

Boko Haram on the Back Foot?

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I. Overview

Under its new president, Muhammadu Buhari, Nigeria has regrouped, and neighbours are collaborating with it more meaningfully, taking a more powerful military response to Boko Haram into rural areas where the jihadist group remains strong. Other international partners also are supporting the effort against the insurrection that since 2009 has cost tens of thousands of lives, uprooted millions and spread to other Lake Chad basin states, damaging local economies and cross-border trade. Boko Haram is seemingly on a back foot, but formed of dispersed segments spread over a vast area (Borno state alone is 92,000sqkm) and accomplished in terror attacks, it is unlikely to be eliminated in a decisive battle. The Lake Chad basin states and their international partners, who meet in Abuja on 14 May 2016 at their second regional summit, must use their new collaboration to move beyond military cooperation and design a more holistic local and regional response, lest Boko Haram or similar groups remain a long-term threat to the entire Lake Chad basin.

In response to the regional campaign, Boko Haram is adapting to the new conditions, including by making greater use of women and children as suicide bombers to attack softer targets, though it can sometimes still launch large raids. It remains challenging to develop a clear picture of how the group has evolved over the past seven years and what motivates its leaders and rank-and-file. Many reports, as well as some books, are available, but most build on few first-hand sources, beyond statements and sermons by the movement's leaders. Nigeria and its allies should more effectively collate and use information gathered from captured fighters, supporters and civilians in occupied areas. New accounts beginning to emerge from former abductees, jailed militants and defectors should help to produce an assessment of the continued threat, the best strategy for curbing the insurgency and, more generally, shape new thinking and measured policy options for responding to terrorist attacks from other extremist groups.

The Abuja summit is a major opportunity for Nigeria, its Lake Chad basin neighbours – Cameroon, Chad and Niger – and wider international partners, namely the European Union (EU), U.S., France and the UK, to address vital policy issues, including:

- the bleak humanitarian situation, especially how to better support the region's 2.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, including how to limit or mitigate the short- and medium-term impact on local communities of military embargoes on trade believed to sustain Boko Haram;

- ❑ ensuring return of the rule of law and ending state-ordered or state-sponsored counter-insurgency tactics that exacerbate local grievances and push youths to join armed groups and further alienate communities whose support is essential to combatting militancy;
- ❑ releasing some of those detained on suspicion of supporting Boko Haram and retrying individuals sentenced without adequate legal representation;
- ❑ preparing avenues for the rehabilitation of the movement's rank-and-file, who join for diverse and often non-ideological reasons, while remaining open to engagement, public or discreet, with those Boko Haram leaders who may be looking for a compromise;
- ❑ rolling back the use of vigilante groups to fight the insurgents, which if not properly managed, could pose a longer-term threat; and
- ❑ returning government administration to marginalised peripheries, so as to provide crucial basic services – security, rule of law, education and health – and address factors that push individuals to join movements like Boko Haram.

This briefing builds on Crisis Group's past work on violent Islamist radicalism in Nigeria, current field research there and in Cameroon, Chad and Niger, and its March 2016 special report, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*. It sets the stage for a series of publications analysing Boko Haram's evolution from a small protest movement in north-eastern Nigeria into a regional menace and the responses of the Lake Chad basin states and their allies.

II. Boko Haram, “Technically” Defeated?

On 24 December 2015, President Buhari declared that “technically” Nigeria has “won the war” against Boko Haram.¹ It is true that for several months, the group has carried out fewer attacks, and those smaller, on softer targets and with reduced success. As recently as December 2013, hundreds of Boko Haram fighters overran the air force base in Maiduguri, the Borno state capital.² Today, the group seems to deploy fewer fighters, who mostly attack remote villages and refugee camps, and it relies increasingly on terrorist attacks, notably suicide bombings. Its four-wheel drive fleet is depleted, and many of the armoured vehicles it seized from Nigerian forces

¹ “Nigeria Boko Haram: Militants ‘technically defeated’ – Buhari”, BBC, 24 December 2015. Supporters tend not to use the term “Boko Haram” which they see as a derogatory designation probably popularised by militants of Izala, a non-violent Salafi movement eager to distinguish themselves from and mock the more radical groups, including Boko Haram, born among them. Boko Haram went through several internal designations, replacing its formal Arabic name, Jama’u Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad) with the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), after its affiliation with the Islamic State (IS) in 2015. There are reports that some groups involved in the insurgency oppose the IS affiliation, so may not accept that name. On divisions with the insurgency, see below. For clarity, and given its wide recognition, “Boko Haram” is used in this briefing.

² For background on Boko Haram, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°s 213, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, 3 April 2014; and 168, *Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict*, 20 December 2010.

are destroyed or recaptured.³ Its last terror attack in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, was in October 2015. On 27 March that year, it lost its own "capital", Gwoza, in south-east Borno state.⁴

While from 2011 insurgents were very active in the other north-eastern states of Adamawa, Yobe and Gombe, they now seem largely limited to Borno's north-eastern quadrant. In February 2016, a Borno senator claimed controversially that Boko Haram still could operate in half the state and had full control of three of its 27 local government areas (LGAs).⁵ What seems clear is that it retains presence and capacity in some rural areas, including several permanent bases, particularly in the Sambisa forest, along the borders with Cameroon and Niger and on Lake Chad islets, from where it can launch raids, including into neighbouring states.⁶

Boko Haram's reach into Chad, Cameroon and Niger appears to have peaked in 2014-2015. Attacks in Chad and Niger seemed to diminish at the start of 2016, and it has turned to suicide bombings against Cameroonian towns and garrisons.⁷

Equally notable, Boko Haram has produced many fewer statements and videos since the end of 2015. There has been no credible proof of life from its leader, Abubakar Shekau, in at least a year.⁸ A video released on 24 March that shows him was doctored, according to several experts; one on 1 April only featured supporters in-

³ It had more than 150 four-wheel drive trucks with mounted weaponry in Gwoza at the beginning of 2015. Crisis Group electronic communication with military expert, 10 March 2016.

⁴ On 7 March 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The area Boko Haram controlled was called the Wilayat Gharb Afriqiya (West Africa province) of the IS caliphate.

⁵ "Boko Haram controls half of Borno, says Senator Garbai", *Punch*, 7 February 2016. The three LGAs were Abadam, Mobbar and Kala Balge, all bordering either Niger or Cameroon. The army said it captured Kala Balge on 23 March 2016.

⁶ "Boko Haram militants attack village in Adamawa", *Naij.com*, 17 February 2016; "Boko Haram raids Yobe state on horseback", *Naij.com*, 20 April 2016. Since 2011, Boko Haram has had logistical networks in Cameroon's far north, notably Kousseri. Crisis Group interviews, security forces, administrative authorities, lawyers and traders, Kousseri, March 2016.

⁷ The first incidents in Niger occurred in December 2014. According to one count, attacks peaked with 24 in February 2015; there were nine in November and only three in February 2016. "Niger-Diffa: Access, Insecurity and Internal displacement", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 10 March 2016. After it joined the regional fight in January 2015, Chad was targeted with guerrilla attacks in and around Lake Chad throughout the year and deadly suicide bombings in N'Djamena and some other localities in June and July. Since January 2016, there have been only small guerrilla operations in the country. Crisis Group interview, security expert, N'Djamena, April 2016. Aside from 2013 kidnappings of Western hostages, Boko Haram's first attack in Cameroon was in March 2014. The country has suffered the most in recent months; 88 were killed in January 2016, 79 in February, 23 in March and sixteen in April. Crisis Group Africa Report N°229, *Cameroon: The Threat of Religious Radicalism*, 3 September 2015, pp. 17-20; and observations, northern Cameroon, March 2016. Crisis Group plans to publish briefings on Boko Haram in Chad, Cameroon and Niger over the coming months.

⁸ The controversy over whether Shekau is alive continues; Nigerian authorities have long claimed he was killed in 2013 and replaced by impersonators. Some Cameroonian soldiers in Mabass said Shekau was in Madagali, Adamawa state, 10-27 February 2016. Madagali shares borders with Mabass and Ldamang towns (Mayo Tsanaga), Cameroon. Crisis Group interviews, security forces, Mabass, Cameroon, March 2016. Boko Haram watchers are divided. Compare Andrea Brigaglia, "Abubakar Shekau: The Boko Haram Leader Who Never Came 'Back from the Dead'", *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2013-2014); Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram and the many faces of Abubakar Shekau", *African Arguments*, 30 September 2014; "Salkida: Shekau alive, still controlling Boko Haram", *The Cable* (Nigeria), 16 August 2015; and Crisis Group electronic communication, researcher working on Boko Haram, 14 April 2016.

sisting he was still the leader, though it also depicted well-equipped fighters and four-wheel drive trucks with heavy weapons, including a heavy artillery piece.⁹

At the least, Boko Haram has demonstrated that it remains a potent asymmetrical threat. While ostensibly on the back foot, it is not yet defeated. In mid-April, it launched a large attack against Nigeria's 113th battalion in Kareto, northern Borno state. The nature of its tactics and geographical reach will make the group's comprehensive defeat difficult. Current attacks seem to be less about military strategy than extracting resources and sending a violent message that it is surviving. Increasingly they are on targets that offer easy plunder, including young captives, many of whom are turned into "wives" and child soldiers.

In its desperate and violent search for resources through plunder, Boko Haram shares some characteristics with late nineteenth century warfare in the Lake Chad area, in which states sustained themselves through raids for goods and people became a tool to sustain (temporarily) the state.¹⁰ It seems even more strikingly similar to the current Uganda-born Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a force also originally formed around a radical, religion-based rejection of society that has deteriorated into a roaming gang, surviving by plundering goods and people.¹¹ But because of its connection to the global jihad, it has, unlike the LRA, an understanding of the special power of terror attacks. Much like other jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), it may become less a guerrilla force attached to a specific territory and more a terror group with a longer reach.¹²

Initially, Boko Haram members attacked "strategic" individuals (local officials, civil servants, chiefs, imams, traders who refused to cooperate and turncoats). They moved on to greater violence against specific communities, including those that formed vigilante groups to resist them, such as the Civilian Joint Task Forces (CJTF, see below). They now appear to be motivated by a broader anger against all who do not support them, including communities over which they have lost control. In so acting, they may be destroying what little appeal they once had among segments of the local population.¹³

The insurgency has badly damaged the Lake Chad basin economy, destroyed or driven away the little services (and cash infusion) the state provided and forced some traders to flee. But in an effort to break its financial base, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria have deliberately targeted economic activities they believe have been benefiting Boko Haram, through tribute, a criminal racket or direct militant participation in certain businesses. States have ordered a variety of bans, such as on motorbike taxi service in the countryside, rural markets, the sale of fuel and trade in fish, pepper, cattle and dried meat. Some trade prohibitions have been lifted after

⁹ Crisis Group electronic communications, researchers and an analyst working on Boko Haram, April 2016.

¹⁰ Kyari Mohammed, *Borno in the Rabih Years, 1893-1901: the Rise and Crash of a Predatory State* (Maiduguri, 2006). Rabih Fadlallah was a Sudanese warlord and slave trader who conquered the Borno Empire in 1883 and ruled it until 1900, when he was killed by French forces. Rabih's forces regularly raided the countryside for plunder and to capture slaves.

¹¹ On the LRA's religious dimension, see Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena & the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda 1986-97* (Oxford, 1999). On later transformation, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°s 182, *The Lord's Resistance Army: End Game?*, 17 November 2011; and 77, *Northern Uganda: Understanding and Solving the Conflict*, 14 April 2004.

¹² Crisis Group interview, international military expert, N'Djamena, Chad, 27 April 2016.

¹³ Crisis Group electronic communication, researcher working on Boko Haram, 25 March 2016.

civil society groups raised concerns, but there is little doubt that the local economies are suffering.¹⁴

Under pressure from the region's armies, Boko Haram faces growing challenges to exact tribute from trade flows that have largely vanished and has difficulties finding suppliers willing to engage in risky illicit commerce.¹⁵ The money from bank robberies and ransoms has either run out or become more difficult to spend.¹⁶ Raids have replaced the tribute once exacted from villages, another indication that its revenue base is being stifled, though the group may still have control of markets in some areas. There is one recent report, quoting security sources, that militants were surrendering out of starvation.¹⁷ Pictures released by the Nigerian military of alleged militants killed or captured in combat show emaciated bodies. Nevertheless, that Boko Haram is losing resources and fighters does not mean the governments have quite regained control.

As Lake Chad basin states push further to dislodge Boko Haram and regain access, further research may shed light on the movement. Since the killing of Mohamed Yusuf, its founder, in police custody in 2009, the evasive Abubakar Shekau, once a Yusuf deputy, is the best-known figure. A known sub-group (or faction), Ansaru, publicly confirmed its existence in 2012. It formed around Nigerian radicals associated with AQIM and had links to, but sought to distinguish itself from Boko Haram. It is not clear whether it was completely dispersed by the security forces, was absorbed into Boko Haram or transformed and survived as something distinct. It is not clear either how deep doctrinal differences run within the organisation, notably over the affiliation to the Islamic State (IS).¹⁸ Organisational charts in literature on Boko Haram are hypothetical, with many empty boxes and question marks. Likely the assaults have weakened the centre of the movement's network, making it less capable of securing obedience and coordination, and fragmenting it into smaller, more local units, tied to specific areas and resource bases.

In its areas of influence, Boko Haram tried to set up a quasi-administrative structure, linking the "imam" (Shekau) and its Shura council to designated emirs (locals or outsiders) charged with organising levies in recruits and kind from local communities. In some areas where its control was most intense and durable, it tried to implement its version of Sharia (Islamic law), controlling male and female dress, limiting

¹⁴ The pepper trade in south-east Niger resumed in February 2016 after civil society took a stand. "Déclaration de la Société Civile Nigérienne", Fondation Frantz Fanon, 20 May 2015.

¹⁵ Boko Haram is reportedly using groundnut oil as motorcycle fuel. "Boko Haram, facing fuel shortages, makes its own: security sources, escapee", Agence France-Presse, 18 April 2016.

¹⁶ An estimated \$11 million was reportedly paid to Boko Haram for release of captives in five separate incidents, 2013-2014, in Cameroon's Far North alone. Crisis Group interviews, administrative and municipal authorities, negotiators, journalists, Yaoundé, Maroua, Mokolo, February-March 2016. "Les contours de la libération des 27 otages enlevés par Boko Haram", *L'œil du Sahel*, 16 October 2014; "Nigerian Islamists got 3.15 USD millions to free French hostages", Reuters, 26 April 2013.

¹⁷ "Boko Haram: 76 starving members surrender to Nigerian military", *Newsweek*, 3 March 2016.

¹⁸ Drawing on the work of Nigerian commentator Fulan Nasrullah (<https://fulansitrep.com>), counter-terrorism analyst Jacob Zenn considers Boko Haram is actually two main active organisations that sometimes cooperate: Shekau's ISWAP, along Lake Chad, by the Niger border and in central Borno state, and Khaled al Barnawi's Harakat-al-Mujahrin, an Ansaru spin-off content with anonymity, in Cameroon and along its border. "Wilayat West Africa reboots for the Caliphate", www.isn.thz.ch, 15 September 2015. Nigerian authorities reported al Barnawi's arrest in April 2016 in Kogi state, far from Cameroon's border.

female mobility and forcing attendance at Quran classes and prayers.¹⁹ However, some consider the notion of Boko Haram as a structured organisation a state-centric misunderstanding of a group that should be viewed as a network of networks.²⁰ Boko Haram, as it deployed in the rural areas and along the border apparently integrated smaller, pre-existing networks – some of which did not have a religious agenda – such as of illicit traffickers or bandits. Some of these are returning to their previous lives but may still be using Boko Haram’s name and notoriety.

It would be wrong, however, to consider the movement a spent force. Since the beginning of 2016, its network along Cameroon’s border has been able to attempt 35 suicide attacks.²¹

III. The Regional Fightback

Boko Haram has been weakened by a stronger, coordinated military response that began in 2015. A combination of regional and wider international support that increased notably with Buhari’s election has put it on the defensive.

After years of inaction and a series of spectacular setbacks in 2013-2014, Buhari’s predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan, tried to fight back as the 2015 elections approached. Reaching out to Russia and China, among others,²² he secured training and weapons and arranged for a South African private military company to train and operate a small force in Borno state from December 2014 to March 2015. Most significantly, forces from Chad and Niger were allowed to intervene on Nigerian territory around Lake Chad that February-March. Boko Haram was pushed out of some areas, sometimes for good (Gwoza and Dikwa), but sometimes not, for failure to maintain a permanent deployment (Gambaru and Abadam, which are further north, along the Cameroon and Niger borders respectively). Nigeria’s own army is not large enough to secure the entire north east and cannot depend on the deeply troubled federal police to help secure urban areas.

The armed response strengthened further after Buhari assumed the presidency in May 2015, although given the military’s history, there remains scepticism about the coherence of the fight against Boko Haram. A retired northern general with strong anti-corruption credentials and military governor experience in the north east (1975-1976), he boosted the morale and capacity of Nigeria’s armed forces, which had been compromised by years of mismanagement and wide-scale graft and fraud. Several of his acts have improved the military response: a thorough command change, transfer of the operations base from Abuja to Maiduguri, moving tactical formations’ head-

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, researcher working on Boko Haram, Paris, 30 March 2016; Adam Higazi, “A Conflict Analysis of Borno and Adamawa States, Northeastern Nigeria”, unpublished field report, February 2016.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Yaoundé, 25 February 2016.

²¹ Seventeen such attacks succeeded. Crisis Group interviews, security forces, Maroua, March 2016.

²² Including some East European countries. See “Analysts Weigh Nigeria-Russia Arms Deal”, Voice of America, 10 December 2014; “Nigeria reportedly takes delivery of ‘Super Hinds’ – Analysis”, FighterControl.co.uk, 9 January 2015; “Musings on this week’s deliveries of MRAPs, Armour and Combat Helicopters from China, Belarus and Russia”, Beegeagle’s Blog, (<https://beegeagle.wordpress.com/>), 15 January 2015; “Nigeria receiving T-72s and other weapons from Czech Republic”, DefenceWeb, 2 February 2015 and “Photo of Chinese-Built CS/VP3 ‘Bigfoot’ MRAP Vehicle of Nigeria Army”, Defence Blog, 26 August 2015.

quarters forward and quick improvements in logistics, wage-payment, air support, rotation of troops and equipment procurement.²³ To reflect the more aggressive disposition, Nigeria's counter-insurgency operation changed names from Operation Zaman Lafiya (We will live in peace) to Operation Lafiya Dole (Peace by All Means).

The armed forces have sustained an offensive posture, catching off balance insurgents who were used to facing a demoralised army largely confined to fixed locations.²⁴ To boost morale and improve capacity, the president also ordered investigations of more than 300 companies and prominent citizens, including senior serving and retired officers, believed involved in security budget mismanagement. Some have been detained.²⁵

Another important change has been the growth and spread of vigilante CJTF groups. Born and nurtured in Maiduguri by local authorities in 2013, they played an important role in pushing the insurgency out of that city, and they eventually formed in Borno's rural areas and in neighbouring states; the Cameroon and Chad equivalents are known as *comités de vigilance*.²⁶ They are alleged to have been involved in serious abuses, including extrajudicial executions and rapes, sometimes in association with security forces.²⁷ But in rural areas, they have provided essential local knowledge and intelligence to the security forces and, more importantly, given people a chance to reconnect with the state who otherwise may have looked to Boko Haram for protection.

Nigeria's more cogent response and the insurgency's growing cross-border footprint have done much to mobilise Cameroon, Chad and Niger, as well as Western partners. As early as 2012, in the framework of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), there were attempts to revive the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), an unsuccessful regional anti-banditry operation established in 1998, at a time when bad memories and suspicions between Nigeria and its neighbours, particularly Cameroon, were high.²⁸ However, Chad and Niger pulled out in 2013 and 2014 respec-

²³ "Buhari names new Service Chiefs, NSA", *Premium Times*, 13 July 2015; Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, Abuja, January and February 2016; Lieutenant General Tukur Buratai, lecture delivered at National Defence College, Abuja, 13 January 2016.

²⁴ Plans to further strengthen military capacity with significant additional security force recruitment are under way in Nigeria as well as Cameroon.

²⁵ "Nigeria targets 300 army officers, firms, in widening corruption probe", Reuters, 25 March 2016; "Why Dasuki will remain in detention – Presidency", *Daily Post*, 29 March 2016.

²⁶ In Cameroon, the *comités de vigilance* are widely praised by security forces and local administration for their role in fighting Boko Haram. Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities, security forces and vigilante groups, Yaoundé, Maroua and Mora, March 2016. In Chad, many vigilante groups were formed at the authorities' demand after the suicide attacks in Baga Sola in October 2015. In villages, they would stop-and-search newcomers and protect markets and NGO-organised food distribution. They do not always have guns, often carrying spears, machetes or whips. Crisis Group interview, vigilante, Andja (near Baga Sola), Chad, April 2016.

²⁷ "Stars on their shoulders. Blood on their hands. War crimes committed by the Nigerian military", Amnesty International, 3 June 2015; "Civilian JTF members caught on video torturing Boko Haram suspects", Sahara Reporters, 21 October 2015.

²⁸ The members of LCBC, created to manage the resources from Lake Chad, are Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, as well as the Central African Republic and Libya. Benin, on Nigeria's western border, also pledged 800 troops to the MNJTF along with LCBC members, in May 2014. In March 2016, a MNJTF communiqué announced Benin was ready to deploy 150, "expected to perform garrison duties, provision of escort and security to humanitarian operations, protection of Very Important Personalities". "Boko Haram: Benin Republic to deploy 150 military troops to MNJTF", thepost-ng.com, 15 March 2016.

tively, and Boko Haram overran the MNJTF headquarters near the Nigerian town of Baga, on the shores of Lake Chad, in January 2015.²⁹

Baga's fall was a wake-up call. Seeing its trade routes to the sea under threat, Chad sent two large columns, one through Cameroon, one through Niger, and supported by a Niger contingent, to fight the insurgents in Nigeria.³⁰ Faced with mounting criticism for collateral damage, the intervention's heavy human and financial toll and what it considered insufficient regional and wider international support, as well as an increase in Boko Haram activity on its territory, however, Chad quickly pulled out of Nigeria, somewhat frustrated. It has since focused most of its operations on its Lake Chad's islands and shore.

Buhari revived regional cooperation that had seemed dead at mid-2015 by paying special attention to neighbours. The MNJTF settled into an expanded N'Djamena headquarters, led by a Nigerian general officially in command of all Lake Chad basin operations. In reality, there has been no force integration: the MNJTF is about coordination, and national contingents re-hatted as MNJTF operate primarily in their own country and report to their own capital.³¹ But the task force allows a level of cross-border operational coordination, while assuaging sovereignty concerns and helping to "erase the borders a bit".³²

Not without difficulties, it also coordinates intelligence and does some joint planning.³³ It likewise performs a function common to many African regional organisations, that of a recipient and coordination point for international technical and financial aid. Several bi-lateral and multilateral partners provide funds and seconded officers directly to the intelligence cell (Cellule de Coopération et de Liaison, CCL), support which may not have been available purely bilaterally.³⁴

Western aid, particularly from France and the U.S., but also the UK and other allies, had already begun accruing to Nigeria's three neighbours in the form of training,

²⁹ "Stars on their shoulders", op. cit., p. 12.

³⁰ "Chad troops enter Nigerian town in pursuit of Boko Haram", Reuters, 3 February 2015. Chad reportedly sent some 400 vehicles and 2,000 soldiers to Cameroon in January and into Nigeria in February 2015. Crisis Group analyst interview in a previous capacity, security actor, N'Djamena, February 2015. The other contingent entered Nigeria from Niger in March 2015.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, international security officials, N'Djamena, April 2016.

³² Crisis Group interview, MNJTF official, N'Djamena, November 2015.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, international security officials, MNJTF officers, N'Djamena, November 2015 and April 2016; MNJTF officers, Mora, Cameroon, March 2016. "Failure to share data hampers war on Boko Haram in Africa", *The New York Times*, 23 April 2016. For internal communications, Boko Haram has been using cell phones; several years ago Nigeria shut down the network in the north east and is currently pushing hard for all SIM card purchasers to be identified. (In 2015, Nigeria fined South African operator MTN \$5.2 billion for failing to provide the identity of 5.2 million users. The fine is currently the object of negotiation involving the South African authorities.) With the network down, Boko Haram and others would travel east to use the Cameroonian network. In the ongoing offensive, the army has seized many cell phones, as well as laptops powered by solar panels. Nigerian authorities claim to have used seized cell phones to track other members. Western intelligence agencies also track communications. It is unclear how much product is shared with local allies. Crisis Group interviews, Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, Washington, 2015-2106.

³⁴ Thus, the EU is about to start giving funds to the African Union (AU) for the MNJTF. It considers the MNJTF inadequately configured to receive funds directly. The AU will use the money to provide in-kind assistance. EU support would have been unavailable if the MNJTF was not a joint command. Some officials from the Lake Chad states have, however, expressed suspicion and frustration, notably about the slow delivery and longer management chain. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Paris, March 2016; international official, Addis Ababa, April 2016.

equipment and intelligence, including from U.S. drones operated out of northern Cameroon. Buhari's reformist agenda has allowed the West, notably the U.S., to commit or pledge more support to Nigeria as well.³⁵

IV. Understanding Boko Haram's Staying Power

Even if it may be on its back foot, Boko Haram is likely to be difficult to eradicate, because it originates from Nigeria's deep structural challenges. Key factors include: demoralisation resulting from massive, oil-fed corruption; chronic mismanagement; growing inequalities between regions, with high birth rates, poverty and low levels of formal education particularly acute in the north east; instrumentalisation of Sharia by northern elites in a context of sudden democratisation; and dysfunctional federalism.³⁶ Climate change has probably also had a part, though contrary to received wisdom, Lake Chad has not retreated in recent years.³⁷ The insurgency's specific home in the north east owes something to Yusuf's appeal in his region of origin and ethnic community, the Kanuri. That region has also been propitious for the insurgency; the long international borders have allowed it to seek refuge, develop support networks and procure weapons in the Lake Chad basin, an area both of porous frontiers and of regions that are marginal peripheries in their own states.

But another local factor mattered for the insurgency's origin and continuation: the history of violence in Nigeria, and particularly in the north east. Globally, jihadist groups have tended to emerge or gather strength during conflict at least as much as initiate it.³⁸ When Boko Haram took root and grew, north-east Nigeria and the broader area of the Lake Chad basin were not home to an open, large armed conflict, but there was diffuse, daily, structural violence. Cattle-rustling, banditry, vigilantism, the protection needed for a lively illicit economy and abuse by state officials have all been pervasive and inter-connected.³⁹ It is a region where trade and the requisite mobile protection have been more important than production, and the 1990s' economic liberalisation did not change this. Untying the nexus of wealth and violence is the region's key structural challenge. A new study of ex-Boko Haram fighters' attitudes tellingly notes that "[a]bout half of former members said their communities at some time supported Boko Haram, believing it would help bring about a change in government". State legitimacy is the core problem.⁴⁰

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, diplomats, Abuja, February 2016.

³⁶ Crisis Group Report, *Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict*, op. cit. Among the books available, see in particular Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (ed.), *Boko Haram. Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Ibadan 2014).

³⁷ Ayo Obe, "Environmental Degradation, Climate Change and Conflict: The Lake Chad Basin Area", Crisis Group, *The Future of Conflict*, 27 October 2015, <https://medium.com/the-future-of-conflict/environmental-degradation-climate-change-and-conflict-the-lake-chad-basin-area-6aec2bd9fa25#ioyvtx95t>.

³⁸ Crisis Group Special Report, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016.

³⁹ See Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa* (Princeton, 2004); Issa Saïbou, *Les coupeurs de route: Histoire du banditisme rural et transfrontalier dans le bassin du lac Tchad* (Paris, 2011); Marielle Debos, *Le métier des armes au Tchad. Le gouvernement d'entre-guerres* (Paris, 2013).

⁴⁰ "Motivations and empty promises. Voices of former Boko Haram combatants and Nigerian youth", Mercy Corps, April 2016, p. 14.

The challenge has been heightened by a violent counter-insurgency campaign to which little thought has been given about how it could further fuel insurgency. The brutal summer 2009 military crackdown in Maiduguri, Yusuf's extrajudicial execution in police custody and heavy-handed attempts to crush the movement made things worse. Repeated pledges by the states involved to comply with the laws of war have had minimal follow-through; there are still too many troubling reports by human rights NGOs.⁴¹ A human rights expert contended that, throughout the region, security forces were probably more deadly for civilians than Boko Haram.⁴² Even accounts from the security forces are dispiriting reads. How, for example, did Nigerian forces know the 58 they killed on 21 March 2016 in the village of Musari were insurgents if they seized only two grenades afterwards?⁴³

This context explains some of Boko Haram's success in penetrating rural areas, an essential but little analysed issue. It put rural civilians before a false choice. On one side was a state that has often made itself felt through unfulfilled promises of development and the taxations, seizures and predations of its agents, many of whom do not speak local languages, and their local allies – the chiefs and government officials. On the other was the presence of armed militants with sticks, but also some carrots – access to a gun, money, a motorbike, protection for trade (or the loss thereof), promises of plunder or a bride, chance for revenge against state abuse and moral justification couched in an understandable religious discourse. Boko Haram has also provided opportunities for communities, not only individuals. Along Lake Chad, for instance, significant segments of Buduma fishing communities have rallied under its flag to counter the economic dominance of Hausa traders.⁴⁴

It is probable, too, that Boko Haram was a chance for some rural youths to gain leverage in a sclerotic patriarchal social system that gave them little, while delaying access to marriage and formal adulthood. The movement has abducted many women. There have been reports of rapes, particularly against Christian women. It seems many of the captives have been forced into marriages, which has led to marital rape.⁴⁵ Reportedly, fighters spent much of their off-duty time talking about marriage prospects.⁴⁶ The easy access to brides, via coercion or otherwise, Boko Haram gives young militants, an aspect observed in some other Muslim reform movements across West Africa, has probably been a major pull factor for the insurgency.⁴⁷

Analysis of women's experience with Boko Haram has often been centred, understandably, on the plight of the female captives and girls used as suicide-bombers. It should not be ruled out, however, that some women may have seized on Boko Haram

⁴¹ "Stars on their shoulders", op. cit.; "Human rights under fire: Attacks and violations in Cameroon's struggle with Boko Haram", Amnesty International, September 2015.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Dakar, 21 April 2016.

⁴³ "Nigerian troops kill 58 Boko Haram insurgents, cut terrorists' logistics – Army", *Premium Times*, 22 March 2016.

⁴⁴ Christian Seignobos, "Boko Harm et le lac Tchad. Extension ou sanctuarisation?", *Afrique contemporaine*, no. 255 (2016).

⁴⁵ See "Those terrible weeks in their camp'. Boko Haram violence against women and girls in Northeast Nigeria", Human Rights Watch, October 2014, a report that draws almost exclusively on the cases of Christian abductees but mentions, however, the possibility that rapes are under-reported.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, male refugees and former Boko Haram captive, Minawao and Yaoundé, March-April 2016.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Crisis Group interview, researcher working on Boko Haram, Paris, 29 March 2016.

as an opportunity for a kind of emancipation observed in other mobilisations drawing on radical Islam. A recent study notes that for some women, particularly young ones, the group offered “unique opportunities”, notably access to Islamic education and a form of social power.⁴⁸ Overall, the relationship of many civilians to the movement has certainly been more varied than usually thought, combining fear and opportunity in complex ways, with each person joining for diverse reasons. That complexity must be understood and dealt with if Boko Haram is to be degraded.

V. Uncertainties Remain

The military balance is currently tipped in favour of the Lake Chad states, and Boko Haram is not likely to create a large territorial enclave as IS has done in Iraq and Syria. There are, however, substantial long- and short-term uncertainties that still threaten Nigeria’s far north and neighbouring countries and must be carefully monitored.

First, Boko Haram is trying to adapt to military defeats. Its networked nature may mean it is unlikely to collapse from the top and is well-suited to surviving as a loosely-coordinated structure. Some bastions, such as the Lake Chad islets or the Mandara hills, may offer long-lasting cover for guerrilla operations. Other militants could drop the attempt to maintain a guerrilla force, complete with families, in favour of a slimmer structure with a longer reach and a focus on terror acts. Some may move to new areas. While Boko Haram has a primary audience among the Kanuri, the dominant ethnic group in Borno state and surrounding areas (and Yusuf’s and Shekau’s community), it has been able to reach further.⁴⁹ The daily violence of banditry and cattle-rustling prevalent throughout northern Nigeria and the region could open up new areas of operation.⁵⁰

Another uncertainty is the potential to reach out to other jihadist movements. There has long been evidence of some links, notably with AQIM or ex-Ansaru militants.⁵¹ Several sources noted the presence of a few Maghreb Arabs among Boko Haram ranks, and Shekau pledged allegiance in March 2015 to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. U.S. officials have recently claimed links between IS and Boko Haram are tightening, but evidence so far is slim.⁵² Nigeria articles in IS’s magazine, *Dabiq*,

⁴⁸ “Motivations and empty promises”, op. cit., p. 15; “Strategy of terror: the suicide bombing girls of Boko Haram”, *Der Spiegel*, 29 April 2016.

⁴⁹ Kabiru Umar, convicted for masterminding the Christmas Day 2011 bombing of St. Theresa Catholic church in Madalla, Niger state, which killed at least 44, was from Gagi Village, Sokoto state. Aminu Sadiq Ogwuche, arrested in connection with the 14 April 2014 bombing of a bus station in Nyanya, Abuja, in which about 130 were killed, came from Orokam in Benue state.

⁵⁰ In what seems like an attempt to manipulate public opinion, some have blamed a number of recent violent clashes in northern Nigeria between ethnic Fulani herdsmen and farmers on Boko Haram. But an escalation in violence could make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. “B/Haram attacking Nigerians under guise of herders/farmers’ feud – Dambazau”, *Daily Trust*, 15 April 2016. Crisis Group electronic communication, researcher working on Boko Haram and Fulani pastoralism, 27 April 2016.

⁵¹ In October 2014, French troops arrested in Niger a senior member of al-Mourabitoune, a jihadist organisation linked to AQIM, who was returning from Nigeria where he was giving Boko Haram media training. Crisis Group interview, Nigerian security official, Niamey, November 2014. Crisis Group Report, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II)*, op. cit., pp. 23-26.

⁵² “Boko Haram and ISIS are collaborating more: US military”, *The New York Times*, 21 April 2016; also, Jacob Zenn, “Nigerian al-Qaedaism”, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 2014. For a critical

are of poor quality, unlike its coverage of the fronts where IS is clearly present. With the exception of the 27 November 2015 attack on a Shia gathering near Kano, Boko Haram's targeting seems to have been less global recently.

Nigeria's ability to capitalise on Boko Haram's current weakness and curb it is another uncertainty, particularly with oil prices low and the naira falling. The neighbours' strengths are also unknown. Each in its way is fragile. Cameroon confronts a delicate presidential succession in 2018, a security apparatus with internal tensions and a north with a large (not exclusively) Muslim population that feels marginalised. Niger is tense, fresh from controversial presidential elections, with budget problems, a partial criminalisation of the state due to illicit trafficking and a military used to meddling in politics.⁵³ Chad is also fragile, with a long history of armed rebellions, essentially controlled by a tribal army awash with aspiring men-at-arms, reeling from the oil-price collapse and just past the controversial election in which President Idriss Déby, in power since 1990, won a fifth term.⁵⁴ Such frailties could, in various ways, offer ground for an extension or more indigenous mutation of Boko Haram, as well as the emergence of other violent actors, jihadist or not.

VI. A Mounting Humanitarian Toll

The humanitarian impact has been huge. There is no solid body count, an indication of state weakness and dearth of local civil society, made worse by security concerns. The Council on Foreign Relations (U.S.) assesses that Boko Haram and state actors together have killed 28,000 since 2011 in Nigeria alone, but the toll may be higher.⁵⁵ There are now 2.8 million displaced persons in the Lake Chad basin, about 200,000 of them refugees. With limited resources made worse by weak capacity, the states and aid community have struggled to handle the crisis.

Regional governments' policies have not always helped the displaced. Authorities have seemed keen for civilians to leave and stay away from Boko Haram-held territory (where they could be a potential source of voluntary or coerced support for the insurgents) but are at the same time embarrassed by the massive IDP camps, fearing they may turn into hotbeds of discontent.⁵⁶ Also, such camps have reportedly attracted human trafficking and sexual abuse.⁵⁷

take on Zenn's insistence on Boko Haram's global links, see Abdul Raufu Mustapha, "Understanding Boko Haram", in Abdul Raufu Mustapha (ed.), *Sects & Social Disorder in Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria* (Oxford, 2014), p. 148. Some military sources warn the evidence of collaboration is slim. Crisis Group electronic communication, military expert, 10 March 2016; interviews, ex-Boko Haram captive, Yaoundé, April 2016; military expert, N'Djamena, Chad, 27 April 2016.

⁵³ Crisis Group Africa Report N°208, *Niger: Another Weak Link in the Sahel?*, 19 September 2013.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group Africa Report N°233, *Chad: Between Ambition and Fragility*, 30 March 2016.

⁵⁵ "Nigeria Security Tracker" (www.cfr.org). See also Higazi, "A conflict analysis", op. cit., p. 8.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Nigerian, Cameroonian, Chadian national and international humanitarian actors, Abuja, February 2016, Yaoundé, February-March 2016, N'Djamena, April 2016.

⁵⁷ "Grim tales of rape, child trafficking in displaced persons camps", International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 29 January 2015. This information was confirmed by a human rights expert. Crisis Group electronic communication, 7 April 2016. Nigeria's National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), however, denied the report. "NEMA denies allegation of sexual abuse, others in IDP camps", *The Guardian* (Nigeria), 16 July 2015.

President Buhari's initial plans to push IDPs back to their home areas have apparently been dropped, and Nigeria seems to be preparing for massive long-term displacement.⁵⁸ Cameroon is not keen on retaining Nigerian refugees and is pushing for swift repatriation, at the risk of returning them to areas still plagued by insurgency and possibly to starve. Niger and Chad have pushed Nigerian refugees and nationals – not always an easy distinction – away from the insurgent-infested Lake Chad islands, sometimes forcibly, and are trying to prevent returns. The future of IDPs, stuck in camps often removed from their resource bases, is sombre.

Displaced or not, 9.2 million of the 20 million living in the affected areas require humanitarian help. Nearly half face severe food insecurity, and in Borno state some 50,000 are starving.⁵⁹ Agriculture is at a standstill, with labour drained from rural areas, movement of goods and people complicated and poor rains. While many civilians have fled to urban centres, there still seem to be many in the bush, with little to no mobility, and the lean season has not even begun.⁶⁰ Hasty return to rural areas without sufficient seeds, tools or fertilisers will not help. At this stage, if rural populations are not supported adequately by government, they may be vulnerable to Boko Haram offering similar supplies.

With the size of the impacted areas, security concerns, intermittent international attention and Nigeria's perceived sensitivity to external involvement, aid organisations are struggling to increase their activity.⁶¹ Humanitarian aid is nevertheless indispensable, as bans on economic activities, which seem to have proven militarily effective, will likely continue. Even if states were willing to reverse them, it is far from certain that would produce a rapid improvement in local livelihoods, since many IDPs and refugees are cautious about returning, and traders are reluctant to re-enter the markets. Whether pushed back to unsafe areas or stuck in insufficiently supplied and protected camps, the displaced would be easy targets for voluntary or coerced Boko Haram recruitment.⁶²

VII. Conclusion

Though the military response to Boko Haram has become more cogent, the Lake Chad states should not too quickly proclaim "mission accomplished". Even if they are made to abandon all territorial pretensions in Nigeria's north east and the Lake Chad area, or are forced to abandon their guerrilla war, some Boko Haram militants at least are likely to seek to continue their insurgency in some form, probably through terror attacks. For Nigeria and its neighbours, the job will only become more complicated. Beyond military action, more complex governance and development challenges need to be addressed. In the coming year, Crisis Group will look at Boko Haram's regionalisation and transformation, its social impact, patterns of recruitment and radicalisation, female experiences, MNJTF effectiveness and regional cooperation.

⁵⁸ "Boko Haram: it's about human lives, not territories", *salkida.com*, 16 February 2016.

⁵⁹ "Lake Chad Basin Emergency: Humanitarian Needs and Response Overview 2016", OCHA, January 2016.

⁶⁰ "Trade seen as key to return to normality in NE Nigeria", *Agence France-Presse*, 13 March 2016.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and humanitarian actors, Abuja, 16-19 February 2016.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, Chadian national and international humanitarian actors, N'Djamena, April 2016.

The 14 May regional security summit, two years after the first was held in Paris, is an opportunity to consolidate regional and wider international cooperation and, crucially, to review the current policies of Nigeria and its partners. The summit's concept note indicates that the Lake Chad states and their international partners recognise the numerous steps and initiatives needed to curb Boko Haram, including restoring security to long-neglected peripheries and borders while respecting rule-of-law, protecting victims and beginning infrastructure development in insurgency-affected areas so IDPs and refugees can go home.⁶³ These are all important to help restrict the rebellion, but preventing future insurgencies must also be part of the summit's focus. Policies and initiatives should aim at developing strategies and tactics that invest in the longer-term goal of conflict prevention and focus on:

- **Attention to the conflict's humanitarian consequences.** Response to the human consequences has been dramatically underfunded and insufficient. More aid, both humanitarian and developmental, is urgently needed, with priority on the swift return of IDPs and refugees to rebuild local economies, though constrained by reasonable security concerns. Promises of assistance should be implemented speedily, without gaps between people returning and the arrival of support. Special support for agricultural production should be provided. Attention must also be paid, in both humanitarian interventions and development programs, to managing land rights and, particularly, relations between affected communities. Boko Haram has, in some places, driven wider wedges between communities that were already rivals for scarce resources.

It is not just about making sure victims are taken care of and protected. The handling of populations that lived under Boko Haram, whether willingly or as captives, needs to be carefully thought through, including with regard to rehabilitation; many are psychologically, socially and culturally vulnerable. Humanitarian support must make special provision for women and children.

- **Reform state and state-sponsored counter-insurgency strategy.** Nigeria and its neighbours have relied on massive, often indiscriminate violence to combat Boko Haram. Security forces and their proxies have been allowed to operate with near total impunity. This may have achieved military gains, but it is likely to prove counterproductive over time. With Boko Haram apparently on the back foot, authorities must establish a calendar to end the state of emergency and return to the rule of law, especially by encouraging security forces to use force more judiciously.
- **Manage captured and ex-fighters wisely.** As regional governments close in further on Boko Haram areas, they should consider how to treat captured and ex-insurgents to prevent further violence and mitigate future recruitment. If they are handled appropriately, it should be possible to obtain crucial information systematically on the insurgency, its recruitment process, including profiles and reasons for joining, and the patterns and intensity of radicalisation. It is essential to avoid casting all Boko Haram recruits as hardline, which could provoke further tensions. Governments should also be prepared to engage, openly or discreetly, with Boko Haram leaders who may be looking for a compromise.

⁶³ However, as a development expert noted, we are still at the stage of a humanitarian emergency, and investments will not resolve important governance challenges. Crisis Group electronic communication, international development expert, 26 April 2016.

How governments treat and distinguish Boko Haram ideologues from those who joined from other motives will be vital. Dealing appropriately with ex-members is the first step to lessen recruitment. This includes developing adequate confinement conditions, de-radicalisation programs and well-designed assistance for community reintegration. Though even more of a challenge in areas devastated by insurgency, a more transparent justice process is critical for restoring rule of law and the state's credibility. While not neglecting accountability for serious crimes and respecting international commitments, the governments should not rule out engaging with leaders willing to negotiate and should provide avenues for reconciliation.

- **Rolling back the use of vigilantes.** The CJTF and other regional vigilante or irregular forces have been important in the fight against Boko Haram, and government support of them as an immediate measure was understandable. It is now time to think carefully about further reliance on them, however, and about their demobilisation, lest longer-term problems result, including increased risk of local, communal violence. Many could become tools for local politicians to misuse.
- **Bringing back the state.** Planning is required for returning more trusted, transparent authorities, including professional security forces, to regions that over time have come to distrust central government. This is critical to curbing the insurgency, particularly in rural areas, where anger against states seen as more predatory than protective has been a push factor for Boko Haram. While diverse factors drove the insurgency, structural insecurity is dominant in the Lake Chad area. Governments must move more urgently to curb impunity, particularly of security forces, and restore social services. The link between underdevelopment and radicalisation is complex, and it rarely makes sense to explicitly label reconstruction or development activities as “de-radicalisation” or “preventing violence extremism”.⁶⁴ That said, improved service provision is essential to rebuilding the state legitimacy that can sap support for movements like Boko Haram. There is little doubt service provision, which goes beyond rebuilding infrastructure, can help states recover legitimacy.

The states around Lake Chad have been challenged by Boko Haram to find ways of cooperating. At some levels this has been successful, but the success is principally military and tactical and has not been without frustrations and suspicions. The positive elements should now be extended to include issues such as prisoner handling, refugee returns, cross-border recruitment and criminality. The bigger challenge may well be to turn this regional cooperation toward transforming the economies – and political economies – in all four Lake Chad countries.

Dakar/Nairobi/Brussels, 4 May 2016

⁶⁴ Crisis Group Report, *Exploiting Disorder*, op. cit.

Appendix A: Map of the Lake Chad Basin

