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# ‘Violent Extremism’ in the Lake Chad Basin

Understanding the Drivers of the Boko  
Haram Insurgency

Gregory Connor



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## Summary

By providing an analysis of the historic dynamics of the Lake Chad Basin region and the common challenges that Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria face, this brief deconstructs common narratives around 'violent extremism' held by the policy community; it provides a more nuanced explanation to the drivers of the Boko Haram insurgency; and it offers a set of recommendations to governments and policymakers on ways to manage the ongoing crisis.

# Introduction

'Violent extremism' has become the central challenge of governments in the Lake Chad Basin. Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria have launched joint military action to fight it. There is good reason: the impact of just one group, Boko Haram, alone on these countries is of an unprecedented scale. Nearly fifteen million civilians have been affected by the ongoing insurgency and resulting military operations, which have left 27,000 dead and more than 2.4 million displaced since 2009<sup>1</sup>. As violence continues, governments are quick to claim that a victory to the war against 'violent extremist organizations' is within sight. Yet the conflict, with its nuanced drivers that run deeper than common narratives around violent extremism, in many ways has only begun.

The deep scars of mass violence and the relentless reminder—through direct violence that includes frequent suicide attacks—of the ongoing insurgency easily portray a region ravaged by 'Jihad'. Yet closer inspection reveals that while the tactics now used by these groups are predominately asymmetrical and in many ways mirror the actions of global terrorist groups, the drivers of the region's 'violent extremism' are rooted in opportunistic and criminal enterprise that draws from the region's distinct political economy. Moreover, the region's conflict actors are neither monolithic, nor coordinated. Such groups actively exploit local grievances at the individual level centered around the region's endemic poverty and marginalization as well as the heavy-handed military approach to fighting the insurgency. Portraying the threat as predominately ideological and branding the insurgency as violent extremist activity or as jihadist terrorism, risk moving the focus away from the nexus of crime, socio-economic deprivation, poor governance and environmental degradation, which, when instrumentalized, drives violence, conflict and fragility in the Lake Chad Basin.

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<sup>1</sup> "North-East Nigeria: Recovery and Peace Building Assessment," the Federal Republic of Nigeria, World Bank, United Nations, and European Union, 2015.

## Not in My Backyard: The Deep and Expansive Roots of Insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin

Insurgents have operated in the Lake Chad Basin and across the wider Sahel region since the early 19th century, when 'warrior-scholars' led by Usman Dan Fodio used guerilla warfare to assert Fulani supremacy over the Hausa of present-day Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> In the 21st century, a handful of groups including *Tanzīm al-Qā'idah fī Bilād al-Maghrib al-Islāmī*, otherwise known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), *Jama'atu Ahlissunnah lidda'awati wal Jihad*, or Boko Haram, *Jama'atu Ansarul Musilimina Fi Biladis Sudan*, or Ansaru, Ansar Dine, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa have emerged and ratcheted up their operations across the Sahel. Some of these groups were able to gain control of large swathes of territory, most notably in northern Mali in 2012 and in north-east Nigeria in 2014.<sup>3</sup> Regional governments and their Western allies began to view the region as "the new front in the war on terrorism".<sup>4</sup> Despite their counter-terrorism efforts over the last decade, which have sought to regain territory by military force, the insurgencies continue.



<sup>2</sup> Comolli, Virginia. *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency*. Hurst and Company, London (2015).

<sup>3</sup> "Forced out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa's Jihadists Go Rural," International Crisis Group, *Commentary/Jihad in Modern Conflict*, 11 January 2017.

<sup>4</sup> "Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?" International Crisis Group, *Report 92/Africa*, 31 March 2005.

In the Lake Chad Basin, insurgencies are not new. Maitatsine, possibly the most well cited religiously-motivated insurgency in Nigeria prior to the formation of Boko Haram, had a large following already by 1972 and had amassed over 10,000 followers shortly thereafter.<sup>5</sup> The group's founder and leader, Marwa Maitatsine, as his name signals, hailed from Maroua, Cameroon. Decades later, part of Maitatsine's doctrine—which asserted that *karatun boko* (Western education) was *haram* (forbidden)<sup>6</sup>—has been echoed by Boko Haram as a core tenet. Although painted as a Nigerian problem, Boko Haram, like Maitatsine, has also drawn upon the deep and expansive political, social, cultural and economic ties that bridge the Lake Chad Basin.

### ***Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin***

Boko Haram formed from a radical religious movement in Borno State, Nigeria, in the 1990s under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf advocated for the establishment of a pure Islamic state based on Sharia law, rejecting 'sinful' or 'forbidden' (haram) social mores, including western-style education. Following deadly clashes between Yusuf's followers and the police, Yusuf was extra-judicially executed by the police in July 2009. Violence dramatically escalated, and nearly 1,000 of Yusuf's followers were killed in confrontations with the security forces. This marked the beginning of a spiraling violent campaign by the group.

The Yusufiyyah movement—the precursor to Boko Haram which originated and grew in northeast Nigeria from 1998-1999—rapidly expanded into other parts of the Lake Chad region. While this has partly to do with the region's kinship networks and porous borders, the narrative of oppression in the most marginalized areas of the four countries of the Lake Chad region also resonated with followers. When the conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government broke out in 2009, many of the former students of Muhammad Yusuf, the movement's founder, fled from Nigeria to Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, where they benefited from the patronage of relatives and local followers. For years, these insurgents used northern Cameroon and southern Niger as a safe haven as well as a logistics hub and rear-base

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<sup>5</sup> Adimbola O. Adesoji, "Between Maitatsine and Boko Haram: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Response of the Nigerian State," *Africa Today*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Comolli, Virginia. *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency*. Hurst and Company, London (2015).



area, where they were able to obtain supplies, stockpile weapons and establish mechanisms to support the insurgency.<sup>7</sup>

#### 'Violent Extremism'

Violent extremism is generally considered to be a phenomenon that occurs when groups conflate extreme ideologies with violence. Often, violent extremist groups rationalize acts of violence as serving a higher purpose. Such groups are also considered to be prone to use violence as a tool to help indoctrinate individuals and communities towards their beliefs. Broadly speaking, violent extremist groups are believed to favor charismatic leaders and prey on divisive aspects within society, particularly feelings related to marginalization and discrimination by the state.

In the Lake Chad Basin, where crime and opportunity play a socio-political role, these interpretations are not clear-cut. Indeed, there is some disagreement over whether groups such as Boko Haram bear the hallmarks of a violent extremist organization. There is also disagreement over the extent to which ideology (as opposed to 'Jihadist branding') might play out in the organization and, by extension, whether the fight against the group can be won through a counter-terrorism approach when the group's actors embrace a number of criminal and exploitative features and behave like other armed insurgent groups.

Similar to Ansaru, Boko Haram and its affiliates also began to recruit fighters—including women—from Cameroon and southern Niger.<sup>8</sup> The group has so far gathered its strongest support among disaffected youth. In Cameroon, since at least as early as 2011, around 4,000 Cameroonian nationals are suspected to have joined Boko Haram in various roles including as fighters, spiritual guides and logisticians. The number of sympathizers is even higher.<sup>9</sup> In Niger, Yusufiyah surrogates who returned to the Diffa region from Maiduguri in neighboring Nigeria in the early 2000s, have recruited Nigerien youth

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<sup>7</sup> Nusrullah, F. "Tide of Lake Chad insurgency shifting from Nigeria," *International Peace Institute Global Observatory*, 19 November, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Zenn, J., & Pearson, E. "Women, Gender and the Evolving Tactics of Boko Haram," *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 5(1), 2014

<sup>9</sup> "Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram," International Crisis Group, Report 241/Africa, 16 November 2015.

into Boko Haram.<sup>10</sup> While the massacre at Baga, on the Chad-Nigeria border with Chad in January 2015 drew international attention to Boko Haram's trans-boundary capabilities, limited focus is paid to the devastation that has been wrought outside Nigeria. Cameroon alone has experienced close to 500 Boko Haram attacks and 50 fatal suicide bombings.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Le Niger face à Boko Haram : au-delà de la contre-insurrection," International Crisis Group, Report 245/Africa, 27 February 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Heungoup, Hans de Marie. "Boko Haram's shifting tactics in Cameroon: what does the data tell us?" Africa Research Institute, 17 February 2017.

## From Surveillance to Deterrence: Pushing the Problem across the Border

Aside from Abuja, governments in the region initially tried to turn a blind eye to the insurgency faced in their countries, preferring instead to use surveillance to monitor what they believed to be a Nigerian jihadist problem. The situation changed in 2014, when Cameroon started to arrest and sentence Boko Haram insurgents. The Cameroonian military bolstered its forces in its northernmost region, including deploying its Rapid Reaction Brigade (BIR). In 2015, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) was formed between Cameroon, Nigeria, Chad, and Niger (with Benin also joining) to pool security resources in the fight against Boko Haram.

While Governments may have been initially cagey about the extent to which Boko Haram operates outside of Nigeria, their militaries have recently spent a great amount of time cleaning up their backyards of the insurgency. Yet the effect has been limited as insurgents—pushed across border—re-group. Despite several previous years of such pushback, in 2015, fatal Boko Haram attacks in Cameroon, Chad and Niger increased by 157%.<sup>12</sup> Despite the magnitude of the insurgency and its formidable and sophisticated security features, local actors have continued to espouse an Islamist religious narrative to describe the violence.<sup>13</sup> A risk remains that regional forces could buckle under the pressure of an increased scale of insurgency—similar to the dramatic attack in Bosso, Niger against the military in June 2016. Recent strings of multiple, fatal suicide bombings across the region demonstrate Boko Haram's resilience and the ongoing need for increased cooperation among the Lake Chad countries to address these concerns.

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<sup>12</sup> *Global Terrorism Index 2016: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism*. The Institute for Economics and Peace. 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Local interviews with security analysts and political experts in Abuja, Nigeria and N'Djamena, Chad by the author, 2017.

## Sticks in a Bundle? Rivalry and Discord among Violent Groups in the Lake Chad Basin

In the same way that local authorities espouse an Islamist religious narrative to describe the violence in the Lake Chad region, they tend to consider the diverse group of violent extremist actors as a monolith. In the Lake Chad Basin, violent extremism exists in different forms, including in Revivalist Christian, Shi'a, Sunni and Salafist strains. However, violent non-state actor groups classified as 'terrorist organizations'—continue to be characterized by local actors almost exclusively as a phenomenon borne by radical Islam and carried out by Boko Haram. Moreover, while Boko Haram is on the one hand viewed as a unitary, cohesive entity, it is, on the other hand, often viewed as having overlapping ties to global terror networks, including al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL).

In reality, violent extremist groups in the region share a tendency to splinter and compete, while their allegiances outside of the region run thin. A lack of unity and inherent enmity sow a disordered situation across the region. One of the reasons for the lack of unity is that groups in the region tend not to be ideologically driven from within, but rather, 'pick and choose' ideological elements or strategies to adopt from groups with which they are not necessarily affiliated.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, among violent extremist groups in Nigeria, tensions have spilled over due to in-fighting, disagreements over ideological positions, different tactical goals or positions regarding the modus operandi of the group, and disagreements with leadership.<sup>15</sup>

When such internal factors emerged in 2012 within Boko Haram, the result was the gradual splintering of the group between a Salafist-conservative faction led by Abu Usmatul al-Ansari, which soon afterwards began to operate as the al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansaru, and a more violent faction of Boko Haram led by Abubakar Shekau. While

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<sup>14</sup> Adimbola O. Adesoji, "Between Maitatsine and Boko Haram: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Response of the Nigerian State," *Africa Today*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (2011).

<sup>15</sup> Comolli, Virginia. *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency*. Hurst and Company, London (2015).

both groups continued to carry out violent attacks on local communities, the violence unleashed by Shekau's Boko Haram was relentless and indiscriminate against Christians and Muslims alike, including Sufis and Shiites.

In March 2015, Shekau declared formal allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which ISIS accepted. Shekau adopted a new name for Boko Haram, the Islamic State's Wilayat (province) in West Africa. Yet a schism emerged between rival leaders in 2016, allegedly over the indiscriminate use of terror by Shekau as an ISIS-affiliate. The marriage did not last: the Islamic State's Wilayat (province) in West Africa broke away with a new wali, or governor, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who claimed to be its legitimate leader. Meanwhile, the outgoing leader, Shekau, re-branded himself as the Imam of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal Jihad (JAS). Shortly after taking control, al-Barnawi announced in an ISIL publication that Boko Haram would henceforth reject Shekau's indiscriminate violence and direct its violence more narrowly on Christian proselytizers and churches. Similar to Ansaru's claims after it splintered from Boko Haram, al-Barnawi pledged that the group would no longer carry out attacks on mosques, markets, and other venues where Muslims congregate.<sup>16</sup>

Since declaring allegiance to ISIS, there is scant evidence that the relationship has made Boko Haram more powerful strategically, tactically, or financially. Linking Boko Haram too directly to the global jihadist movement risks misdiagnosing the threat it poses.<sup>17</sup> It can also underestimate how the splintering of Boko Haram can have unpredictably deleterious consequences for the region. Though infighting could further weaken the Boko Haram militancy (i.e. the ISIS-affiliated faction and JAS), it is more likely that competition between the two factions as they seek to establish supremacy in the region will play out perniciously as rival tactics are deployed against civilians and militaries. Reports that al-Barnawi's faction is hiding out in Chad, where Boko Haram defections peaked in 2017, while Shekau and his faction remain holed up in Nigeria's Sambisa forest could see the two factions develop rival cross-border attacks. Indeed, the area located in between these two areas—Cameroon's Logone et Chari province in the Far North region—has seen a doubling of internal displacement and

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<sup>16</sup> Cooke, Jennifer G. and Sanderson, Thomas M. *Militancy and the Arc of Instability: Violent Extremism in the Sahel*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. September 2016.

<sup>17</sup> "Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State", International Crisis Group, *Special Report*, March 14, 2016.

food insecurity over the past year alongside testimonies of unyielding violence.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Local interviews with displaced persons and others affected by violence in Kousseri, Logone et Chari Department, Cameroon by the author, 2017.

## Blinded by Faith? Fighting the Wrong Causes in the Lake Chad Basin's Counter-insurgency

There are many factors driving conflict, violence and fragility in the Lake Chad Basin. Concerning 'violent extremism,' notably the violence borne by the Boko Haram insurgency, it is often asserted that violent religious ideology is the principal driver of the conflict. Religious ideology plays only a facilitative role in certain cases, while in individual cases, it may be a motivating factor for recruitment. Yet many other factors drive recruitment, most notably opportunism. By presenting the insurgency as a manifestation of Jihad, the region's governments are downplaying the region's fragility, including the roots of the current crisis.

Despite an abundance of natural resources much of the Lake Chad Basin region has stagnated economically and socially for years. All four countries of the region suffer from low human development, with Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad ranking at 152, 153 and 183, respectively, out of 188 countries and Niger ranking as the least developed country in the world. The impact of the Boko Haram crisis has further exacerbated these underlying conditions, as have the effects of climate change and environmental degradation on the Lake itself, which continues to shrink.

All four countries are experiencing rapid population growth with some more than doubling their populations over two decades. In Cameroon, the country's population is predominantly young, with 57% under the age of 25 and a median age of 18. The country's youngest population—with a median age of 14—in the Far North is also the country's largest. These young generations in the Lake Chad area are faced with the highest rates of unemployment and the lowest levels of formal education and vocational training. Facing limited opportunity, youth are easily susceptible to recruitment into criminal activity or armed violence or may join violent or criminal groups to seek protection against heavy-handed security forces. A study conducted in Nigeria on why young people join Boko Haram suggests that the first reason is that converts "want to make money", followed by the ideas that "they want to be respected" and "they are unemployed and see Boko Haram as a

job.” One of the key findings of the study is that religion plays little or no role on people’s decision to join Boko Haram.<sup>19</sup>

*... the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin should be viewed as a symptom rather than a cause of the region’s fragile political, governance and security systems.*

In the area around Lake Chad, state legitimacy is weak. Where institutions exist, they typically suffer from a deficit of accountability and transparency. Corruption, political patronage, distrust of the state and security forces, including the police, and the centralization of power also play out. With limited state presence, non-state actors, including vigilante and criminal groups, have stepped in to fill the void. For all of these reasons, the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin should be viewed as a symptom, rather than a cause, of the region’s fragile political, governance and security systems. Violent extremist organizations in the region began as ethnically homogenous movements with purely domestic concerns, namely the overthrow of their respective governments.<sup>20</sup> Despite a dominant counter-terrorism narrative that asserts that the principal driver of violent extremism in the region is jihad, these domestic concerns and the factors of local political economy—including ‘bigmanism’ and revenge—mirror other violent insurgency movements on the continent.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ewi, Martin and Salifu, Uyo. “Money Talks: A Key Reason Youths Join Boko Haram.” *ISS Policy Brief 98*. February 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Buchanan-Clarke, Stephen and Lekalake, Rorisang. “Violent Extremism in Africa: Public Opinion from the Sahel, Lake Chad and the Horn,” *Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 32*. June 2016.

<sup>21</sup> For similar examples of ‘bigmanism’ and revenge being conflated with ‘violent extremism’ see Boas Martin, “Crime, Coping and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery”, *African Security*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 299-319, 2015, and Raineri, Luca and Strazzari, Francesco, “State, Secession and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali”, *African Security*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 249-271, 2015.



## Conclusions

1. First, 'violent extremism' in the region is similar to other armed insurgencies and largely locally grown. 'Violent extremism' is not—as several of the region's governments aim to portray—a problem merely originating from neighbors.
2. Second, the brief unpacks the common view that violent extremist groups in the region are cohesively united—both vertically and horizontally—in a war against the West.
3. And third, the brief questions the view that 'violent extremism' in the region is principally driven by radical Islam. It asserts, rather, that the local political economy against a low state presence is the principal driver of the current conflict.

## Key Recommendations

- The development and implementation of a holistic and coherent strategy that responds to the manifestations and the drivers of the insurgency in and around the Lake Chad Basin by addressing crime, justice, good governance and local and regional economic development
- Sustained political will and national commitment to deal with the crisis domestically at country-level
- Bolstered civil-military cooperation that effectively counters ever-shifting tactics as well as recruitment into violent activities
- Enhanced military cooperation across borders to understand and combat the various factions of Boko Haram and related criminological aspects.





## Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

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**Gregory Connor** has served in a variety of roles in international organizations. Until June 2017, he served as the United Nations Senior Regional Peace and Development Adviser covering the Lake Chad sub-region, where he worked closely with national governments and other partners to address conflict, violence and fragility in the Lake Chad Basin. Previously he served as the United Nations Peace and Development Adviser in Timor-Leste, where, together with the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Adviser, he helped ensure a peaceful transition of political power. Before that, he supported the National

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