



# POLICY BRIEF

## Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin Region: Evolution and Impact of Boko Haram

By Cynthia Happi



### Executive Summary

Terrorism and violent extremism remain significant threats to peace and security in Africa. While no country is immune to these threats, countries bordering Lake Chad have been particularly susceptible. The Lake Chad Region, comprising Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, has become the scene for an offensive by Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lidda'awatiw'al Jihad, commonly known as Boko Haram. While ideological, religious and socio-cultural ties shared by countries bordering Lake Chad eased the group's territorial expansion, socio-economic challenges, environmental degradation and poor governance provide further insights into understanding the group's ability to gain ground in the region. The relentless attacks perpetrated for more than a decade by Boko Haram in a region already characterized by multiple dynamics of instability, therefore, raise a sense of urgency. It threatens to keep the region embroiled in conflict and violence if not adequately addressed. Much as national and regional responses, notably the military campaigns by the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) are commendable, their activities have encountered several challenges which have limited its effectiveness. It is becoming evident that the war against Boko Haram cannot be won by relying solely on the MNJTF given that the region's main approach that focuses on military operations is yet to achieve total victory. If the Lake Chad Region is to fully utilize its resources and potentials, overcome its challenges and thrive, countering Boko Haram's strength and exploiting its weaknesses beyond military response becomes a necessity. This calls for the implementation of policies and approaches that address the root causes of the insurgency in order to find sustainable solutions to violent extremism in the Lake Chad Region.

### Key Points

- ▶ Boko Haram has over the years shown its resilience and capacity to adjust to evolving context. Countries of the Lake Chad Region and strategic partners should, therefore, redouble efforts towards mobilizing additional resources and support to the MNJTF in order to strengthen its operational capacities.
- ▶ Crises that predate Boko Haram such as environmental degradation, limited access to basic services, extreme poverty, malnutrition and starvation provide opportunities for Boko Haram to continue its expansion and activities. This is by mobilizing individuals who are discontented with livelihood insecurities in the region.
- ▶ Financial constraints contribute to limiting the effectiveness of the MNJTF, while the competition between national interests and lack of regional coordination are equally major factors of weakness in the fight against Boko Haram.

## Introduction

Boko Haram, also known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awatiwal-Jihad<sup>1</sup> was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State in Northeastern Nigeria by the now-deceased cleric Muhammed Yusuf. Salafist<sup>2</sup> in orientation, Boko Haram is against westernization, which it views as negatively influencing Islamic values. The group's initial goal was the islamization of Nigeria through the creation of a society exemplifying pure Islam. It was radical but largely non-violent until 2009 when they transformed into a violent insurgent group. Following the arrest and extrajudicial execution of its leader by the Nigerian government in July 2009, Boko Haram intensified its violence under Abubakar Shekau who emerged as the new leader of the group. Their attacks increased in frequency and magnitude, with reports of the group's mass abductions and use of women and children as suicide bombers. The kidnapping of 276 school girls in 2014 from the town of Chibok in Borno State, Nigeria, notably received international attention. Boko Haram's violent attacks escalated further in 2015 spreading from Nigerian Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states to the border areas of neighboring countries. This signaled the territorial expansion of the group's activities beyond Nigeria's borders, making Cameroon, Chad and Niger part of Boko Haram's operational ground.

Boko Haram further pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2015<sup>3</sup> and officially split into two groups in 2016 - the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), led by Lawan Abubakar, and Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awatiwal-Jihad (JAS), led by a long-time militant Abubakar Shekau. The Islamist group has been responsible for outrageous acts of violence, thousands of deaths, and the displacement of more than 2 million<sup>4</sup> people across Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. It has evolved from a religious movement into one of the deadliest terrorist organizations in the world.<sup>5</sup> It is, therefore, important to deepen and broaden our understanding of the group's activities toward a problem-solving and policy-relevant analysis. This policy brief provides an overview of Boko Haram's activities in the Lake Chad Region, its ability to expand and gain ground, and the Lake Chad Region's counter Boko Haram approaches. It concludes with a series of policy recommendations to supplement MNJTF's operations and find lasting solutions to the insurgency.

## Consolidating Its Footprint in the Lake Chad Basin Region

Active since 2009 in Nigeria, Boko Haram has expanded into all the countries bordering Lake Chad. The group extended its activities into Cameroon's Northern border with Nigeria in 2013, Niger's Diffa region in 2014 and Chad's Western Lac region from early 2015.<sup>6</sup> The historical, ideological, religious and socio-cultural ties these border regions share with Northern Nigeria are factors that contributed to Boko Haram's ability to gain ground in countries of the Lake Chad Region.<sup>7</sup> These ties eased the group's territorial expansion as they facilitated large-scale smuggling of weapons and supplies across borders, as well as the recruitment of combatants who joined the group out of opportunism or under duress.<sup>8</sup> Boko Haram's alignment with the world's most ruthless terrorist organizations is another factor which provides further insights into understanding the group's ability to gain ground in countries of the Lake Chad Region. The jihadist group declared allegiance to al-Qa'eda in 2010<sup>9</sup> and rapidly increased its military capabilities with the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), vehicle-borne IEDs, and suicide bombers. Boko Haram further pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2015<sup>10</sup> and became the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). Alignment with international terrorist groups was, therefore, beneficial for Boko Haram in terms of exchange of tactics, expertise, and resources. Falling under ISIS is also a boost for the group from a propaganda point of view, as well as in staging itself in the global jihadi landscape.

Factionalism at first seemed to weaken Boko Haram but it ended up being a contributing factor to the group's territorial expansion and ability to gain ground in the Lake Chad Region. In August 2016, Boko Haram split into two factions<sup>11</sup> with one retaining the name ISWAP and the other reverting to the original name Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awatiwal-Jihad (JAS). JAS, which operates in Nigeria (South-central Borno) and along the Cameroonian border, is largely responsible for suicide attacks, often using children and female suicide bombers against civilian soft targets.<sup>12</sup> ISWAP on the other hand, engages in large scale assaults primarily targeting military structures.<sup>13</sup> It has established a stronghold in the Lake Chad and along the Niger border as well as in North-eastern Nigeria.<sup>14</sup> Competition within and between the two factions has led to even more extreme violence in the Lake Chad Region as the two groups demonstrate their strength<sup>15</sup>. Factionalism, therefore, contributed to Boko Haram's ability to gain ground as it complicates efforts made to fully control the security threats posed by both factions which have different operational strategies. Both factions of Boko Haram have equally established their ability to adjust to evolving contexts by changing tactics and adopting different strategies. Their tactics have included forced conversion to Islam, physical

and psychological abuse, forced participation in insurgency operations and the abduction of women and girls primarily for Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV). These factors have inspired fear among local communities and contributed to Boko Haram's notoriety and territorial gain in the Lake Chad Region.

## **When Boko Haram Capitalizes on Larger Human Security Deficits**

Over the last decade, Boko Haram has waged a campaign of mass violence in Africa's Lake Chad Region. The group's activities are those typically associated with terrorism, including, kidnappings, suicide attacks, targeted killings and mass destruction. Boko Haram uses a number of endogenous methods to finance their activities. This includes ransom payments, illegal operation of border exchange bureaus, hijacking of public transport vehicles, theft, enlistment of microfinance institutions, trans-border cattle theft and cattle trade, and supply of products used for terrorist acts.<sup>16</sup> The group has demonstrated its ability to continuously inflict serious human and material devastation, despite military deployments and operations against it. It has caused a large-scale humanitarian crisis with more than 2 million people displaced<sup>17</sup> and more than 30,000 people killed.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the ongoing Boko Haram's insurgency, crises that predate the Islamist group have left civilians in the Lake Chad Region in a dreadful situation. Extreme poverty, malnutrition and starvation, as well as limited access to basic social services like education and medical care have become realities in the region with around 3.5 million people<sup>19</sup> who remain food insecure. The region also suffers from environmental degradation, given the drying up of its waters. This has had an impact on livelihoods and is apparent in land clearing and deforestation for firewood and agricultural use.<sup>20</sup> Given that most of the population in the region lacks the education or skills for occupations other than farming, livestock rearing and fishing, Boko Haram exploited these worsening living conditions to mobilize individuals who are discontented with livelihood insecurities. Ecological threats and socio-economic challenges that the region faces have, therefore, provided opportunities for the group to continue its activities and expansion.

The areas of the Lake Chad Basin countries where Boko Haram's factions have been operating are outskirts regions which have not benefited from the same level of development as other parts of their respective countries. Unemployment and lack of public services have contributed to poverty and underdevelopment in these regions. For instance, 76.8%<sup>21</sup> of the population in Northeast Nigeria lived below poverty line in 2017 with the poverty index in Borno state, the heart of Boko Haram, measured to be 70.1%.<sup>22</sup> The Far North region of Cameroon further exemplifies the vulnerabilities created by underdevelopment. It is the poorest region of the country with 77%<sup>23</sup> of its population living below poverty line in 2019. Real and perceived disparities resulting from limited state presence and poor governance in the regions bordering the Lake Chad have deepened the population's perception of exclusion and marginalization. This has contributed to low rates of development and popular discontent, and has been a key driver of the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency.

## **Trapped in the Military Approach?**

The Lake Chad Basin countries have applied a range of policies at the national and regional levels in response to the Boko Haram menace. This includes using national military responses, imposing states of emergency, initiating reconstruction projects and adopting programmes to re-integrate former fighters. Niger for instance, introduced a programme in December 2016 granting amnesty to Boko Haram defectors as well as rehabilitation and socio-economic reintegration.<sup>24</sup> Cameroon also established the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Committee in November 2018 for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-fighters of Boko Haram.

At the regional level, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), with the support of the African Union (AU) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), adopted a Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Region in August 2018.<sup>25</sup> The implementation of these programmes and strategies have, however, been challenging. Members of the local population, for instance, feel reintegration programmes are developed and implemented with minimal community engagement or consideration of their perspectives, fears or concerns.<sup>26</sup> This has made communities that often have little information about existing reintegration processes unwilling to accept back Boko Haram defectors. Some of the communities that have been victimized by Boko Haram even inhibit the prospects for reintegration of people who they perceive as being responsible for the atrocities inflicted on them. Failure to adequately sensitize communities about these programmes has, therefore, led to the return of former fighters to Boko Haram. Moreover, the upsurge of Boko Haram's attacks and territorial gain is in part due to the return of these defectors who were not accepted back into their communities.<sup>27</sup>

Much of the regional responses to the threat posed by Boko Haram, however, focus on military operations. As the group's territorial control expanded from north-east Nigeria to Cameroon, Chad and Niger's borders, concerns over regional security increased pushing countries towards collaborative military engagement. This led to the reactivation of the MNJTF<sup>28</sup> by the LCBC on 30 April 2012 with an expanded mandate to encompass counter-terrorism operations. It was, nevertheless, given a clearer strategy against Boko Haram only on October 7, 2014 at the Extraordinary Summit of LCBC member states and Benin. Its mandate included creating safe and secure environment in the areas affected by Boko Haram; facilitating stabilization programmes in the member states; and facilitating humanitarian operation and providing assistance to the affected population.<sup>29</sup> To achieve these goals, the Task Force undertakes military operations, conducts patrols, prevents the transfer of weapons and logistics to the group, searches and frees abductees, and undertakes psychological operations<sup>30</sup> to encourage defection from Boko Haram. Formally authorized for deployment by the African Union Peace and Security Council (AU PSC) on 29 January 2015, the Task Force includes Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad and Benin among troop-contributing countries.<sup>31</sup> International partners such as the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), France, the United States and the United Kingdom have all provided financial support, training and military advisors, as well as intelligence and surveillance capabilities to the Task Force.

Although the MNJTF has recorded successes on ground in dislodging Boko Haram and considerably reducing their military capabilities,<sup>32</sup> its activities have encountered several challenges. The MNJTF has faced financial challenges since its setup which has hindered its effectiveness. Contributions from countries of the Lake Chad Region and international partners have been insufficient to meet the initial estimated budget of US\$700 million.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, funding of the MNJTF's operations has been slowed down with member states' not always respecting their pledges. This financial constraint is likely to worsen and further weaken the region's military approach due to internal crisis and economic hardship countries bordering the Lake Chad are facing. Another challenge is the lack of coordination and tense relations between the four principal contributing countries to the MNJTF.<sup>34</sup> Evidences are some of the uncoordinated military actions and claims of victory against Boko Haram by individual states during conjoint operations.<sup>35</sup> This probably explains why President Idriss Deby of Chad told national TV on April 9, 2020 that Chadian troops will no longer participate in military operations outside the country's borders against armed groups active in the Lake Chad region and the Sahel.<sup>36</sup> President Deby further claimed that Chad alone is shouldering all the burden of the war against Boko Haram.<sup>37</sup> These remarks, made just after Chadian armed forces ended a major offensive against Boko Haram,<sup>38</sup> echoed frustration at perceived failures by countries of the Lake Chad Region to collaborate effectively in the regional fight against Boko Haram.

The above-mentioned challenges have limited the effectiveness of the MNJTF, causing analysts to believe that other approaches that go beyond military responses such as negotiation should be considered to supplement MNJTF's operations. Negotiation does not, however, come without obstacles. Governments must be willing to make certain concessions when considering dialogue. These concessions might be very challenging to achieve since Boko Haram's Sharia Law agenda is not viable in countries of the Lake Chad Region which have diverse religious and secular communities. Moreover, while Boko Haram may not be inclined to negotiate unless weakened, the release of some Chibok girls and Dachpi girls beckoned possibilities of negotiation with the group. The stalemate between Boko Haram and military forces, therefore, makes negotiation worth re-considering.

## Conclusion

Porous borders, inadequately trained or ill-equipped security forces, lack of economic opportunities, governance deficit and weak institutional structures have created conditions for terrorism and violent extremism to evolve in parts of Africa. The Lake Chad Region has notably become the arena for a war between the bordering states and Boko Haram, with the local population caught in the middle. In view of this conflict that has been going on for over a decade, Boko Haram clearly remains a threat to peace and stability in the Lake Chad Region. The group continues to defy national armies and the MNJTF with Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin all having their military resources stretched to the limit in battles that appear to have no end in sight. The region's prevalent counter-terrorism approach that focuses on the use of force has, therefore, not been able to create a secure and safe environment in communities affected by the Islamist group's activities. With no signs of slowing down despite national and regional responses to the insurgency, the insecurity and humanitarian situation in this unstable region is only likely to worsen. Lasting solutions are, therefore, needed to address the root causes of the Boko Haram insurgency. This entails the implementation of policies that adequately balance security considerations with local needs.

## Policy Recommendations

- ▶ Countries of the Lake Chad Region should focus on improving governance and social services and tackling development challenges as part of the fight against the root causes of the Boko Haram insurgency. A development approach, which complies with international and regional human rights laws, would improve the livelihoods of the population in the areas affected by Boko Haram's activities. It would also contribute in countering Boko Haram's resilience and ability to recruit, which is one of the factors that explains its expansion.
- ▶ Although many feel governments should not negotiate with terrorists, negotiation should be explored as part of an inclusive set of policy options. This approach will require countries of the Lake Chad Region to consult local communities, Islamic clerics, negotiation experts, traditional and women groups as well as Civil Society Organizations (CSO). Insights and views from this cross-section of the population will help in shaping the negotiation and in providing clear objectives of the talks. Negotiation may not be an immediate or total solution to ending the insurgency, but it could lead to cease fires, isolation of the more radical members of Boko Haram and reintegration of the moderates into the mainstream.
- ▶ Member states of the Lake Chad Region and strategic partners should redouble efforts towards mobilizing additional resources and support to the MNJTF in order to strengthen its operational capacities. This entails adequate intelligence-sharing among member states and concrete effect to pledges of material, financial and technical assistance by member states and MNJTF partners.
- ▶ Collaborative military engagement should continue between countries of the Lake Chad Region given that no state can single handedly defeat Boko Haram. The lack of collaborative engagement between member states in regional fighting force would further limit the effectiveness of the MNJTF and impede the international and regional solidarity needed to defeat Boko Haram.

## Endnotes

- 1 Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad in Arabic which means "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad."
- 2 Salafist thought and writings treats anything western as completely unIslamic.
- 3 ISS, Factional dynamics within Boko Haram, July 2018. Available at : <https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/factional-dynamics-within-boko-haram>
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- 6 ISS, Factional dynamics within Boko Haram, July 2018. Available at : <https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/factional-dynamics-within-boko-haram>
- 7 UNDP, Journey to extremism in Africa, 2017. Available at: [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/denmark/docs/Journey%20to%20Extremism\\_report.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/denmark/docs/Journey%20to%20Extremism_report.pdf)
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Pérouse de Montclos, Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria, 2014. Available at: <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/23853/ASC-075287668-3441-01.pdf>
- 10 ISS, Factional dynamics within Boko Haram, July 2018. Available at : <https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/factional-dynamics-within-boko-haram>
- 11 In addition to the two well-known factions of Boko Haram, there are at least two other smaller ones.
- 12 ISS, Factional dynamics within Boko Haram, July 2018. Available at : <https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/factional-dynamics-within-boko-haram>
- 13 Ibid
- 14 ICC, Facing the challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province, May 2019. Available at : <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>
- 15 The two factions of Boko Haram often clash with thousands of deaths in total. They however recently decided a ceasefire among them in order to face together Chadian offensive in the Lake and the sustained air bombing campaign of the Nigerian army.
- 16 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, The Boko Haram conflict in Cameroon. Why is peace so elusive? 2017. Available at : <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/14200.pdf>
- 17 UNHCR, Nigeria emergency, March 2020. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/nigeria-emergency.html>
- 18 Hudson Institute, The origins of Boko Haram and why it matters, Jan 2020. Available at : <https://www.hudson.org/research/15608-the-origins-of-boko-haram-and-why-it-matters>
- 19 UNHCR, Nigeria emergency, March 2020. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/nigeria-emergency.html>
- 20 ISS, Responses to Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Region: Policies, Cooperation and Livelihoods, July 2018. Available at : <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2018-07-06-research-report-1.pdf>
- 21 Health sector Nigeria, Northeast Nigeria response health bulletin, Oct 2017. Available at : <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/northeast-nigeria-response-health-sector-bulletin-32-30-september-2017>
- 22 Ibid
- 23 The World Bank, Lifting Cameroon's Most Vulnerable Out of Poverty: Building Resilience and Fostering Local Governance to Address the Root Causes of Fragility and Conflict in Northern Regions of Cameroon, Nov 2019. Available at : <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2019/11/08/lifting-camerouns-most-vulnerable-out-of-poverty-building-resilience-and-fostering-local-governance-to-address-the-root-causes-of-fragility-and-conflict-in-northern-regions-of-cameroon>
- 24 ISS, What doesn't break Boko Haram in Niger makes it stronger, May 2019. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/what-doesnt-break-boko-haram-in-niger-makes-it-stronger>
- 25 The strategy is an all-encompassing approach with nine pillars, including education and skills acquisition, empowerment and inclusion of women, socio-economic recovery and environmental sustainability. It is expected to drive, rationalize and complement various initiatives and interventions aimed at stabilizing the areas affected by Boko Haram's activities. See: African Union, Ministerial Conference on the adoption of the Regional Stabilization Strategy for the Lake Chad basin region, 31 August, 2018.
- 26 The Kukah Centre, Through our eyes: People's perspective on building peace in northeast Nigeria. Available at : <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Through%20our%20eyes%20-%20peoples%20perspectives%20on%20building%20peace%20in%20northeast%20Nigeria.pdf>
- 27 Bulama Bukarti, The challenge of Boko Haram defectors in Chad, May 6, 2020. Available at : <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/the-challenge-of-boko-haram-defectors-in-chad/>
- 28 The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) was created by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) in 1998 to address cross-border security issues in the Lake Chad region.
- 29 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, The Boko Haram conflict in Cameroon. Why is peace so Elusive? 2017. Available at : <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/14200.pdf>
- 30 Ibid
- 31 The MNJTF increased its troops from 7,600 in 2015) to 10,250 in July 2019. See Nextier SPD, MNJTF so far, so so, Sept 2019. Available at : <https://nextierspd.com/download/mnjtf-so-far-so-so/>
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- 33 IJLASS, The Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram: Rethinking Military Interventions, Vol. 6 No. 7 Aug 2018. Available at : <https://ijlass.org/data/frontImages/articles/Vol.6No.7/3.15-24.pdf>

- 34 The MNJTF is a coordinated force and not an integrated force. National militaries therefore still control the military actions of their respective troops.
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- 36 Aljazeera, Chad to stop participating in regional fight against armed groups, April 2020. Available at : <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/chad-stop-participating-regional-fight-armed-groups-200410182054049.html>
- 37 Ibid
- 38 The Chadian army claimed on April 9, 2020 that 1,000 fighters had been killed in a major offensive against Boko Haram. The offensive was launched after at least 92 Chadian troops were killed in a Boko Haram raid on a base at Bohoma on March 23, 2020 - the biggest one-day military loss in the country's history.

## About the Author

Cynthia Happi is a Researcher at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), Addis Ababa University. Prior to joining IPSS, Cynthia was seconded by the African Union to work as a Program Support Officer at CEMASTE, Nairobi-Kenya. She also worked for the United Nations Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa (UNCHRD-CA). Her research focuses on national and regional security in the Lake Chad Region of Africa. She holds a Master's Degree in International Relations (International disputes and conflict resolution) from the International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC).



Addis Ababa University  
P. O. Box: 1176  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

**T** +251 (1) 11 245 660  
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