

Responses to Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Region: Policies, Cooperation and Livelihoods

Omar S Mahmood and Ndubuisi Christian Ani



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Executive Summary

This report, produced by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), is the second in a two-part study examining current dynamics with regards to violent extremist organisations (VEOs) operating in the Lake Chad region (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger). The first report examined factionalism within the Boko Haram movement, while the second report profiles current responses and challenges.

The Lake Chad region is characterised by a number of factors which make it conducive to the presence of non-state actors. No single factor explains the emergence and rise of Boko Haram in the region, but understanding the overall context is important to understanding the movement itself. Chief among the factors enabling the rise of Boko Haram include a limited state presence and poor governance, underdevelopment and unemployment, environmental pressures enhanced by the receding waters of Lake Chad and desertification, and a deep history of Islamic conservatism.

While those factors describe the shared overall context in which Boko Haram has operated and thrived, responses have differed across the region. The development of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has played an instrumental role in terms of coordinating military action, but cooperation has generally been restricted to this sphere, and largely amounts to joint military operations around border locations.

Yet, positive signs of increased military cooperation have begun to appear. In addition, Nigerian security forces have undertaken a number of internal offensives, though it is unclear to what degree the security apparatus has considered the split within Boko Haram and adjusted its operating methods accordingly. Rather, it appears that the focus initially centered on Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and its leader Abubakar Shekau, instead of Islamic State West Africa (ISIS-WA), although a more equitable balance in terms of operational targeting has emerged lately. In Cameroon, the country second most affected by militant activity, the response has involved the mobilisation of security actors at all levels, which has also provided a chance for the government to reorganise and deepen its presence in border communities that were previously neglected.

Non-military responses have largely been ad-hoc and suffer from limited coordination across the region, although the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) is attempting to change that. Nonetheless, some key challenges have emerged in regards to this aspect. This report highlights a few areas of concern, beginning with the need to balance security considerations with restrictions on local livelihoods. Given the precarious nature of livelihoods in the Lake Chad region, especially for those displaced, civilians can be threatened by the unintended effects of government or military policies. Restrictions on aspects like movement, transport, or the engagement in certain trades, while taken with security in mind, ultimately increase dependency and forestall the ability of the region to get back on its feet.

Vigilante organisations were present throughout the Lake Chad region prior to the Boko Haram crisis, but they have taken on an increased importance in response to it. Yet many questions remain as to their future, especially given the expectations of vigilante members themselves, considering their contribution and the sacrifices endured. The gap in state presence made the reliance on vigilantes necessary, but that same gap in terms of state services will still have to be overcome to ensure the vigilantes remain productive members of society.

Over the past few years, a significant number of former combatants have defected from both factions of Boko Haram. However, reintegration is a challenging aspect, which countries in the region have handled differently. The needs of local communities must be taken into account for any re-integration project to succeed, and this aspect will be a key test for the region's ability to move on from a violent chapter in its history.

Finally, many parts of the Lake Chad region, especially Nigeria's Borno state, have been devastated by the conflict. Reconstruction efforts are underway but are increasingly intersecting with politics ahead of Nigeria's general and state elections in early 2019. National, state, and local leaders must not allow this to disrupt plans for sustainable solutions in favour of more expedient but ultimately cosmetic adjustments, which may have political benefits but do little with regards to long-term recovery.

The response to the Boko Haram crisis is a key test for countries in the region to ensure that they can collectively recover from the destruction of the past few years, but also more pertinently provide for their citizens. As schisms within Boko Haram have led to a development of a faction that prioritises a new relationship with civilians (ISIS-WA), regional governments must do everything they can to ensure their response outpaces that of the militants and succeeds in re-invigorating the social compact between citizen and government in the Lake Chad region, thereby diminishing the long-term appeal of Islamist militancy as an alternative.

Introduction

This is the second report in a two-part series looking at current dynamics in Islamist militancy in the Lake Chad region. Part I examined the split of Boko Haram into two distinct factions and the resultant civilian impact. Part II will examine some factors that have enabled the development of militant groups in the region, before switching to focus on how regional governments and militaries have responded to these challenges. A particular point of emphasis is the impact of government responses on civilian populations.

For the sake of simplicity, the report distinguishes between the Barnawi/Nur-led and Shekau-led factions of Boko Haram, referring to the former as Islamic State-West Africa (ISIS-WA) and the latter as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS).

Methodology

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) undertook extensive desktop research, relying on secondary sources such as local media coverage, academic articles, and other reporting on conflict dynamics in the Lake Chad region, in addition to primary sources like military updates and messaging from violent extremist actors themselves. The ISS also utilised quantitative datasets for a mixed-methods approach, relying on a database that it maintains of violent incidents likely attributable to Boko Haram to analyse conflict trends, and verifying them with other similar catalogues of attacks.¹

The ISS and its partners supplemented the desktop research with field visits to Nigeria (Abuja and Maiduguri), Cameroon (Maroua, Mora and Kolofata) and Chad (N'Djamena) in March-April 2018. The ISS relied on previous fieldwork conducted in the Diffa region of Niger, in addition to follow-up interviews with Diffa and Niamey-based respondents, to ensure a robust regional approach. The field research was combined with the desktop review to triangulate information. Peer and external reviews were also conducted to further validate the analysis.

Across the four countries of the Lake Chad region, more than 75 total interviews were conducted, including with government officials, humanitarian organisation personnel, civil society members, diplomatic representatives, security representatives, vigilante members, traditional leaders, and other researchers. During the course of the field research in Nigeria, an additional 45 respondents from eight local government areas (LGAs) in Borno state affected by the crisis were surveyed.² This included respondents from Mobbar, Magumeri, Bama, Dikwa, Damboa, Gwoza, Ngala, and Konduga LGAs to grant a geographic balance in terms of coverage and obtain first-hand accounts of current dynamics from the populations most affected.

Interviews were primarily conducted individually, although focus groups were utilised on occasion. The responses were derived from a series of open-ended and semi-structured questionnaires, in order to allow participants to express themselves freely. The identities of those interviewed have been kept confidential to protect them and maintain the anonymity of the information provided.

Overview of the Lake Chad Region

The Lake Chad region consists of parts of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Linkages throughout the region surpass the national boundaries imposed upon it. It is in this region that Boko Haram was able to thrive, taking advantage of a number of common issues that affect all four states, albeit with some variations. In this sense, while no one single factor can explain the most recent emergence of Islamist militancy in the region, understanding the context and environment in which this has taken place is important to ultimately understanding the movement itself.

Limited State Presence and Governance

It is important to note that the areas where both factions of Boko Haram have been active are peripheral regions within the countries in which they sit (northeast Nigeria, Diffa region of Niger, Far North province in Cameroon, Lac region of Chad), and tend to gravitate towards each other more than their respective capitals. Many of these communities have historically experienced limited interactions with the state, reducing relationships to power centres.³ The neglect has bred sentiments of marginalisation and a disconnect from the state itself, resulting in limited overall ties.

Where the state has been present, allegations of corruption, or continuing perceptions of it, combined with overall poor governance and mismanagement, further reinforce the dynamic that the government is not present to serve its people. This ultimately reduces allegiances to the state if not cultivating active opposition, with many prepared to 'go it alone'.⁴

These aspects are demonstrated through a variety of indicators. For example, Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad all in the bottom quartet, with only Niger scoring higher at 112 out of 180.⁵ In another respect, accusations of security forces abuse against civilians in the region have been rife, further breeding resentment against the government.⁶

As one manifestation of this dynamic, the limited state presence has in turn over the years enabled criminal networks to operate in the border regions, prior to the emergence of Boko Haram. Indeed, the Lake Chad region was previously known for organised crime, with a weak state presence leading to de facto havens for violent criminal organisations. Smuggling is rife, including everyday consumer products (profiting from price differences), vehicles, cigarettes, genuine or fake medicines, weapons (especially light), drugs and so on.⁷ Banditry has also been common, to the point where Cameroon developed a specific force, the Rapid Brigade Intervention (BIR), to address the issue. In addition, the inspiration of the original regional force along the lines of the current-day Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), also has its origins in combatting criminal activity in the region in the 1990s.⁸

Beyond criminal actors, armed groups have also taken advantage of the lack of state presence to establish sanctuaries in the region, prior to Boko Haram's emergence. For example, Lake Chad was also the stage for the Movement for Democracy and Justice (MDJ), which targeted the Chadian government in the 1990s.

In this sense, the combination of a limited state presence, and a governance system characterised by corruption and misadministration where the state is present, provides a breeding ground for anti-state behaviour. Combined with the geographic particularities of the region, given that the Lake Chad's watery

expanses are difficult to control, the porous nature of national boundaries, and the cross-border linkages, the region has provided a suitable environment for actors who wish to use it as a base to challenge state authority, even prior to Boko Haram's emergence.⁹

Local researcher explaining the isolation of certain communities in Chad

Interviewees in Chad noted that communities such as the Boudouma, who inhabit many of the islands in the Lake Chad, are isolated and receive limited government services. The population knows very little about the local administrative authorities and the nature of the country they belong to. They are mostly aware of traditional governance. Some of those interviewed in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps did not even know the colours of the Chadian flag, which they only saw for the first time when they had to leave their place of residence to flee the fighting between the Boko Haram insurgents and the Chadian military.

Unemployment and Underdevelopment

Tied into state neglect is a precarious economic situation. The environmental pressures on Lake Chad (see below), unemployment and lack of public services contribute to a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment. In turn, poverty rates in the region tend to be high, especially compared to other regions. For example, the poverty rate in Borno state in Nigeria, the epicentre of the Boko Haram crisis, was measured by one study in 2017 to be 70%, significantly higher than in many states in the south of the country, where in some cases the rate was lower than 20%.¹⁰

Non-state actors have been able to take advantage of such dynamics by offering material rewards – either through the provision of payments or other aspects – as in the case of Boko Haram and its offer of an easier path to marriage – as a means of sustaining recruitment, aspects which prey upon the relative deprivation of local populations. Further incentives, such as increased material or financial rewards based on sharing the spoils of group performance, also feed into this dynamic. While it is uncertain if ISIS-WA and JAS maintain the ability to continue such rewards-based recruitment in the current context, this was clearly a motivating factor at one time.

The Underdevelopment of Cameroon's Far North Province: Commentary from Local Researchers

Cameroon's Far North province exemplifies the vulnerabilities created by underdevelopment. At almost four million inhabitants, the Far North is the most populated region in Cameroon. It is also the poorest region in Cameroon, with 74% of the population living below the poverty line, compared with a national average of 37.5%.¹¹ In the region, as in the rest of the country, underemployment affects more than 75% of young people. Indeed, poverty plays a role in luring young people in the region to explore the opportunities provided by the terrorist group.¹²

The underdevelopment in the Far North is reflected in inhabitants' limited access to basic services, such as health care and education. In this region, home to 17.9% of Cameroonians, the literacy rate is one of the lowest in the country. Traditionally, communities in the Far North deeply mistrust Western schools and parents preferred to send their children to Quranic schools and later integrate them into their own professional industries. The region's under-schooling – particularly in rural areas and communities along the border with Nigeria – has caused the out-of-school population to become a poorly educated group who can read and write the Quran but cannot speak either of the country's two official languages. In addition, as they have had no professional training, these young people gravitate to jobs like smuggling counterfeit goods from Nigeria. Constantly hunted by the police, they often have to negotiate with officers to recover their seized goods or to avoid arrest. Such factors have also created a climate of mistrust and hatred.

Additionally, the limited state presence and underdevelopment is glaring in the border communities. The local market in the border communities is held only once a week, at the convenience of some travelling traders. Economically, Nigeria supplies more opportunities for these areas than does Cameroon. The currency used in this region is the Nigerian naira: the flow of this currency influences the prices of goods and even old women and children are aware of its exchange rate. In towns such as Makary, Hilé Alifa and Blangoua, civil servants must change their salary to naira before they can use it.

It is in such areas which are outside the control of authorities that Boko Haram established itself, relying on the state's remoteness. Boko Haram managed to replace the state in areas around Lake Chad (where authorities had not even bothered to send soldiers or police officers) by exerting authority through force and disruptive activity.

Desertification and Environmental Pressures

The Lake Chad region also suffers from enormous environmental pressures, given the drying up of its waters in recent years, combined with the fact that the overall population is expected to double in the next 25 years.¹³ This environmental degradation has had a dual impact on livelihoods on the one hand, and migration patterns on the other.

Sixty percent of Lake Chad's surface area is within the Sahel, an ecosystem that is feeling the full force of climate change and the impact of various anthropogenic changes in the environment, such as deforestation, desertification and loss of biodiversity. In fact, in less than half a century, Lake Chad has lost almost 90% of its water surface area.¹⁴ Annual rainfall isohyets have been retreating increasingly further south and average temperatures have dramatically increased.¹⁵ Environmental degradation is particularly evident in the clearing of land for agricultural use and in deforestation for firewood. Additionally, the demand for land for agricultural use has meant that there is little land left uncultivated for long. The main consequence of this is increased erosion, caused by wind and water. Compounding this situation is the phenomenon of acute drought, such as was experienced in the Sahel in 1973 and 1984.¹⁶ The vegetation cover in the surroundings of Lake Chad (a radius of more than 150 km) has disappeared, exposing agricultural land, pasture and surface water to the damaging effects of desertification.

The fragile spatial, ecological and socio-economic balance in the region has encouraged significant population movement in the four countries sharing the Lake Chad shoreline, resulting in demographic shifts. Some communities bordering the lake have moved closer to vicinities around Lake Chad for fishing and farming, thereby fostering cross-border movements and mixed ethnic relations.¹⁷ Additionally, scarce natural resources and significant population growth has exposed communities to poverty, hardships and resource conflicts between pastoralists, farmers and fishers.¹⁸ Although the direct link between poverty and insecurity is weak, the situation provides opportunities for non-state actors to mobilise individuals who are discontented over livelihood insecurities, as well as limited alternatives and government support.¹⁹

Social and Religious Dynamics

The Lake Chad region has a deep religious history, with the introduction of Islam dating back hundreds of years. Northern Nigeria in particular has seen a number of religious-based revival movements in its history, ranging from Dan Fodio's Fulani jihad in the early 1800s in the northwest, to the Maitatsine uprisings of the 1980s in Kano and other locales, to the emergence of Muhammad Yusuf's anti-establishment preaching in Maiduguri in the 2000s. What emerges in Nigeria often influences and/or has linkages throughout the Lake Chad region, evident by the spread of the reformist and anti-Sufi Izala movement to Niger, and Maitatsine founder Mohammed Marwa's roots in northern Cameroon. In addition, students from Cameroon, Niger, and Chad frequently travel to Nigeria for religious study and education, further extending linkages.

In Nigeria, the British colonial experience largely left local structures intact in the north, meaning that education systems, such as the tsangaya schooling model, were left alone. This Islamic schooling system

prioritises the memorisation of the Quran and left many northern Nigerian Muslims ill-prepared for the post-colonial Nigerian state.

In the 1960s, Abubakar Gumi, at the time Grand Khadi of the northern region, began to advocate for the development of Salafist strains of thought. By the 1970s, this led to the birth of the Izala movement, whose main attributes were hatred towards Sufis and *bida*, or what it considered as innovations beyond the word of the Quran. In the 1990s, some Salafist clerics who had gone for training in Saudi Arabia began to return and argue for purer forms of Salafism, claiming that the Izala movement was not in line with global Salafist structures.

By the 2000s, the popular cleric and Muhammad Yusuf's mentor, Ja'afar Mahmud Adam, rose to fame, advocating for a political role. He publicly disagreed with his former mentee Yusuf during a series of public lectures in the mid-2000s, which resulted in his assassination, likely on Yusuf's orders, in 2007. Yusuf in turn began to advocate for very specific resistance to matters like Western education or democratic participation, while also urging that the path of change lay through jihad. With Yusuf's death, Abubakar Shekau took over the movement, leading it down an even more expansionist path towards the use of violence.

In this sense, the ideological roots of what became known as Boko Haram lay, in large part, in a deepening conservative Salafist streak in northern Nigeria that has been ongoing since independence. Yusuf's teachings and Boko Haram are just the latest and most violent manifestations of this, but they form part of a larger trend. These trends tend to influence other parts of the Lake Chad region, given the cross-border linkages and influence, while demonstrating the deep history and association with conservative religious movements.

Regional and National Responses to Boko Haram

The factors described above help depict the environment of the Lake Chad region, and the vulnerabilities which non-state actors, including Boko Haram, have been able to exploit. These vulnerabilities must be addressed when considering responses to the emergence of Boko Haram and its spread across the region, the topic on which the rest of the paper will focus.

Boko Haram maintained cross-border linkages in the Lake Chad region even prior to the initiation of violent attacks outside of Nigeria's borders (see Part I for a quick overview of activities in each country). This has continued with the split of the group into two factions. Nonetheless, regional cooperation to counter the menace has not always been forthcoming. Rather, Boko Haram was initially viewed as a Nigerian problem, given its roots and predominant activity in the country.²⁰ Yet the group's continued expansion pertinently demonstrates the interconnectedness across the boundaries of the Lake Chad region, and how dynamics affecting one area are difficult to contain.

Cooperation amongst the countries of the Lake Chad region was poor until the election of Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari in early 2015. Indeed, Buhari's election was a clear turning point. The Nigerian president made it a priority to resurrect relations with Nigeria's neighbours, visiting Niger and Chad on his first foreign trips to galvanise support for a collaborative response to the Boko Haram menace. The MNJTF, a regional force mandated to degrade Boko Haram, became operational after his election in 2015 and has played a significant role in checking its expansion throughout the region.

Much of the regional response to date, however, has focused on closer coordination for military operations. Little in terms of a regional strategy on non-military aspects has emerged, despite the linkages across the region and the common threat faced. This may be changing, however, as the Lake Chad Basin Commission has organised two regional stabilisation workshops focused on a common framework for stabilisation since late 2017, while in May 2018 the Lake Chad Basin Governors' Forum was established to further strengthen linkages at a sub-national level in the region.²¹

The History and Development of the MNJTF

Prior to Boko Haram's emergence, the Lake Chad Basin Commission had initiated a task force known as the 'Multinational Joint Security Force' in 1994, with the mandate of combating banditry and facilitating free movement of people in the Lake Chad region.²² The force, however, was comprised mainly of soldiers from Nigeria, the dominant power in the region.²³ In 1998, the force was strengthened to address cross-border issues, and Chad and Niger became part of it, although operations were limited to their national borders.²⁴

In April 2012, when the Boko Haram insurgency had become more prominent, the mandate of the force was revisited to focus on this new threat. Yet it was only in October 2014 that the force was reactivated to combat Boko Haram, and renamed the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). This was driven by necessity, however, and was primarily a reaction to Boko Haram's capture of large swathes of territories in Borno state, and the threat of further expansion.

The MNJTF comprises of soldiers from Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad as well as Benin. The headquarters was moved to N'Djamena, Chad in January 2015, but its commanders have been Nigerian. The African Union (AU) further bolstered the mission by authorising the mission and galvanising international support.²⁵

Although it has not always been steady, the MNJTF has provided an outlet for military cooperation in the region. The line between national military action and the MNJTF can also be blurred, with national armies in each country conducting anti-Boko Haram operations outside the confines of the MNJTF as well. But overall cooperation has vastly improved in the region, including cross-border operations.²⁶ In this sense, the MNJTF has had a demonstrable impact on the regional battle against Boko Haram, paving the way for cooperation around military activities, and eventually perhaps beyond.

Regional Military Responses: MNJTF and Joint Operations

The MNJTF has undertaken a few major operations to counter Boko Haram. The dynamics surrounding the split of Boko Haram into two factions have had an impact on the MNJTF, as one of the largest operations, *Gama Aiki* (Hausa for Finish the Job) was launched in June 2016, in response to the devastating attack in Bosso, Niger (See Part I for an explanation of the Bosso attack, and its linkages to ISIS-WA even before the factional dispute was made public). In the aftermath of that incident, Chadian troops were sent to Niger, indicative of both the level of military cooperation in response to the common threat posed by violent extremist groups present in the Lake Chad region, but also the pivotal role in which the Chadian Armed Forces have played in kick-starting operations against the militants.

Gama Aiki ran through September 2016, and was replaced with Operation *Rawan Kada* (Crocodile Dance, also referred to as *Gama Aiki II*) later in the year. *Rawan Kada* had a greater emphasis on stabilisation in the same area.²⁷ The predominant focus of both operations in the Lake Chad area and the Niger-Nigeria border suggests the MNJTF has largely been dealing with ISIS-WA, rather than the joint Cameroon-Nigeria operations that have targeted JAS further south (see below).

Rawan Kada concluded in mid-2017, claiming its objectives had been achieved. This also coincided with the withdrawal of Chadian troops from Niger.²⁸ Chad cited commitments along the Libyan border in the context of its participation in the emerging G5 Sahel force, overstressing its capacity and thus necessitating a reduced presence in Niger.²⁹

The ISIS-WA faction has not launched an assault in the area similar to Bosso since June 2016, indicating some level of success from the MNJTF operations. Yet smaller scale incidents have persisted, and militants retain a stronghold in northern Borno and parts of Lake Chad, with frequent incursions across the border to Niger, denoting the limits of achievement and the need for sustained military pressure in the region. As the follow-up, the MNJTF announced in April 2018 Operation *Anmi Fakat*, aimed at consolidating the gains of *Rawan Kada*.³⁰ With that operation in its infancy, it is too early to tell if it will make a decisive impact on the operations of ISIS-WA in the region.

Joint cooperation along the Nigerian-Cameroon border, close to JAS areas of influence, has occurred both within the framework of the MNJTF, and also bilaterally. For example, Cameroonian forces participated in operations on Nigerian territory in Ngoshe from 11 to 14 February 2016, and also in February 2016 as part of *Operation Deep Punch 2*, a sweep operation in Nigeria's Sambisa Forest, for which 497 Cameroonian soldiers were pre-positioned in Pulka, 12 km from Kerawa.³¹ *Operation Thunder 1*, which began in December 2016, was also conducted jointly with the Nigerian and Cameroonian armies near the Mandara mountains, an infamous militant refuge along the border.

Recently Nigeria invited Cameroonian troops to serve on Nigerian soil alongside *Operation Lafiya Dole*, its internal military operation against Boko Haram.³² In early 2018, Cameroonian troops were present in the Gwoza area, while the Nigerian army also credited the support of Cameroonian forces in the re-opening of the road to Banki.³³

This cooperation has extended elsewhere, especially with regards to regional troops operating within Nigeria, a dramatic change from just a few years ago. For example, the Nigerian Air Force conducted a bombing raid in northern Borno state that was based on intel from a Nigerian reconnaissance craft in April 2018, while three Chadian soldiers were killed on Nigerian soil in Abadam LGA the same month, demonstrating the burgeoning coordination.³⁴

National Military Responses

At the national level, the Lake Chad Basin countries have undertaken various offensives to degrade Boko Haram. Given the locus of attacks in Nigeria and Cameroon, this section will focus on the security responses of those nations.

Nigerian security operations

In Nigeria, the military, through the command of *Operation Lafiya Dole*, has undertaken a series of actions aimed at both groups, although it is unclear the level to which it has been able to take advantage of the split, or incorporate the factional divide into operational planning, given the distinct tactics pursued by each group.³⁵ Overall, the military initially enjoyed successes in recapturing territory from Boko Haram, but since then a sort of status quo has set in, with limited developments that erode the capacity of both factions.

The retaking of many major towns has created conditions for the gradual return of civilians and administrative authority to some LGAs. Yet this dynamic is restricted to urban centres, as rural areas of most Borno LGAs remain too insecure.³⁶ This has led to concerns that the military is pursuing a 'garrison town' strategy and largely abandoning the countryside.³⁷

The military has also prioritised the securing of transport routes, evidenced by the much-heralded re-opening of the Maiduguri-Banki road in March 2018. Yet similar to the focus on urban centres, militants remain capable of conducting attacks along re-opened routes. The struggle to degrade the militants to the point whereby rural security improves was epitomised in early 2018, when President Buhari approved a controversial \$1 billion withdrawal from Nigeria's excess crude account, in part to purchase military equipment to reinvigorate the battle against Islamic militancy.³⁸

Ground forces have been a major aspect of the military response, particularly in south-central Borno, where *Operation Deep Punch I* and *II* have seen a number of incursions into the Sambisa Forest area. In addition, the use of air power through a series of operations called *Ruwan Wuta* (Rain of Fire) has also been an important aspect. With little information coming out of the northern parts of Borno state, including Marte and Abadam LGAs which remain off-limits, it is difficult to assess the campaign against ISIS-WA.³⁹ Nonetheless, a number of air strikes have targeted this part of Borno over the past 1,5 years – although tragic incidents like the accidental bombing of an IDP camp in Rann in January 2017 demonstrate the risks behind this approach.⁴⁰

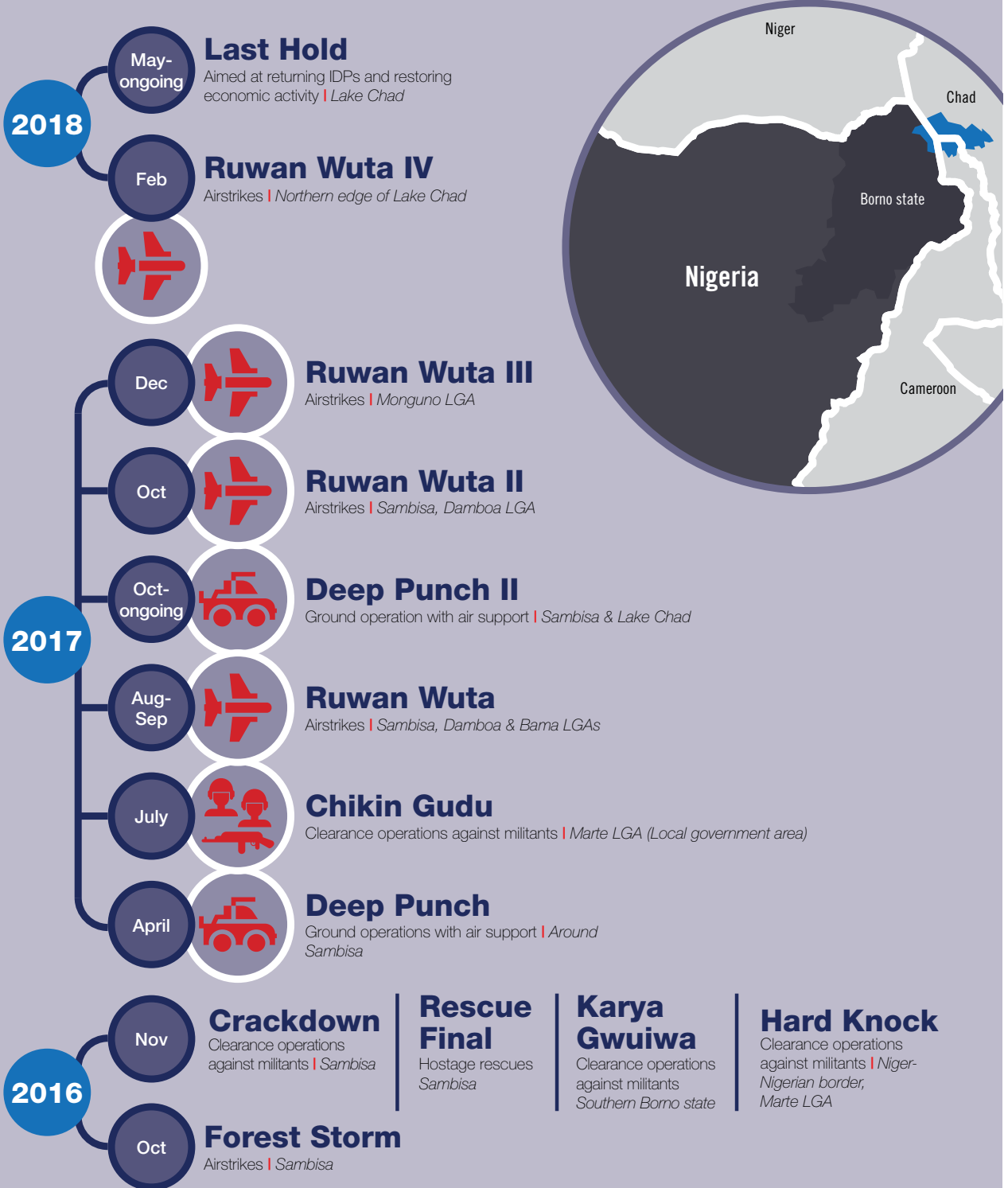
While operations against both groups are ongoing, the battle against JAS has taken on a more public profile. Public pronouncements related to Shekau include Buhari's fanfare around the clearing of Sambisa Forest in December 2016 and a 40-day ultimatum for Shekau's capture in July 2017.⁴¹ ISIS-WA has not garnered the same amount of public attention. While such statements are just one reflection of the Nigerian Army's approach, the predominant overt focus given to Shekau appears to reflect a greater obsession with his group.⁴²

In one sense, this has been because of the nature of JAS itself. JAS has been responsible for more frequent but less deadly suicide assaults, especially those conducted by underage or female bombers, which tend to attract significant media attention and occur on a near-daily basis in the region. The frequent targeting of civilians also demands a more robust response than ISIS-WA's less frequent attacks on security forces.

But Shekau has also served as the face of Islamic militancy in Nigeria over the past seven years, given his frequent media appearances.⁴³ The Sambisa Forest has also become a household name in Nigeria, to the point where Buhari's announcement in late 2016 that a major camp in the area had been cleared

Major Nigerian military operations

against Boko Haram since August 2016



was equated with the defeat of the movement itself. JAS also maintains that it holds the remaining Chibok schoolgirls, an aspect which has become perhaps the most pertinent global symbol of the conflict. This is in contrast to ISIS-WA, which wields a much lower public profile. In this sense, triumph over JAS represents a key symbolic achievement in Nigeria's war against terrorism and may in turn drive a greater focus than the more reticent ISIS-WA.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, interviewees noted that while the Nigerian Army was initially more focused on JAS, in recent months a more equitable division of attention has occurred.⁴⁵ For example, in late April 2018, the Nigerian Army announced *Operation Last Hold*, which would run from May through August. The focus is on clearing the Nigerian side of Lake Chad and facilitating the return of IDPs and normal economic activities. It demonstrates the renewed focus by the Nigerian military on areas where ISIS-WA predominates, but also could be seen in the context of the political imperatives to return IDPs ahead of the 2019 general elections (see below: Reconstruction and Political Imperatives).⁴⁶

Regardless, neither faction appears to have been diminished significantly following their regrouping in the aftermath of the split, with concerns that the operations around Sambisa targeting JAS do more to displace rather than degrade the militants.⁴⁷ JAS's wave of suicide bombers has ebbed and flowed and varied in effectiveness, but the group has consistently been able to source both bombers (either willing or coerced) and explosive materials.⁴⁸

ISIS-WA has also demonstrated an increased operating radius and maintained an ability to directly confront security forces (for more on attack patterns and operational capabilities, see Report I). Both dynamics are indicative of continued capabilities, in spite of frequent pronouncements that Boko Haram has been or will be soon defeated. In this sense, Boko Haram as a whole has been consistently publicly underestimated by Nigerian security and government officials since its emergence, a trend that continues with the movement's division into two groups.⁴⁹

Cameroonian security operations

Interviewees from the Cameroonian military highlight that the Boko Haram crisis provided the opportunity to regenerate and equip the Cameroonian army, increase state presence in the territory, and, most importantly, allow for interaction with local communities.⁵⁰

Officially entering the war in 2014, Cameroon had already suffered enormous losses in human lives and resources. This led to a reorganisation of Cameroon's army, which enabled the state to better respond to the affected areas in the Far North with military equipment and personnel.

On 14 August 2014, the head of Cameroon's army decided to create a fourth Joint Military Region (RMIA4) in Maroua by reducing the RMIA3 based in Garoua into two administrative regions, in order to provide the Far North region with its own RMIA. This decision helped Cameroon to make up for a lack of permanent military presence on the ground in the region, and also brought new equipment and more experienced military personnel.⁵¹

The reorganisation also made it possible to create a gendarmerie region in the Far North, with the same organisational structure as the RMIA. Within this RMIA based in Maroua, the president of the Republic created the 41st Motorised Infantry Brigade, which is currently based in Kousséri in Logone-et-Chari department. At the time of its establishment, it was recommended that 'every effort be made to rebuild socioeconomic activities in this administrative region', indicating the needs beyond just security.⁵²

According to the interviews carried out with the military authorities of RMIA4, all relevant security forces have been mobilised in the campaign against Boko Haram, in a three-category system. This includes gendarmerie squads or territorial gendarmerie units forming part of the first-category forces. Mobile and special police units, or mobile gendarmerie units and their special units, form part of the second-category forces. The third-category is the infantry, the air force and the BIR (Rapid Intervention Brigade) which also participates in the MNJTF. The collaborative effort is representative of a collective approach to degrade Boko Haram.

Given their presence in the communities in Cameroon, the police force focuses mainly on providing intelligence to the administrative and military authorities, as well as maintaining law and order.⁵³ The police and gendarmerie place emphasis on vigilance, continuous surveillance of roads, tight control of borders, monitoring of border villages, people and goods and the confinement of returnees, as stated by an interviewed commander of the Gendarmerie Legion in the Far North. The objective for the police and the gendarmerie is to work with other forces and centralise their intelligence at a single headquarters. This is to mitigate the adverse effects of having a multitude of corps and special services involved in the fight against Boko Haram.⁵⁴

In addition to a few exploits linked to sweep operations, most of which have been conducted jointly by the army with the MNJTF, the police and gendarmerie have also participated in *Operation Emergence 4*.⁵⁵ *Operation Emergence 4*, which brings together forces from the first, second and third categories, is being carried out under the authority of the commander of RMIA4.⁵⁶ It therefore encompasses the military sector, the 41st Motorised Infantry Brigade (*Brigade d'infanterie motorisée* – BRIM) and even *Operation Alpha* (*Operation Alpha* is effectively a BIR-led operation that confronts the enemy directly). As a result of this military pressure, the militants' capacity to launch direct attacks in northern Cameroon has been reduced. Instead they have started to rely more on asymmetric warfare tactics.

The security operations have worked to cut the militants' supply lines for weapons, ammunition, food, spare parts, fuel, vehicles and motorbikes, by closing their routes and livestock markets on the border.⁵⁷ In this sense, one of the great achievements resulting from military pressure has been the reopening of certain trade routes (Fotokol – Gambaru; Banki – Maiduguri) and even the reopening of the corridor (Maiduguri – Bama – Banki – Amchidé – Limani – Mora), which has made it possible to resume trade through markets.

For populations living in the Far North, the army's presence on the ground is also gradually allowing for a resumption of daily activities.⁵⁸ In some ways, this activity has led communities to expect the state to be more present than before.⁵⁹ In this sense, the reorganisation of the armed forces and the Cameroonian response has provided an opportunity for the state to become more deeply involved in the day-to-day affairs of its Far North region, but any such increase in expectations will also have to be managed going forward in case of an eventual reduction in security force presence, when the overt threat of militancy in the region recedes.

The Use of Trenches to Slow Down Boko Haram

The BIR has opted for trench warfare in its operations. It has dug trenches with a length of three metres and a width of four metres over a distance of about 100 km along the border between Cameroon and Nigeria, from Kolofata to Gambaru in Nigeria. The trenches block access for motorcycles, pedestrians and vehicles. The trenches have enabled the army to identify and control movement remotely from a single location, working with vigilance committees that use megaphones for monitoring purposes (50 metres minimum), and have proven to be very important in the preventative measures taken against the sect.⁶⁰

Kolofata is one of the towns where security officials constructed a huge trench. The commander of the BIR in the southern zone noted that after the town suffered more than 10 suicide attacks in a week, the digging of the trench and the establishment of a single, secure entry point to the town significantly reduced the number of attacks. As a result, whether it is in places close to the border, such as Kolofata and Waza, or in strategic sites such as the military base in Salak or the University of Maroua campus in Kongola, digging trenches as a means of securing and controlling territory seems to have become the preferred option.

Given the focus on the trenches as a means of halting suicide bombers, this tactic largely appears directed at the operations of the JAS faction. Despite signs of success, in early April, local residents reported that militants were able to infiltrate the border town of Amchidé after filling part of the trench around the town – an indication of their adaptability to new tactics, and the need to constantly reevaluate practices.⁶¹

Non-military Responses

The Lake Chad Basin countries have undertaken a range of policies in response to the Boko Haram menace, including supporting vigilante networks, imposing states of emergency, adopting programmes to re-integrate former combatants, and initiating reconstruction projects. However, such responses have largely been restricted to the national rather than regional level, and conducted on an *ad hoc* basis in reaction to tactics adopted by Boko Haram. Some of these policies have also had a negative impact on civilians, engendering local discontent.

This highlights the dilemma of authorities to undertake measures that increase security, but that also avoid adversely affecting local populations. The following section highlights a few selected thematic areas where national governments have undertaken policies aimed at increasing security in the Lake Chad region, but which also have unintended effects on local populations.⁶²

Security Restrictions and Local Populations

Since 2013, a state of emergency imposed on the states of Yobe, Adamawa and Borno in northeast Nigeria has included restrictions on movements and curfews. In addition, Chad and Niger have imposed states of emergency in areas bordering Nigeria.

While within Nigeria responses to the crisis have been as varied as ensuring humanitarian needs are met, kick-starting reconstruction efforts through the much-heralded Bama Initiative (see below) and initiating a deradicalisation programme for ex-militants through *Operation Safe Corridor*, surveyed respondents largely focused on the security restrictions. Most claimed little benefit from government-led initiatives, but rather highlighted measures that negatively affected them, such as the imposition of constraints that affected local livelihoods, and the continued absence of rural security.

Security considerations and concerns about the financing and supply for both factions of the movement have led to provisions which in turn limit local livelihoods, and thus generate resentment. These include nightly curfews, bans on local trades like cattle and fish (for more on this, see Report I), and restrictions on the movement of certain items, like fertilisers and fuel. Given such restrictions, the majority held negative views with regards to government performance, despite a few areas of optimism (see below).

Niger, Chad, and Cameroon have enacted similar restrictions, under the guise of the state of emergency in both Niger and Chad. For example, Niger has enacted similar bans on local trades like fish and red pepper, from which militants have reportedly benefited. This has had a negative impact on people in the Diffa region who rely on such trades for survival. The government enforced these bans by seizing or burning cargoes with fish or red pepper, and arresting the persons involved.⁶³ Like Nigeria, Cameroon and Niger have also prohibited the use of motorcycles in order to prevent attacks, but which are a common source of livelihood for youth in the region.⁶⁴

While such restrictions are rooted in security considerations, respondents focused more on the wider impact on local livelihoods, especially given the precarious situation many find themselves in, and the limited options they ultimately have. This is all the more so for those who have been displaced by the conflict, and find themselves in new settings, and ones in which despite the large-scale humanitarian response, their basic needs were often not met.⁶⁵

Local Researcher Commenting on Restrictions in Niger

In Niger, administrative authorities forbade the open sale of fuel and requested justification from anyone wanting to buy fuel. This move was made to limit Boko Haram's mobility. However, given that Boko Haram is deeply connected with smuggling networks, those who bore the brunt of this interdiction were civilians.

Another administrative disposition was the prohibition of two-wheeled motorcycles. This prohibition particularly frustrated the youth, many of whom are employed as commercial motorbike riders. This move was intended to easily identify militant fighters, who normally maraud the borderland spaces on motorcycle. However, it overlooked the fact that not every motorbike rider belonged to the violent extremist group.

The government closed certain markets in order to limit the risk of high casualties in case Boko Haram struck in a crowded area. Some of these moves implemented to economically counteract Boko Haram actually brought untold suffering to the local population. 'There were even cases where fishermen, to get rid of their stock, were forced to sell to Boko Haram at a discount,' asserted a Diffa youth.⁶⁶

However, authorities have made adjustments in response to local demands. For example, administrative authorities developed a programme to replace two-wheeled motorcycles with tricycles. They have moved to secure and open more markets and also shortened the curfew. This demonstrates how local authorities can respond and maintain flexibility, while still focusing on the need to provide security.

As an example, respondents in Borno State complained about a recent ban on the transportation of charcoal into Maiduguri, on the assumption that militants benefit from the trade. Fetching firewood and making charcoal have become common income-generating activities for many civilians in northeast Nigeria struggling to survive. Yet the practice has come under the suspicion of the Borno state government. A state official noted that 'ordinary people cannot spend time in the bush fetching firewood without being attacked if they are not making deals with the group . . . the traders use the money to buy food for Boko Haram and take back to the countryside'. He added that 'the restriction is more positive than negative because if it is not taken, Boko Haram will be empowered', underpinning the dilemma the government faces in terms of taking actions that diminish militant activity, but affect the civilian population as well.⁶⁷

Damboia respondent on livelihood restrictions

Now, we cannot go five km from Damboa town to farm because Boko Haram members may kill you. The military had also restricted people from going to avoid being killed or mistakenly targeted as a militant. We live in hunger. There is no other means of earning money. But the army stopped us from bringing charcoal from Damboa to Maiduguri. Yet what the NGOs are giving us is not enough and they don't give to everyone. The government said that the Mamman Nur faction [ISIS-WA] has agreements with those who get firewood in the bush to buy things for them in Maiduguri, and in turn the Nur faction allows them to cut the firewood. People are beginning to hate the government, and some say it is better to join Boko Haram.

Losing the public relations battle?

Such dynamics tie into the need to win the hearts and minds of the civilian population, as ISIS-WA is attempting to do the same. According to respondent testimony, the government has an inherent advantage in that Boko Haram has been responsible for the devastation, but inadequate responses threaten to quickly erase that advantage, a concerning outcome for long-term prospects in the region (for more on this, see Report I).

When asked what the government could provide, respondents overwhelmingly mentioned the need for increased security, so they could return to their villages and fend for themselves. In this sense, respondents were not asking for much more than a resumption of pre-crisis dynamics, but felt the government was

failing them on this. The inability to secure rural areas ensures that the region cannot restart farming, forcing the population to remain dependent on donor support and stymieing reconstruction efforts. As one respondent from Konduga put it, the situation of 'caging us due to insecurity is the worst, as it makes us stay like beggars'.

Konduga respondent commentary on the need for security to farm

I have been in a camp for three years now. We receive just enough food for six to seven days each month – there is some hard labour we can do for extra money, but it still doesn't cover enough. We don't need anything from the government – we know their promises cannot be fulfilled. But just let them provide security so I can farm. If I can do that, I can get everything I want. There is nothing that will be given to you that can equal the independence of working on your own. As long as there is security, we will return to our village.

Dikwa respondent complaining about insecurity

In August 2014, Boko Haram came and took over Dikwa. I escaped to the nearby village with a bicycle. They were in Dikwa for two years before soldiers came and took back the place. They have attacked several times after that but the soldiers have always repelled them.

Now we cannot farm. The soldiers have told us not to go beyond five km from town to avoid being killed by Boko Haram, so we cannot go farming to feed ourselves. The government should have gone farther to provide security for us to be able to farm. The food provided by NGOs is not enough and many people have not received NGO support because the process is not transparent. The government also said they helped to renovate our houses, or gave us at least 10% support to rebuild our houses. This is only noise.

Nonetheless, a few areas of positive developments were noted. Respondents from Ngala in particular remarked that their situation has improved with the appointment of a new commanding officer (CO) in January 2018. The new CO has ensured better community relations through proactive engagement and the extended patrolling of his forces, including during curfew hours.

One of the biggest changes, however, has to do with travel to and from Maiduguri. Many in Ngala frequently make that trip for supplies or to earn income. Previously they would have to stop in Dikwa, sometimes for days, at their own cost, as the military would not allow anyone to pass due to security considerations. The new CO ended the restrictions beyond Dikwa, ensuring that those making the journey can do so within a few hours. Ngala respondents expressed great appreciation for this alteration – a key example of how a small adjustment taken in line with current security considerations can have an important effect on local populations and thus generate significant goodwill.

Defence Committees and Vigilante Groups

Another major response involving civilian communities throughout the Lake Chad region has been the development and employment of self-defence committees, which shifted the tenor of the battle against Boko Haram.⁶⁸ In Nigeria, most interviewees highlight that the achievements of the military thus far could not have been attained without the support of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), which emerged in mid-2013. With knowledge of the operational terrain, the CJTF provides intelligence to the military and fights the insurgents with weapons such as daggers, cutlasses, bows and arrows. Their remarkable success led to their recognition by the Nigerian government in September 2013, and they are now present in 22 LGAs out of the 27 LGAs in Borno State.⁶⁹

However, there have also been reports of abuses by some members of the CJTF including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, revenge attacks, extortion and intimidation.⁷⁰ This includes the recruitment and use of children, which led UNICEF to negotiate an action plan to prevent and end the recruitment and use of children, which the CJTF signed in September 2017.⁷¹

The future of the group when the fight against Boko Haram ends is a cause of concern. The Borno State government said it developed a blueprint to address the needs of the CJTF, and the state House of Assembly has passed the Youth Vigilante Empowerment Agency Law 2015 in order to create jobs for vigilante group members. An interviewee from Nigeria's Office of National Security Affairs also indicated that a committee has been set up by the federal government to develop a plan to reintegrate members of the CJTF back into society. Interviewees from the CJTF, however, were sceptical of government's willingness to keep their promise in view of the limited government support at present, raising concerns for the future.

Interviewees from CJTF explain the lack of government support

There are no funds for us to work, and we have lost many of our members but there is no support for their families. A few of our members get paid less than 30 dollars (about 10 000 Naira) per month. We even spend our own money for this fight. There are more than 26 000 CJTF members including about 750 special forces that have been trained but never deployed or received anything. Only 30 of our members have joined the Department of State Services (DSS) and 450 have joined the military. We are negotiating that our members can join the Security and Civil Defense Corps, the Prisons Service, as well as the Custom and Immigration services. We also want the CJTF to become an institution. There are others who want education and those who want to be carpenters or mechanics, and all those need support too. These issues should fall into the ear of the government because we don't know what will become of our members.

Vigilantism in Northern Cameroon

In Cameroon, local communities also took responsibility for security into their own hands by forming vigilante groups, though the situation is complicated by vigilantism as a traditional protection mechanism, and that in response to the Boko Haram threat. Vigilantism was revived over two decades ago in the Far North region in an effort to address the challenge of kidnapping that became rife in the region. During colonisation, vigilantism had also existed due to the need to protect the villages, its inhabitants and, more generally, properties (primarily livestock). Whether in Logone-et-Chari, Mayo-Tsanaga or Mayo-Sava – the departments most affected by the insurgency – many local communities created several community defence organisations, all devoted to ensuring security of property and people, but differing in their origins, composition, operating methods and effectiveness.

Among the Kotoko of Makari, for example, near Lake Chad in the Logone-et-Chari department, a community defence unit known as the brotherhood of hunters (*nkuradaji*) are present in *ngare* (sectors) to ensure the safety of property and people within the sultanate, under the direction of a chief (*salala*).⁷² According to an interviewee, 'With the growing insecurity, widespread banditry and Boko Haram issue, the Kotoko hunters decided to organise themselves into vigilance committees. Each hunter within a vigilance committee is listed on a register, held either at the gendarmerie or at the sub-prefecture, and issued with a militia card.'⁷³ They are then entrusted to surveillance tasks at the village entrances, providing security for livestock markets and, more recently, frisking the faithful during religious ceremonies.

At Mayo-Moskota in Mayo-Tsanaga, the social make-up of the vigilance committees is quite different. These committees were previously formed as part of a brotherhood or established body and re-emerged in response to the Boko Haram menace. In Mayo-Sava, while most of the current vigilance committees were set up in 2012, there are also some former '*dogas*' within them, i.e. 'hardened' individuals who were in charge of a village and had undertaken surveillance in the sultanate's security system. After the first Boko Haram attacks, the number of people joining and creating vigilance committees increased. One researcher counted more than 300 vigilance committee members providing security in Mozogo and Mayo-Moskota cantons, out of more than 3 000 people living in the department.⁷⁴ These are mainly young people, largely from disadvantaged sectors of society. Under the authority of the deputy prefect, they are provided with mobile phones and bladed weapons so that they can work with law enforcement agencies.⁷⁵

Members of the community defence units work in rotating teams covering eight-hour shifts within their neighbourhoods. There is an average of 20 individuals per group and some groups charge a tax of XAF 100 to pass through the roadblocks they set up. Information is passed on by the head of the vigilance committee, who alerts the army or local authorities when necessary.

The head of the urban Mora vigilance committee indicated that 24 neighbourhoods are covered by 305 men and five women wearing badges authorised by the deputy prefect, and equipped with torches, bows and arrows, clubs, slingshots and talismans. A rotating system means that teams are relieved regularly (06:00-13:00, 13:00-20:00, 20:00-06:00). A particularly effective system of guarding entrances and checking identities has been established, enabling the prompt identification and detection of possible suicide bombers.⁷⁶ In Mayo-Tsanaga, the vigilantes are called upon to help during large gatherings and the committees from different villages even coordinate when village members are invited to departmental meetings in Mora.

The vigilance committees that have been (re)established seem to be operating wherever deemed necessary, whether in the departments in question or in large towns such as Maroua. Their work has been effective and is regularly cited as an example of community policing by the authorities. By way of example, interviewees noted the head of the Mayo-Moskota vigilance committee has been credited with such acts of bravery as catching Boko Haram terrorists with his bare hands and even killing them.

An analysis of these organisations on the basis of documentary evidence and the interviews conducted with their members does, however, raise a number of issues, especially because the government does not have full control over these committees, and the concerns that some vigilante groups may create further security problems in the region.

Notably, the records of vigilance committee members are not up to date and a committee may in fact sometimes have twice as many members. The committee members also erect roadblocks, charge a tax to pass, and conduct raids and searches sometimes without any member of the law enforcement agencies being present. More worrying is the fact that interviewees noted some vigilance committee members have criminal records, while others have already been arrested.⁷⁷ For example, Tchamaya Sarina, president of the Kolofata vigilance committee, was held for 58 days in the Kolofata BIR camp for colluding with Boko Haram.⁷⁸

Some of the vigilance committees also have a high opinion of the help they are providing the state and they have expectations of significant rewards, such as recruitment into the army or police, a pension, work or training. Hence, if expectations are not met, members of the community defence units could pose security problems in the future, underpinning the utility but also the challenge of relying on vigilantes.

Peace Committees in Niger

In addition to the development of vigilante groups, other experiments to increase community relations and awareness with regards to Boko Haram have been tried in the Lake Chad region. With the support of local communities, The High Authority for Peace Consolidation (HACP) in Niger has developed peace committees (*comité de paix*) – presided over by mayors and composed of community members, business people and religious leaders. These serve as an important arena for military coordination with civilian populations and also play an early warning role. They are operational in all of Diffa's 12 communes, according to an official of the HACP. Through such measures, relationships between local communities, security actors, and government can be strengthened, providing a forum to discuss and disseminate pertinent information with regards to the Boko Haram threat, and generate local buy-in.

The Challenge of Reintegrating Repentant Ex-militants

The countries of the Lake Chad Basin have also taken diverse approaches to the reintegration of ex-militants, an issue rising in importance as more and more militants either surrender or are captured by

security forces. This has been another major policy response to the Boko Haram crisis, which impact local populations in a variety of ways, as regional governments seek to balance the needs for justice and reconciliation, with programmes to encourage current militants to defect in order to weaken the militants' ranks.

In Nigeria, the government established an amnesty program for repentant Boko Haram fighters through *Operation Safe Corridor*. The operation involves a 16-week rehabilitation programme, which graduated 95 ex-combatants in February 2018.⁷⁹ While the amnesty provision encourages defections, local populations affected by the crises hold mixed views.

Some have expressed the opinion that the rehabilitation efforts prioritise ex-combatants over them, the victims of the insurgency, who have received minimal government support.⁸⁰ Interviewees from the CJTF also shared their dismay over the rehabilitation programme which empowers and provides skills to ex-combatants while many members of CJTF receive limited support.⁸¹ Others seek justice for crimes committed by ex-combatants and are sceptical of the corrective effects of the rehabilitation programme. This has led to cases where ex-combatants were rejected by their communities.⁸²

In Cameroon, traditional authorities sought to address communal misgivings about repentant Boko Haram members by performing public ceremonies for them. The army usually entrusts those who defect into the care of their respective traditional authorities. These traditional authorities have created a system whereby former members can renounce Boko Haram. The repentants swear on a copy of the Quran during a gathering of the whole village, professing that they regret the error of their ways and permanently renounce all links with the sect.

The validity of this remains a dividing issue for the population who, still traumatised and angry, do not want to see former Boko Haram fighters getting off so lightly. For many respondents, this ceremony disregards the victims and families of victims of Boko Haram. Others noted that a group of youth have mobilised themselves against former Boko Haram fighters originally transferred to Maroua, saying 'if the soldiers won't kill them, then we will!' Be it through revenge or reparations, there is a need for justice in the Far North region.

Reintegration in Niger

Niger's Minister of Interior announced a deradicalisation programme in December 2016. By mid-2017 approximately 150 *repentis* were housed in a camp in Goudoumaria, where deradicalisation sessions are provided.⁸³ To further increase defections, the governor of Diffa region, where most of Niger's Boko Haram members have come from, issued a deadline for others to come forward by the end of 2017.⁸⁴

Separately, over 1 000 arrested under suspicion of being militants have been detained in prisons in Niamey, Kollo and Koutoukalé. Trials for these detainees began in 2017, resulting in the conviction of approximately 300, while others were released.⁸⁵ Yet many still remain in prison, given procedural difficulties in processing the rest.

These distinct pathways highlight the differences in dealing with ex-combatants, based on both their exit from the group and activities during their time in it. The need to balance the desire for justice with the practical realities of dealing with large numbers of ex-combatants underlines the tensions that Niger, and others in the region, are facing.

In Niger, the HACP, Ministry of Interior and governor of Diffa have been the driving forces behind the amnesty and defector programme. A key aspect involves securing the support of affected communities and addressing their grievances. A number of issues remain, and local discontent exists. The details regarding the amnesty program also remain unclear. Furthermore, the numbers in the camp pale in comparison to those on trial.

Yet Niger's defector programme is also designed with an eye to the future, to encourage others to leave the militant groups in order to weaken their ranks. In this sense, continued activity by the centre in Gououmaria, combined with effective communication and outreach – to both current militants but also local communities – can result in future gains for Niger, as it attempts to address the legacy of Boko Haram's reign of destructive violence on its soil.

The various countries of the Lake Chad region are taking a myriad of approaches to dealing with ex-combatants. A more regional push from the Lake Chad Basin Commission to introduce a common approach and guidelines is underway. Nonetheless, such policies must take into account the localised experiences and responses of the victims of Boko Haram violence, as without their buy-in, such programmes ultimately will be doomed to fail.

The Politics of Reconstruction

As more and more communities are recovered from militant rule and security improves, especially in the urban centres of Borno state outside of Maiduguri, reconstruction efforts have gathered apace. With Borno state serving as the epicentre of the destruction, it has also been a focus of efforts to get the region back on its feet. Nonetheless, while a number of activities are ongoing, there are concerns that this is also becoming politicised ahead of the 2019 elections.

For example, in Borno the military focus on securing urban centres and transportation routes is linked to the need to demonstrate progress in government-led reconstruction efforts. The re-opening of the Maiduguri-Banki route in March 2018 was followed by the return of 3 000 IDPs to Bama, ahead of a plan to return 120 000 displaced citizens to the LGA.⁸⁶ As one of the towns most devastated by the crisis, Bama had been chosen in late 2016 to kick-start reconstruction efforts through the high-profile Bama Initiative, which would then serve as an example for the rest of the state. Through this programme, the state government has made major efforts and claimed the reconstruction of 11 000 houses, as well as some public buildings, by January 2018.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, respondents and interviewees largely discounted the government efforts. One referred to it as a sham, claiming destroyed houses were just painted over.⁸⁸ Respondents in other locations also undergoing reconstruction discussed how only those with political connections had their homes repaired, or that those in symbolic locations, such as near the main road, were touched up to give a wider appearance of progress.⁸⁹ A representative from the Borno state government admitted that just a section of Bama town has been rebuilt, but remarked that those who wish to return will be provided funding to continue the reconstruction of the town.⁹⁰

Given the upcoming campaign period ahead of the March 2019 state elections, there is a concern amongst interviewees that imperatives such as demonstrating visible progress in reconstruction will place political pressure on the military to achieve notable security gains, while other programmes may suffer from rushed timelines, at the expense of a thorough approach to security and reconstruction.⁹¹ A Borno state government representative confirmed that resettling IDPs is the most important task ahead of 2019, indicating the depths of linkages between the reconstruction efforts and local politics.⁹² Indeed, the 2015 election was preceded by an increased focus by the outgoing Goodluck Jonathan administration to take back territory from Boko Haram militants – a programme that enjoyed some success, but also ran into complications, given its rushed nature.⁹³

In this sense, many interviewees were concerned that the reconstruction of Borno state has become interlinked with political objectives ahead of the official opening of the campaign season. While in theory this could lead to more activity, the rushed nature of this can emphasise the overt trappings of progress over genuine efforts, providing short-term gains at the expense of long-term stability. Failures in this regard would only engender greater discontent in the region as civilians see their return from the ravages of Boko Haram politicised by local governments, contributing to perceptions that cosmetic adjustments are more important than actual change.

Conclusion

In view of a war that has been ongoing for nine years and the split of Boko Haram into two groups, violent extremism remains a major threat to the Lake Chad Basin. Even as respondents noted how Boko Haram largely delegitimised itself, the underlying factors that aided its rise remain very much in play. Regional responses have varied between military and non-military aspects, but combined with the devastating humanitarian crisis and the destruction that has been wrought, the situation remains dire, especially as the insurgency continues to rage in parts of the region. Coordination and long-term solutions are needed for Lake Chad to degrade the insurgents and address the root causes of violent extremism to prevent further militancy. This entails an imperative to implement policies that adequately balance security considerations with local needs, and that avoid prioritising short-term but unsustainable gains ahead of impending electoral cycles.

Recommendations

For National Actors

- Devise military approaches that correspond to the distinct paths and activities each factional group has pursued. For example, eliminating bomb-making factories may be a useful priority to counter JAS suicide attacks, while a focus on improving civilian relations and intelligence gathering may be important with regards to ISIS-WA, in order to stymie future attacks on security force outposts.
- Increase communications and public knowledge on military operations, to provide a better picture of the campaign against extremism and other developments in the area. In turn, ensure that closed-off areas are opened up to humanitarian actors as soon as possible, in order to provide vital assistance to those currently unreachable.
- Prioritise the humanitarian response along with reconstruction efforts, but not at the expense of each other. Adequate security must be ensured before reconstruction can begin, while an inability to adequately provide for humanitarian needs will ensure continued unmet frustrations vis-à-vis the civilian population and governance structures.
- In turn, programming must be analysed down to the village unit, as LGAs and even villages within the Lake Chad region have had varied experiences during the Boko Haram crisis, and thus require varied responses. Flexible programmes are required to incorporate such differences, to ensure needs are being appropriately addressed.
- Prioritise rural security as well as in urban centres and transport routes. The lack of military patrols beyond one to five kilometres outside urban centres allows militants greater freedom of movement, while upholding the biggest impediment in rural reconstruction – the inability to farm. Continuing with the garrison town strategy will impede long-term development in the region and elongate the reconstruction timeline.
- Balance the need for security restrictions with their impact on local livelihoods, taking into consideration the concerns of displaced communities who have few other alternatives. Decreased financing or supplies towards militants is a positive outcome, but if it comes at the expense of the goodwill of the civilian populace, it may offer only short-term gains.
- Avoid politically-inspired actions that do not take into account long-term considerations. Especially as Nigeria moves closer to the 2019 election cycle, there is a concern that the prioritisation of images of success (such as the return of IDPs) ahead of the conditions required (such as local security) could provide short-term electoral gains, but prove damaging in the long run.

For International Partners

- Encourage and support reconstruction initiatives that are geared towards enhancing local livelihoods in the Lake Chad Basin area as part of a strategy to win the hearts and minds of civilians who could become targets for militant recruitment.
- Support Lake Chad Basin countries to continue developing a regional framework for amnesty, rehabilitation and reintegration, so as to encourage defections in a coordinated manner.
- Work with governments in the region to encourage the development of comprehensive plans for the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of vigilante units into society, to forestall the possibility of such groups becoming a future security threat.

Endnotes

- 1 The ISS maintains a database of violent incidents in the Lake Chad region, likely attributable to Boko Haram. This database helps shed light on key trends and patterns in conflict dynamics but does have limitations as it relies on media reporting on the conflict. Given the difficulties in accessing remote areas of the region, the database likely represents a fraction of overall violence. In this sense, it should not be taken as a comprehensive view of each and every attack in the region, but rather as a guide to overall patterns and trends.
- 2 The affected populations are henceforth referred to as 'respondents', while others are called 'interviewees', in order to allow for a distinction based on personal or professional experience. The experiences of the respondents shed light on the localised dynamics of violent extremist organisations operating in north-east Nigeria as well as the impact on the civilian populace. While the conflict dynamics differ significantly from one local government area to another, or even from town to town, key cross-cutting patterns emerged and the differences also illustrate pertinent trends.
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- 90 Interview with Borno state government representative, Maiduguri, 29 March 2018.
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About the report

This report is the second in a two-part study examining current dynamics with regards to violent extremist organisations (VEOs) operating in the Lake Chad region (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger). The first report examined factionalism within the Boko Haram movement, while this second report profiles current responses and challenges.

About the authors

Omar S Mahmood is an ISS researcher based in Addis Ababa. He has worked as a security consultant on the Lake Chad Basin and Horn of Africa, senior analyst for a Washington DC-based consultancy, and Peace Corps volunteer in Burkina Faso. Omar has a Master's in Security Studies and Conflict Resolution from the Fletcher School, Tufts University, Boston.

Ndubuisi Christian Ani is an ISS researcher based in Addis Ababa. His research interests cover peace and security, democracy and governance, social cohesion, and indigenous systems. Ndubuisi has a PhD in international relations from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

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