

BOKO HARAM

REGIONAL ISSUES AROUND THE UPRISING

Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos*

*Associate Fellow, Africa
Programme, Chatham
House, London

While the African Union plans to mobilise more than 8,000 men from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Benin to fight Boko Haram, the following analysis focuses on the regional issues surrounding the crisis. The aim is not to concentrate on the origins or the social dimension of the sect; these have already been dealt with in field studies and secondary sources¹. In a first part, the analysis shows that Boko Haram has been present in Niger, Chad and Cameroon ever since its birth in Maiduguri, in the Borno region, around 2002. Regarding territory, it also shows that we are not looking at an expansion of its area of control, but of its field of military actions since the armies of countries neighbouring Nigeria got involved in operations to erase the sect.

In fact, the growing involvement of Niger, Chad and Cameroon in the fight against Jihadist terrorism has broken the mutual non-aggression pact that was in place. In an audio report dated the 6th of June 2014, Boko Haram threatened President Idriss Déby with reprisals if he was to join forces with Nigeria in their attacks on the sect. In addition to this, in an interview filmed and broadcast on the 28th of January 2015, a spokesman for the rebels stated that the group would stop attacking Niger and Chad if they stopped their offensive against the group. It appears that the international reaction to the threat of terrorism from Boko Haram could be a contributing factor in the future international expansion of a sect whose ire, until now, had been contained to Nigeria: they had not established links with a wider diaspora or coordinated efforts with other jihadist groups in the Sahel.

Secondly, the study shows that it is neither realistic nor feasible to reinforce military cooperation between Nigeria and the French speaking countries of that region. With this in mind we need to rethink the regional management of the “war against terrorism” in the most populated country in Africa. To jurists of the International Committee of the Red Cross and Amnesty International, the fighting between Boko Haram and the Nigerian army is a non-international conflict. However, the intervention of Chadian forces

1. Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine (dir.) [2014], *Boko Haram : Islamism, Politics, Security, and the State in Nigeria*, Ibadan, IFRA-Nigeria, Leiden, African Studies Centre, Waposo Series no2, 275 p. ; « Boko Haram and islamist terrorism in Nigeria : religious insurrection, political contestation or social protest? », Paris, Centre of studies and international researches, Research question n° 40, 2012, 33 p.2

in Cameroon and Niger, along with encroachments into Nigerian territory, could give the crisis a brand new dimension.

Niger in the eye of the storm

Boko Haram has long been present in countries neighbouring North-Eastern Nigeria. From a structural point of view, the weakness of states in this region, the porosity of their borders, the significance of their history and their ethnic ties with the Adamawa people in Cameroon or the Kanem-Borno in Niger and Chad obviously played a role. However, since 2009, under pressure from the Nigerian army, Boko Haram's leaders have resorted to a strategy of scattering (*taqiyya*) like the Sultan of Sokoto in 1903, who called his followers to disband to avoid being defeated by the British.

Because of the cultural, religious and geographic proximity with Borno, the blind spot that is the region of Diffa, in the Southeast of the Republic of Niger, is naturally at the forefront of the crisis. Traditionally, its Koranic students would go to Nigeria to study Islam. With British colonisation, the city of Maiduguri also became the starting point for pilgrimages to Mecca, using a modern airport built by the Allies during the Second World War. More than 1300km away from Niamey, the region of Diffa developed economically and religiously under the influence of its powerful English-speaking neighbour. Today, every Islamic movement that can be found in Nigeria can also be found there: from dominating Sufi brotherhoods such as Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya to the Salafi movement Izala and the Yan Shia, ideologically close to the Muslim Brothers.

According to legend², the founder of Boko Haram, Mohammed Yusuf, lived in the village of Kelakam in Niger, where his mother was allegedly born. According to statements collected in Diffa, he later returned to kill the marabout who had taught him a syncretic Islam. This village has a name that means "chopped head", referring to the rebel spirit of its inhabitants, who used to be very successful in caravan trade and now excel at cross-border smuggling. It is in fact the reason why the first activists of the Mohammed Yusuf movement established their collective farm nearby, in the Nigerian state of Yobe. In 2002, they settled in Kanama (Yunusari Local Government), after they were forced to leave their camp in Zagi-Biriri, a desert zone in the local government area of Tarmuwa, 70km north from Damaturu, the administrative capital of Yobe. At the time, the so-called "Talibans" were handing out leaflets announcing the creation of an Islamic State³. Radical preachers of Boko Haram, whose name means "Western inspired Education is sacrilege", also attacked the local marabouts as deviant because they used traditional medicines,

2. The legend reports that Tuareg herdsmen beheaded the natives who had refused to give them the salt cubes they were asking for their cattle.

3. Abdulkareem, Mohammed Babangida [2010], *The paradox of Boko Haram*, Kaduna, Moving Image Ltd., p.30.

magical powers and perfumes to attract spirits. In Diffa, they tried to kick out the Izalas and were finally expelled from the central mosque in 2007.

Cameroon, shelter then battlefield

Cameroon was not spared either from the influence of Muhammed Yusuf's followers, especially in the Mandara Mountains. Just like in Niger, the porosity of borders and cultural proximity explain the ease with which the sect spread beyond Borno State in Nigeria. On the tarmac road between Maiduguri and Ndjamen, Boko Haram's fiefdom in Dikwa, for instance, was Cameroonian before the departure of the German colonial master in 1914. Historically, the Kanuri people from Borno have had a great political and religious influence on Northern Cameroon. Conversely, a prophet from Northern Cameroon, Muhammadu Marwa "Maitatsine", led an Islamic rebellion that devastated Kano in Nigeria in 1980. Maman Nur, who is said to have organized the Boko Haram attacks against the United Nations offices in Abuja in 2011, also hailed from Northern Cameroon, a region where, in the 1970s, President Ahmadu Ahidjo bulldozed the mosques of the Tarabiyya movement, a branch of the Tijaniyya that advocated "moral education" and whose preachers had to go into exile in Nigeria.

More recently, the "Talibans" also went to find shelter in the Mandara Mountains when they were driven out of Kanama by the Nigerian security forces at the beginning of 2004. The sect used villages in Cameroon to obtain supplies, arms, and for training and recruitment. On the border, this was the case with Banki and Amchidé, where Boko Haram fought many battles in 2014. On the Nigerian side, Banki was a centre for smuggling, with an imposing mosque and the villas of wealthy Borno families such as the Tudjani⁴. On the Cameroonian side, Amchidé had a health centre and several bars where Bornuans would go to look for girls in an effort to escape the dry regime of the Sharia law, which banned alcohol after 2002...

Chad affected by capillary action

Chad is separated from Nigeria by a lake that can now be crossed on foot during the dry season, and is a slightly different case in point. Initially, it was less affected than Niger and Cameroon by the preachers of Boko Haram. Historically, in fact, animist fishing communities such as the Budumas have used the islands of Lake Chad for shelter to resist Islamisation from Borno. Nevertheless, ministers from Idriss Deby's government

4. Bennafla, Karine [mars 1999], « The end of national territories? State and border trade in Africa », *Politique Africaine* no 73, p.40.

were curious enough to go to Maiduguri to attend Mohammed Yusuf's preaching before the Nigerian police assassinated him in 2009⁵.

Coming under increasing pressure from the military in Nigeria, Boko Haram leaders then used Ndjamena as a shelter. So were their enemies like Borno's controversial governor, Ali Modu Sheriff. In office from 2003 to 2011, he settled in Ndjamena at the end of his mandate and created a company, SAS Petroleum, which is run by a former Chadian oil minister, Eugene Tabe⁶. Because he is thought to be responsible for the killing of Mohammed Yusuf, Ali Modu Sheriff is on Boko Haram's black list. Yet he also used the sect to win the regional elections. These links allowed him to act as a mediator for Chad, although he did fail to negotiate a ceasefire in 2014.

A strategy that is difficult to decipher

In Niger, Chad and Cameroon, Boko Haram thus had rear bases for quite some time before Nigeria imposed an emergency rule in Borno in 2013. Its members could move freely around this area thanks to a mutual non-aggression pact. But everything changed when Niger, Chad and Cameroon announced that they would collaborate with Nigeria to wipe out the movement. On the ground, hostilities started at the level of police operations. In the Waza Game Reserve of Cameroon in February 2013, for example, the sect kidnapped expatriates for the first time (the Moulin-Fournier family) when the gendarmerie arrested around ten Boko Haram activists.

Since then, the confrontations went from bad to worse. The sect even succeeded in bringing together criminal groups who claimed to be Boko Haram and launched cross-border attacks which were not necessarily ordered by Abubakar Shekau, the successor to Mohammed Yusuf. This is the case of Fulani highway robbers such as the *konta konta* ("lie down") in Niger or the *zargina* ("covered faces") in Cameroon. Amongst refugees, Boko Haram also recruited victims of violence and forced conscription attempts by the Nigerian army and their militia *Yan Gora* ("those carrying the stick"). In Borno, civilians were caught in the crossfire. Every time the survivors came back to their villages to pick up the corpses after an attack, they risked being accused of complicity with the enemy, and being killed by the army or by Boko Haram.

5. Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine [2014], « Boko Haram and politics: From insurgency to terrorism », in Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security, and the State in Nigeria*, Ibadan, IFRA-Nigeria, Leiden, African Studies Centre, Waposo Series no2, p.141.

6. Created in 2011, SAS bears the name of its founder (Senator Ali Modu Sheriff) and is active in Southern Chad, where it seeks to explore the fields of Erdis IV and where it is alleged to have a stake in another company, Global Petroleum, to develop areas around the city of Bébédjia.

Yet the sect's expansion strategy is hard to decipher, especially since the extrajudicial killing of Mohammed Yusuf and the takeover of the movement by Abubakar Shekau. Boko Haram, whose actual name is "Congregation of the Prophet's companions for the propagation of the Sunni tradition and the holy war" (*Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal Jihad*), wants to seal off "a pure Islamic land", destroying the bridges which link Borno with neighbouring countries and the Nigerian State of Gombe. In August 2014 in Fotokol, for instance, Cameroon's rapid reaction battalions, the BIR (***Bataillons d'Intervention Rapide***), had to push back insurgents who were trying to blow up the main bridge on the road between Maiduguri and Ndjamen, near Gambaru. Boko Haram still fought with basic weapons. In Northern Cameroon, they used Chinese trial motorbikes to launch attacks on villages close to the border, as was the case on the Torou Road close to Mokolo in September 2014. These motorcycles are driven by so-called *cascadeurs* ("acrobats") with a server and a gunner at the back⁷.

A paralysed regional cooperation

Against this backdrop, one can wonder if an international coalition of armed forces can solve the problem. Efforts to create military cooperation have faced both institutional and political obstacles, and the results have been inconclusive. In October 2014, Nigeria announced a ceasefire, and Chad declared the pending liberation of the Chibok schoolgirls, yet at the same moment Cameroon was launching an attack against Boko Haram in Amchidé, which demonstrates a complete lack of coordination. On that occasion the three armies further disgraced themselves: in the end there was no truce, no hostage liberation and no military victory. As for the MJTF (Multilateral Joint Task Force), which was to bring together military units from Nigeria, Niger and Chad, its joint border patrols almost stopped after the Paris conference which, in May 2014, was supposed to promote military cooperation!

In early January 2015 in Nigeria, insurgents thus took over the Baga military barracks, which housed the MJTF command. This event further highlighted the inability of the region's armies to contain Boko Haram. Since then, Chad has deployed troops in Niger and Cameroon, hinting at the possibility of a greater military involvement of the French-speaking countries. It also managed to get the MJTF command transferred from Baga to Ndjamen. However, the willingness of Chadian armed forces to take the reins from Nigeria's failing military is coming up against resistance from the English-speaking giant, which does not want foreign troops on its land. In practice, Abuja refused to let Chad take over the Baga military base and did not authorise Cameroon to exercise its right of pursuit beyond the border – although this did not prevent Ndjamen and Yaoundé from bombarding the rebels on the Nigerian side.

7. Seignobos, Christian [2015], « Boko Haram and the Mandara mounts : Caliphate, mass islamisation and Chinese motorcycles », *Afrique contemporaine* to be published.

The paralysis is institutional. Niger and Nigeria are members of the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States); while Chad and Cameroon are members of the EMCCA (Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa). For these four countries to be able to communicate, an empty shell, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), had to be brought back to life. Created in 1962 and ratified in 1964, its main aim was to prevent border conflicts, especially around fisheries exploitation. However, it never managed to act as an arbitrator, a role that the ICJ (international Court of Justice) eventually took over.

Border conflicts

Nigeria, the country most affected by the lake's drop in water level, actually claims sovereignty over islands like Tomba Moto in Niger, Tatawa, Hadidé and Kinasserom in Chad, and Darak in Cameroon. Iron bars are supposed to demarcate the borders in the lake, which divide the four countries, but they are only visible during the dry season, from February to September. Disputes are therefore frequent, and one even turned into a short armed conflict between Chad and Nigeria, which lasted from April to June 1983. Nowadays, tensions with Cameroon are the most noticeable, and are concerned with land which appeared around Darak as the water receded⁸: with 14 islands and 21 villages, and home to about twenty thousand people, this area is significant economically. One, because it allows for the control of some trading routes, and secondly because of its potential for fishing: production levels have risen since Nigerian emigrants settled there after the 1972-1973 droughts.

It is also important to remember that apart from Niger, every army in the region has fought against Nigeria at some point in their history after independence. Devastated by several civil wars, Chad has suffered the effects of interventions from its powerful neighbour. During a peace conference in Kano in March and April 1979, for example, Nigeria supported a Kanuri faction of Aboubakar Abdel Rahmane, within the National Liberation Front of Chad. Renamed the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Chad, it recommended an African solution to the crisis, and asked for French troops to leave Ndjamena. Within a peace operation under the aegis of the OAU, from November 1981 to June 1982, Nigeria was then supposed to deploy 2,000 soldiers on the ground. They did not, however, manage to prevent the taking of Chad's capital by Hissène Habré's men.

Cameroon has not been spared either. In 1994, it fought Nigeria over the border running along the oil-producing peninsula of Bakassi, on the Atlantic coast. Furthermore, the Cameroonian government has linked this case to the one of the Darak islands, where the Nigerian army planted its flag in 1987. In 1994, it brought a complaint before the ICJ on

8. Abdouraman, Halirou [2008], « The border conflict Cameroon-Nigeria in the lake Chad: the issues of the Darak island, disputed and shared », *Cultures & Conflits* no 72, pp.57-76.

both issues. In 2002, Yaoundé ensured that Abuja's claims over the lake Chad area were rejected. Anxious to assert itself in a region neglected by central powers, the Cameroonian government then made Darak the district's administrative centre in 2004.

Nigeria's ill will

Border tensions between Nigeria and its neighbours are not the only factor limiting the possibilities of regional military cooperation. More importantly, Africa's demographic and economic giant is resistant to any kind of intrusion on its territory, especially since foreign humanitarian organisations violated its national sovereignty by setting up an airlift to help rebel forces during the Biafra civil war from 1967 to 1970.

Nigeria has always seen itself as a kind of regional "policeman" on the international stage, whether in Chad in the 1980's, in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990's, or in Darfur and Mali in the first two decades of the millennium. In the field of diplomacy, the headquarters of ECOWAS are in Abuja, and Nigeria hosts the third biggest European Union delegation in Africa, after Ethiopia and South Africa. On a military level, Nigeria is hostile to the possibility of a UN peacekeeping operation on its territory, yet that does not prevent it from asking the international community to provide sophisticated weapons and training. Western powers are quite defenceless in this regard: the former British colonists are keeping a low profile, and France has little or no diplomatic influence. In spite of its presence in Niger, Cameroon, and above all Chad – seat of the command for Operation Barkhane – its cooperation with Nigeria is limited. Over the years, of the financial commitments that the French Development Agency has made in the world, Africa's biggest economy has only received between 1% and 3%, for example in 2012 and 2013.

As for the United States, they had to give up on their anti terrorism training programmes, whose funding fell to less than a million dollars for the year 2015⁹. Driven by media pressure generated by the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls in April 2014, Washington made an unsuccessful attempt to create a battalion of 650 men trained by 12 American instructors. The idea was to build a professional unit in line with the conditions of an amendment voted in 2008, at the suggestion of the democrat senator, Patrick Leahy. This amendment prevents the United States from training or equipping armies that have perpetrated war crimes and committed human rights violations with impunity, which is the case for the Nigerian army in Borno. Jonathan Goodluck's government then complained about Washington's refusal to provide lethal equipment – Cobra helicopters in that case – and put a stop to the creation of Battalion 143.

9. Campbell, John [2014], *U.S. Policy to Counter Nigeria's Boko Haram*, New York, Council on Foreign relations, p.17.

Combined with this political ill will, the depth of corruption in the Nigerian military institution does not leave much hope for military cooperation. Soldiers deployed in Borno lack munitions and are not always paid, because the money is misappropriated in Abuja, which disheartens the troops and leads to mutiny. In addition, the Nigerian army often shoots civilians, which limits the support of local communities, without which it is impossible to win an asymmetrical war against an invisible enemy such as Boko Haram. Finally, the decision-making process is very fragile in a federal system which sets the opposition and central powers in charge of the Borno region against one another.

A resistance test for Niger, Cameroon and Chad

From this point of view, we could expect the armed forces to be more efficient in centralised countries such as Niger, Cameroon and Chad. But their military capacity is equally restricted by financial, political, demographic and geographic reasons. First, Niger is a vast, sparsely populated country, and it already has Jihadist fronts in Mali and Libya to worry about. In the Southeast in 2014, it launched Operation Ngaa (“Shield”) to seal its border with Nigeria. To prevent any misconduct which could upset the local communities, the authorities were careful to put the National Guard in the front line and the army behind, in support¹⁰. But it turned out to be a mammoth task. The border has always been porous and impossible to control. The British, as it happens, ran into trouble in this area in the Second World War, when they wanted to close it to isolate the French governor of Niger, who had remained faithful to the Vichy regime, in opposition to Felix Eboué in Fort Lamy¹¹.

Weakened by Islamist riots in Zinder and Niamey in January 2015, it is a risk for president Mahamadou Issoufou to be seen intervening more firmly in the war on terrorism. Some people already criticise him for being too close to France, and in particular for going to Paris to commemorate the victims of Charlie Hebdo, instead of attending the funeral of Nigerien soldiers who died fighting in Mali. Furthermore, the elections in March 2016 could push the government to enter into a coalition with fundamentalist groups and, even if they are groundless, the constant rumours about the possibility of a coup d'état show how fragile the state is.

In comparison, Cameroon seems more determined to fight Boko Haram. But its strengths are also its weaknesses. Its centralised structure makes it difficult to take action: prefects in the North must wait for orders from Yaoundé before making the smallest of decisions.

10. Interview with the president of the Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix (High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace), Colonel Major Mahamadou Abou Tarka, Niamey, 5th July 2014.

11. At the time, there was no customs or police post along the 600km of the Borno border! The situation is not exactly better today. Cf. Niven, Rex [1982], *Nigerian kaleidoscope : memoirs of a colonial servant*, London, Hurst, p.181.

Also, Cameroon faces the same evils as Nigeria when it comes to corruption, institutional weakness and the duplication of command chains. In the north, its security forces have never managed to end arms trafficking or prevent attacks by the highway robbers *zargina*. The state does not have a strong presence, so people must turn to the rebels. One example in Fotokol is the mayor's complicity with a Boko Haram arms trafficker, Abakar Ali, who was arrested in Kousséri in September 2014 and set free a month later, in exchange for the liberation of Chinese and Cameroonian hostages who were being held by insurgents.

As with Nigeria, corruption is rife in the security forces. During a revolt in December 2012, which was quickly contained, "patriotic soldiers" from the presidential guard protested against salary embezzlements and misappropriations. Cameroon is also facing serious problems similar to those in Nigeria in terms of coordination. In fact, the regular army and the BIR (Rapid Reaction Battalions) have two different chains of command, with the former financed by the Ministry of Defence, and the latter by the National Oil Company SNH (*Société Nationale des Hydrocarbures*). This special treatment causes permanent tensions: the BIR are decidedly privileged, and bypass the military hierarchy, taking orders directly from President Paul Biya's own General Staff. The BIR was in fact created to protect the presidential palace in the city of Yaoundé, and not for combat in the Sahel.

At the beginning of 2015, the Chadian armed forces' incursion eventually revealed the shortcomings of the security forces in Northern Cameroon. It was seen as a sign of weakness in the eyes of Cameroonian nationalists, and it undermined the credibility of President Paul Biya, who has been in power since 1982. The risk of destabilisation also threatens Chad: rumour has it that the Toubou people have joined the rebels to combat the influence of President Idriss Déby's group, the Zaghawa. In fact, Ndjama deployed troops of Zaghawa people in the north of Cameroon for three main reasons. Firstly, Boko Haram was getting dangerously close to the capital city, which had been spared by the group for a long time. In January 2015, the taking of the Baga military barracks confirmed the armed presence of the sect on one of the numerous islands of Lake Chad. Secondly, in the same period, the escalation of fighting in the north of Cameroon threatened to paralyse the Chadian economy. Indeed, Ndjama's supplies coming from the port of Douala pass through this bottleneck. Boko Haram's progression towards the south of Adamawa state in Nigeria is just as worrying, considering that the pipeline exporting Chadian oil comes into Cameroon near Yola. Finally, it is in Ndjama's interest to intervene before the dry season, when the rebels will be able to cross the swampy areas of the lake to spread their attacks far and wide.

Conclusion

The countries of the region are already destabilised by the flow of refugees coming from Nigeria, and their military involvement is not sufficient. The fight against Boko Haram has put increasing pressure on political regimes, which were already fragile in Niger, and

authoritarian and contested in Cameroon and Chad. Under the aegis of the African Union and the LCBC, there are at least the beginnings of cooperation between the francophone countries' armed forces. However, English-speaking Nigeria is not really part of it, and any solution to the crisis could only be achieved with Abuja's involvement¹². Apart from the fact that this is an additional source of tensions, the combined military weight of the francophone countries is still not enough to compensate for the weaknesses of this African giant. Therefore it is on Abuja that the international community must concentrate their efforts.

It is also important not to repeat the same errors we saw in Nigeria, where the army's misconduct and the lack of witness protection created a code of silence, which worked in Boko Haram's favour. We need to bear in mind that the predatory practices of the Chadian soldiers have contributed in the past to the chaos in the Central African Republic, in spite of the credit we want to give them now for fighting Jihadists alongside French troops in Mali in 2013. The same is true for Niger and Cameroon. In the future, detention without trial and violence from the security forces could alienate the community and even cause riots. The militarisation of the regions neighbouring Borno is a double-edged sword. For example in Diffa, Niger, people are worried and avoid even mentioning the name Boko Haram, for fear of coming under suspicion. They now prefer to talk about *Yarran Mallam*, in Hausa: "the children of the master" (Mohammed Yusuf, in other words). In reality, increased police surveillance leads to all kinds of reports, which are often to do with nothing more than getting rid of an annoying neighbour or solving old disputes about land or women!

Evidently, it is important to weigh up the potential positive and negative effects of over-militarisation in response to Boko Haram. For now, pressure from the Nigerian and Cameroonian armies has not been effective: they have not ended the sect's violence and have in addition damaged relations with parts of the population in Borno, without which it is impossible to win an asymmetrical war. There is no reason to believe that Chadian forces will do any better, given their poor history in the Central African Republic. Therefore, it is hard to expect results from setting up a pan African force, especially one which runs the risk of being no more than a cooperation between French-speaking countries, and which will remain handicapped by Nigeria's ill will. Given that the potential of military response is limited, we must consider other options, such as humanitarian aid or the reinforcement of basic public services to legitimise the weakest states, or the negotiation of sanctuary or amnesty for the rebels.

12. For proposition about this, refer to Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine [2014], *Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency? Addressing the Boko Haram Crisis*, London, Chatham House, Research Paper, 36 p.