekau was able to articulate English and West-related terms and phrases quite well, in addition to having knowledge about global affairs.

*Comparing JAS\* and ISWAP\* on Weaponizing Western Attributes in Their Speeches*

Though both JAS and ISWAP frequently mention the West and its attributes in their respective speeches, the former seems to surpass the latter in practice. In single videos or audios where Western-related words are uttered, those with the highest frequencies of utterance are from JAS. Before discussing the possible reason behind this, it is pertinent to note that the high frequency of the utterances could be attributed to the late Abubakar Shekau. Therefore, unless his successor embarks on the same trend after his death, there is likely to be a lesser reference to the West and its attributes in JAS video and audio publications.

It is possible that ISWAP lags behind JAS in terms of referencing the West and its attributes due to the former's relative success in seizing and controlling territory. ISWAP has been observed to control and govern more territory than its rival, JAS, in northeastern Nigeria, making it the most powerful Jihadist group in the region (ICG 2022). As a result, ISWAP may focus more on issuing narratives aimed at local audiences rather than those intended for the West. The control and governance of territory may divert the ISWAP's attention towards prioritizing their messages to the locals they govern and to expose the Nigerian government's failure to develop the relatively poor northern region. It has also been reported that, unlike the Jihadists from JAS, the ISWAP Jihadists have been less harsh towards the locals they govern (*Ibid.*). This is done in order to win support from locals and delegitimize the authority of JAS in the contested areas of influence.

Furthermore, another notable observation in the referencing of the West and its attributes by JAS and ISWAP in their respective video and audio publications is the divergence in wording when referring to the same or similar attributes. For instance, when referring to Italy as a Western attribute, ISWAP cites the Vatican, while JAS references both Rome and Italy, as seen in Table 1 above. In another video speech, ISWAP referred to Spain as Andalusia, which is also depicted in Table 1 above. This indicates that ISWAP is taking a more in-depth approach in its weaponization of the West in its narratives. Citing Andalusia instead of Spain is likely to resonate more profoundly with

broader Muslim sentiment and sympathies. This, in turn, is more likely to attract recruits to ISWAP, as they can be perceived as revivers of Islamic heyday with such a reference to pre-Western Islamic Spain (Andalusia).

Rationally, since ISWAP is a branch of ISIS in West Africa, this pattern of referencing the West by citing ancient and iconic religious attributes is understandable. Relatedly, in 2014, ISIS referenced a prophetic saying (hadith) to indicate the imminence of an apocalyptic end-of-time battle between Muslims and Crusaders after it had captured the Syrian town of Dabiq (McCants 2014). In this case, ISIS referred to the US-led West fighting it as the crusaders they anticipated battling at Dabiq. Therefore, ISIS and its tentacles – in this case, ISWAP in northern Nigeria – are inclined to refer to the West or at least associate it with ancient religious names, places, and events. This further explains the divergence observed between JAS and ISWAP regarding their references to the West and its attributes as weaponization tactics in video and audio publications. While JAS mentions the West by modern names and attributes, ISWAP tends to cite ancient and religious elements associated with the West.

#### *America and France, the Two Most Cited Western Countries by Nigerian Jihadists*

From Table 2 above, America and France were mentioned 42 and 23 times, respectively, by all three Jihadist groups – JAS, ISWAP, and Ansaru. Although other Western countries, including Italy, Germany, and United Kingdom, were referenced in all the audio and video materials assessed, as illustrated in Table 1 above, America and France are the two most frequently cited by the Jihadists. Here, by America, they mean the United States (U.S.). Importantly, for the U.S., the reason behind its frequent mentions by the Jihadists is that it is the leader of the democratic world and the primary agent in the West's fight against Jihadism. In one video, Jihadists from Ansaru associated the democratic system in northern Nigeria with the U.S., stating that Muslims in the region should reject it because it is a grave sin (Zenn 2020). The Jihadist group has also specifically aligned itself with Al-Qaeda\* and thus often cites the U.S. as a major foe fighting its comrades in the Middle East.

Comparatively, unlike ISWAP and JAS, which systematically threaten and cite America as an active enemy in a war, Ansaru does not often refer to the U.S. as if it were actively engaged in conflict with it. For ISWAP, the fact that the US is leading a coalition to defeat the Islamic State makes America a direct enemy. This explains the jihadist group's frequent references to the U.S. in their online publications, as if they were battling it on the ground in Nigeria. Despite these observed and assessed divergences, all three jihadist groups view the U.S. as a key adversary impeding their efforts to establish an Islamic state or system in northern Nigeria. Therefore, the U.S. is likely to continue appearing in the narratives of Nigerian jihadists as a prominent reference to Western attributes in varying degrees and forms.

Similarly, France, as a Western attribute, is frequently cited and weaponized by Nigerian Jihadists in their online publications because it is viewed as a major adversary. The antagonistic sentiment towards France, which is often referred to by jihadists, has three aspects. First, there is general hostility toward France as a bastion of democracy, which the Jihadists oppose locally. Second, there is an anti-colonial sentiment that Ni-

gerian Jihadists, especially JAS, integrate into their anti-Western narratives. Third, the Jihadists frequently cite France in response to specific incidents where they perceive it as oppressive towards Muslims. These three factors have led to the more frequent use of France as a Western attribute in Jihadist narratives.

Observably, incidents such as controversial depiction of the Islamic prophet by Charlie Hebdo in 2015, the 2010 restrictions and ban on wearing Muslim women's face coverings (Niqab) in public, and the support of related incidents by French government attracted Jihadists' attention and aggressive responses. For example, in 2020, two online audio publications of JAS specifically titled 'Message to Emmanuel Macron' and 'Message to France' were released. In these audio messages, the late Abubakar Shekau, who was the leader of JAS Jihadists, was heard defaming and warning France and its leaders regarding their support for those who insult Islam and its respected figures (Unmasking Boko Haram 2020a). France was also mentioned multiple times in Nigerian Jihadist publications, for similar reasons.

Regarding the expression of anti-colonial sentiments by Jihadists, France is often cited by JAS Jihadists as the master of governments, particularly in the French-speaking countries of West Africa, where JAS has an operational presence. Abubakar Shekau frequently claimed in his speeches that the governments of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon are puppets of France, and thus act only at its orders. In an audio publication attributed to JAS, Shekau is heard referencing Mahamadou Issoufou, the then-president of the Republic of Niger, as 'a fool and the dog of France' (Unmasking Boko Haram 2020b). Idriss Deby, the late President of Chad, was also referred to derogatorily in the same audio message. ISWAP and Ansaru also made similar statements about anti-colonial sentiments, in which France was often regarded as a key Western element in weaponization. France's decade-long involvement in the fight against Jihadists in the Sahel region of Africa (Schofield 2022) is also directly factored into the anti-colonial sentiment used by Jihadists. This is due to the hostility of Nigerian Jihadists towards France, as they perceive it as a primary champion of democracy through local politicians.

#### *Less Cited Western Attributes, but which are Key to the Jihadists*

Collectively, the Nigerian Jihadists have demonstrated their fundamental adversarial stance towards the West by weaponizing almost every aspect associated with the latter. Based on the data extracted above in Table 1, Western-related words and/or phrases, including 'human rights', 'the United Nations', 'capitalism', 'globalization', 'same-sex marriage', 'Ban Ki-moon', 'federalism', and 'socialism', uttered by the Jihadists, sum up the essence of modern Western civilization's order. Even though these words and/or phrases were not spoken plentifully, their significance and level of respect in the Western world means that the local Jihadists are fully aware of their adversaries. In other words, the Jihadists seem to know all the key aspects that complement Western democracy, and therefore, systematically spoke about them in a weaponized fashion in their online videos and audio publications to delegitimize Nigeria and the West. This also indicates that the possibility of a reliable and sustainable peace agreement between the Jihadists and the Nigerian government is far from fruition. This is because the Jihadists

fight these Western attributes, whose tentacles make up the system of governance in their localities.

Another less-cited Western-related attribute by all Nigerian Jihadists is Israel, which was mentioned only eight times in the video and audio materials analyzed for this study. It is pertinent to state that despite the low frequency of mention, Israel remains a crucial weaponized Western attribute for the Jihadists. Other Jihadist groups around the world, including ISWAP, JAS, and Ansaru often use the Israel-Palestine conflict to showcase the oppression of Muslims by the West, thus calling upon Muslims to support their cause. This is crucially important for Jihadists, because it is a flashpoint where their sentiments converge with the mainstream Muslim grievances. As a result, Israel is mentioned in their audio and video publications, especially when they are sending messages to the West. Perhaps, the reason why Israel is often cited relatively less often than other Western attributes, is because the religious term ‘Yahudawa’, which means ‘the Jews’, is already used by all three Jihadist groups to refer to Israel. Thus, citing Israel many times may not be necessary since Yahudawa covers all Jews, including Israelis.

Observably, the use of the term ‘Yahudawa’ to reference Jews, including Israel, is another crossroad between Nigerian Jihadists and the mainstream Muslim population in the country. Islamic clerics in the region often use this term in their sermons to reaffirm and spread their religious belief that the Jews are responsible for all major decadence and immorality in the world. To illustrate one such case, an influential Muslim cleric in northern Nigeria, Sheikh Mohammad Sani Yahaya Jingir, claimed in 2020 that the COVID-19 pandemic that emerged that year was created by Jews to prevent Muslims from performing the annual pilgrimage (Hajj) (as cited in Gbeyonron 2024: 60). Similarly, the late Abubakar Shekau, the leader of JAS Jihadists, claimed that Jews were associated with the spread of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Unmasking Boko Haram 2020b). Therefore, to reiterate, the Jihadists mention Israel less often, not because it is less relevant to them but because they refer to all Jews as Yahudawa.

Also, Britain has been cited by Jihadists relatively less frequently than its Western allies, such as the US and France, as shown in Table 2. Connectedly to this, the Nigerian Jihadists cited George Bush 16 times, mostly in connection with the ‘U.S. war on terror,’ waged during the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, followed by the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. However, surprisingly, his British counterpart, Tony Blair, was not cited by the Jihadists at all. Does this indicate the Jihadists' indifference towards Britain? This may not be the case. It may simply be that the US leadership in the fight against jihadism has overshadowed British involvement and thus resulted in fewer mentions of Britain. In other words, America may have attracted the jihadists' attention away from Britain. Moreover, the mentions of other British attributes, including England, the BBC, Margaret Thatcher, and Queen Elizabeth, as shown in Table 1 by jihadists, could indicate the relevance of Britain, particularly in terms of weaponizing Western attributes.

## Conclusion

Despite the concentration of Nigerian Jihadists (ISWAP, JAS, and Ansaru) on local authorities, they are deeply embedded in weaponizing Western attributes by frequently citing them in their respective narratives. The tentacles of globalization have reached the deep forests where these Jihadists reside; thus, they respond to whatever the West says about them and their activities in northern Nigeria. Even children among the Jihadists in northern Nigerian forests have cited Western figures such as Emmanuel Macron, Queen Elizabeth, and America, issuing threats as if these entities were actively fighting against them. The findings of this study indicate that local Jihadists possess significant knowledge of the aggregate composition of modern Western mechanisms of governance and influence. The referencing of modern Western mechanisms of influence, such as the United Nations, human rights, globalization, capitalism, and the Vatican, by local Jihadists in their audio and video publications demonstrates their extensive understanding of the West. Consequently, this study concludes that as long as the Jihadists continue down this path, their crossroads with Nigeria's majority Muslim community will be illuminated, potentially garnering the support of the masses. The weaponization of democracy by the Jihadists and the discontent of many Muslims with the poor governance in Nigeria, especially in the impoverished north, could intersect and ultimately benefit the Jihadists in the long run. This study also concludes that the Jihadists' weaponization of America's involvement in Muslim affairs, including northern Nigeria, could similarly intersect and benefit them. If such a weaponization aligns with existing widespread mainstream Muslim grievances regarding U.S.-led secularization of the Islamic world, such as the promotion of same-sex marriage, it could attract more recruits to the Jihadist cause.

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