

Hollow Ranks & Ghost Soldiers: Nigeria's Corruption-Fueled Security Collapse

By
Arman Sidhu

Published: May 11, 2026

Nigeria's worsening security crisis is, at its core, a story of military breakdown. The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) [overran](#) at least 15 military bases in 2025, captured and executed a brigadier general, and deployed armed drones that outmatched the defending units. The pattern of base overruns, mass desertions, and failure to reinforce troops under attack points to deep organizational failure.

Events like the February 2026 Kwara massacre, in which jihadists killed over 200 people as well as the December 2025 [U.S. Tomahawk cruise missile strikes](#) on Nigerian soil and the [deployment](#) of American troops amount to the clearest sign yet that Africa's most populous nation can no longer secure itself.

The Mosul Parallel

Iraq, before the fall of Mosul in 2014, offers the closest comparison. When 1,500 ISIS fighters routed 60,000 Iraqi soldiers, the collapse came not from lack of firepower but from corruption. The Iraqi military had roughly [50,000 ghost soldiers](#) on its payroll, troops who existed only on paper so commanders could pocket their salaries. Nigeria faces the same problem. [Leaked](#) UK diplomatic cables found that of the 20,000 troops Nigeria claims to deploy in the northeast, the real number is significantly lower, with thousands of ghost soldiers generating salaries collected by officers. The corruption is not incidental; it is systemic. [Transparency International](#) gave Nigeria's defense sector an 'E' rating for "very high" corruption risk.

The human cost falls on ordinary soldiers. A Nigerian private earns \$31 to \$38 per month. Soldiers spend three to five years [deployed](#) without rotation, creating conditions for mass desertion. Iraq's military eventually reformed after Mosul through fingerprint-based troop verification and coalition mentoring, but that reform only happened because Mosul was a shock too large to ignore. Nigeria faces a harder problem, a slow bleed rather than a single catastrophe, which gives political leaders room to delay action indefinitely.

ISWAP's Tactical Evolution and the Sahel Corridor

ISWAP's 2025 "Camp Holocaust" campaign has been the most successful in the group's history. ISWAP systematically [destroyed](#) forward operating bases across the Lake Chad Basin using drones, night-vision gear, and coordinated swarm attacks. The capture and execution of Brigadier General Musa Uba in November 2025 was not simply a battlefield loss. It revealed that ISWAP now operates with better intelligence than the forces it fights. ISWAP [intercepted](#) his communications and tracked his position after his convoy was ambushed 88 kilometers from regional military headquarters in Maiduguri. A force with 230,000 troops and a multibillion-dollar budget could not locate its own brigade commander.

The broader Sahel security framework has collapsed around Nigeria, and the timing could not be worse. Niger's [withdrawal](#) from the Multinational Joint Task Force in March 2025 ended joint border patrols along a vast open frontier. Into this gap has moved [Lakurawa](#), an Islamic State Sahel Province subgroup operating across Sokoto and Kebbi states with surveillance drones. Al-Qaeda affiliate JNIM launched its first recorded [attack](#) on Nigerian soil in 2025.

The Air Power Deficit

The Nigerian Air Force shows what happens when procurement runs ahead of maintenance capacity. Three JF-17 fighters from Pakistan were delivered in 2021. By May 2023, only one could still fly. The result is an air force that cannot protect civilians or support ground troops. SBM Intelligence estimates over 400 Nigerian civilians [killed](#) in erroneous military airstrikes between 2017 and 2025. The [February 2026 Woro massacre](#) showed what this means in practice. A military aircraft appeared overhead during a ten-hour attack that killed at least 162 civilians but did not engage.

External Partners and the Limits of Assistance

The United States launched [16 Tomahawk cruise missiles](#) against Lakurawa camps in Sokoto State on Christmas Day 2025 and deployed troops to Bauchi Airfield. [CSIS assessed](#) that one-off strikes are unlikely to reduce the terrorist threat significantly. The pattern is familiar: outside firepower treats the symptoms while the underlying disease, institutional corruption, goes unaddressed. Nigeria's own Defense Minister Christopher Musa has acknowledged that military action addresses only 30 percent of the conflict. The [International Crisis Group's 2016 reform blueprint](#) called for fingerprint-based troop verification and open defense spending records. It remains unimplemented a decade later.

The Coup Question and the Criminal-Terror Nexus

Recent history across the Sahel makes this risk real. In Burkina Faso and Mali, troops who felt abandoned by civilian leaders seized power. Nigeria shows each of these warning signs. Soldiers earn \$31 a month while generals oversee billions in unchecked spending. The Nigerian Armed Forces mostly ruled the country between 1966 and 1999, and the memory of military government has not faded.

A second risk deepens the picture. ISWAP brings in an [estimated](#) \$191 million per year by taxing trade across the Lake Chad Basin, ten times what the Borno State government collects. Furthermore northwest bandit networks took in an estimated [\\$1.42 billion in ransom](#) in a single year.

Every overrun base sends vehicles, weapons, and ammunition to ISWAP and other groups, fortifying their governance with economic and military assets. This is the critical danger: the longer reform is delayed, the more these groups entrench themselves as alternative governments with independent revenue. Once that happens, as Sudan's civil war has shown, the window for reversing the trend narrows sharply.

Outlook

The 2026 Nigerian defense budget includes [5.41 trillion naira \(\\$3.9 billion\)](#). However, 62 percent goes to personnel costs and the naira's collapse has cut real spending power by two-thirds since 2023. Nigerian President Tinubu's security emergency declaration has not changed the picture. At least 316 civilians were killed across 15 states in the 71 days that followed.

Three patterns deserve attention: the self-arming cycle, where weapons from overrun bases fuel the next attack; the intelligence gap, where ISWAP knows more about the military than the military knows about ISWAP; and the governing contest, where ISWAP's services undercut public trust in the state. Until the corruption at the heart of Nigeria's military is confronted, no amount of outside help will change the course. The question facing Abuja is whether reform comes through deliberate action or through the kind of devastating loss that forced Iraq's hand after Mosul.

Arman Sidhu is an American geopolitical analyst and writer. He regularly covers the commodities market, international trade, and foreign investment. He is a regular contributor to Geopolitical Monitor and his work has previously appeared in The Diplomat, Eurasia Review, Economic & Political Weekly, and RealClearWorld, among several other outlets. The views expressed in this article are the author's own.