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A not so global war on terror?

International engagement and the Boko Haram conflict

Vincent Foucher



Photography: "A Star", [Obiageli Adaeze Okaro](#)

Few jihadi fronts have had a more global moment of horrific glory than the jihadi insurgency in the northeast of Nigeria generally designated as Boko Haram. The kidnapping of more than 200 schoolgirls in Chibok, in 2014, created a truly global emotion, as #BringBackOurGirls reverberated through the social networks. The Sambisa forest, the haunt of Boko Haram's leader Abubakar Shekau, came to be the theatre of the opening scene of the 2018 blockbuster *Black Panther*, with the heroes of Wakanda overpowering jihadi fighters to release a group of kidnapped girls.

In real life however, despite this global emotion, international intervention in the Boko Haram conflict has been more contained and indirect. Certainly, with ebbs and flows, there has been international interest in, and support to, the states involved, Nigeria and its three less intensely affected Lake Chad neighbours, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. But international

intervention against Boko Haram has been nothing like the global fight against the jihadi in nearby Mali, where French and United Nations troops have been present for years, along with a large military training mission from the European Union and troops of the G5 Sahel, a coalition of African countries.

The reasons behind it are a complex mix, having to do with the conflict and with Nigeria itself, with its regional and international partners and with how and when the conflict entered the global “market” of conflict situations. This complexity has fed a lot of suspicions on all parts, suspicions that have occasionally grown into full-fledged conspiracy theories, thus complicating international cooperation further. As Denis Tull has argued in a groundbreaking study of the international engagement in Mali, it is important to maintain a degree of symmetry, to examine mutual perceptions, rather than focus only on one side’s reading of the situation [1]. But I also want to argue that, for all those (mis)perceptions between the Lake Chad states and their international partners, cooperation has indeed taken place. Perhaps its most significant legacy has been facilitating cooperation between the Lake Chad states themselves, which had long been difficult, and remains a complex matter.

Despite global emotion over the ‘Bring Back Our Girls’ affair, international intervention in the Boko Haram conflict has been more contained and indirect compared to the global fight against the jihadi in nearby Mali

A clarification about terminology is in order before embarking in this discussion. Boko Haram (“Western education is forbidden”, in Hausa) is a derogatory designation, a caricature used by critics drawing on the movement’s hostility to Western-style education. The proper name of the movement in the early 2010s was Jama’atu Ahl al-Sunnah li-Da’awati wal-Jihad (Group of the People of the Sunna for Preaching and Jihad, JASDJ). In 2015, JASDJ became ISWAP after Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State; in 2016, critics of Shekau created their own group, eventually gaining the recognition of the Islamic State and Shekau reverted to using the JASDJ designation. In 2021, ISWAP moved against JASDJ, forcing Shekau to kill himself with a suicide-bomb, and has become hegemonic, though peripheral JASDJ groups still resist inclusion. This complex history is often masked as the term “Boko Haram” remains widely in use in the media and among the population. In this piece, it is occasionally used to designate the movement before 2016 or both factions together since.

A peripheral threat... to all?

One of the main factors of the limited international involvement in the Boko Haram conflict is probably that, for all the devastation it has caused, it has remained peripheral even to the Nigerian state itself and to the three other affected states. The conflict has affected only peripheral areas of the four Lake Chad states, far from these countries’ capital city or from key economic areas. While the jihadi eventually engineered terror attacks in the capital

cities of both Chad and Nigeria, those did not last: the networks involved were promptly dismantled. At no point in the history of the conflict did Boko Haram factions threaten to extend effectively beyond the parts of the Northeast of Nigeria that they have operated in, unlike the Malian jihadi did in January 2013, when they moved from northern Mali towards central Mali in droves, thus fuelling a French military intervention.

The one partial exception to this peripherality of the Boko Haram insurgency is Chad, as Lake Chad, which has become a jihadi stronghold, is much closer to Ndjamená, the Chadian capital, than to the capitals of the other three states. But the real focus of Boko Haram has been Nigeria. In Chad, the jihadis have never pushed beyond the shores of Lake Chad. In a telling move, when a brutal attack by a Boko Haram faction against a Chadian army base in Bohoma in 2020 created concerns that the jihadi could push deeper into the Chadian territory, France had some of its Ndjamená-based warplanes carry out a flyover on the Chadian part of the Lake, sending a clear signal that while it was not intervening in the marshes of Lake Chad, it would strike should the jihadis venture in the open terrain leading to Ndjamená. This exception thus largely confirms the rule: Boko Haram jihadi have elicited limited international intervention in part because they have failed to call into question the survival of the states they have been fighting against.

Also, the links of Nigerian jihadi to the global jihad have long been a matter of controversy. While all observers recognise that in the early 2010s, JASDJ had some connection to Al-Qaeda, the dominant academic commentators have long judged that this connection was never as established or as important as those of AQIM or the Shabaab of Somalia to al-Qaeda [1]. This assessment was probably right, though information has been coming up since, according to which the connection was nevertheless real enough [3]. Even after Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015, many observers remained suspicious, dismissing that new link as mostly a media stunt. The persisting doubts about the connection between the Lake Chad jihad and global jihad has probably played a part in limiting the internationalisation of the response to it—in Mali, the link to global jihad could not as easily be dismissed.

Another element has to do with the timing of its expansion. In 2013–2014, when JASDJ really made it to the global agenda thanks to its territorial expansion in Borno State and to spectacular acts of violence like the Chibok kidnapping, the leading interventionist states, the United States, France and the United Kingdom, the P3 as they are often called, were booked and/or resistant. The P3 states were pushing for intervention in Syria at the time, and France was massively involved in Mali. Under Barack Obama, elected in 2009, the United States had revised its engagement global jihad, rethinking its presence in Afghanistan and withdrawing from Iraq, and favouring elsewhere a “light footprint” strategy reliant on drones, special forces and support to local armies. In this new dispensation, Nigeria would not see a massive and direct American involvement. In a March 2013 testimony, James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, “did not highlight any organization [in Nigeria] known to have both the current intent and the current capacity to carry out attacks against the United States” [4]. It took the Chibok episode to bring about a small deployment of American military and security experts to Maiduguri, initially tasked to help assist the Nigerian forces in the search for the missing girls, and American surveillance

planes and drones began flying over the region. This deployment, however, had little impact. As will be seen below, the relationship between the Lake Chad states, and particularly Nigeria, and international partners, has been a complicated one.

Nigeria, a difficult partner?

Another factor limiting international commitment to the struggle against Boko Haram has been Nigeria's policy and politics. While a number of critical scholars have insisted that the Nigerian authorities have pushed the narrative of Boko Haram as a part of global jihad in order to attract international support and gain free reins in repression, the record is more mixed than that. Nigerian officials have often been balancing in their description between Boko Haram as dangerous global terrorists demanding international commitment and Boko Haram as a rabble of bandits on the verge of defeat best left to the Nigerian military. This certainly has to do with Nigeria's touchy sense of sovereignty, its self-perception as a continental powerhouse, its claim to leadership in West Africa and Africa as a whole. Such a state has always had a hard time admitting to being significantly challenged internally. This shows in the communication policy of its military, which has a record of downplaying its losses and exaggerating its kills and vehemently denying reports of human rights violations by established human rights organisations.

Denial has not been the only thing that has made partnership with Nigeria difficult. Many international partners perceive Nigeria as a state awash with resources thanks to its massive oil revenues, but using them badly. Repeated scandals of embezzlement of state funds, notably military budgets, have done little to assuage these concerns. Worse, governance problems in the Nigerian military go beyond embezzlement: the Nigerian military is generally regarded as having low morale and being particularly prone to human rights abuses [5]. Off the record, foreign military experts and the military of Nigeria's three neighbours call its performance into question. All this makes Nigeria a difficult partner, particularly for Western states [6].

A factor limiting international commitment to the struggle against Boko Haram has been Nigeria's policy and politics, in connection with its self-perception as a continental powerhouse and its claim to leadership in West Africa and Africa as a whole

In 2013, United States Ambassador McCulley made clear that the United States were not "very satisfied" with the way in which the conflict was handled [7]. Under Barack Obama, the United States halted weapons sales to Nigeria, in line with the Leahy Law, a United States legal provision banning military assistance to abusive security forces. Washington notably blocked the sale of American-made Cobra attack helicopters by Israel in 2014 and blocked the sale of Super Tucanos, specialised anti-guerrilla aircraft to Nigeria after Nigerian Air Force bombed a refugee camp in 2017. President Trump eventually reversed the decision, and the Nigerian Air Force began operating Super Tucanos against ISWAP in 2021. At the

end of 2021 however, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken insisted that the United States may again apply the Leahy Law—this time over the repression of civilian protests unrelated to the Boko Haram situation in 2020.

Nigeria, a suspicious partner?

Perceptions go both ways, and state officials and the general public in Nigeria have their own reservations towards international actors, and particularly towards the P3 states. These reservations and suspicions are fed by the longer history between Nigeria and international partners, but also by the more immediate ambivalences and hesitations in the international engagement vis-à-vis the Boko Haram crisis discussed above. These suspicions have occasionally grown into full-fledged conspiracy theories particularly in Nigeria and Cameroon, and they have certainly made cooperation more difficult.

The colonial and postcolonial experience of Nigeria and the Lake Chad states frames their current attitude towards international cooperation, and France, Britain and the United States have been perceived as at least as problematic as they have been central as partners in counter-insurgency. From 2015, Great Britain deployed to Maiduguri a team of military trainers and advisors, but cooperation with the Nigerian military was always uneasy, and the team was withdrawn in 2020. As for a recent British offer of embedding British special forces with Nigerian troops, it was rejected by Nigerian authorities. France has been less involved in Nigeria, but it has bilateral agreements with Niger, Chad and Cameroon and supports their military in various ways. This support does not come without suspicion: a French officer insisted to this author that the small team of French military advisors deployed in a Nigerien army base in Diffa were largely marginalised by the Nigerien military.

In fact, suspicion has fed full-fledged conspiracy theories in all Lake Chad countries, sometimes echoing similar theories circulating in the Sahel. In the Nigerian case, memories of France's support to the Biafran rebels in the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1971 and concerns about the continuation of "Françafrique" are particularly strong. This author, being French himself, has been asked by several civilian and military officials, including high-level diplomats, in Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad why France was arming Boko Haram, a piece of fake news that keeps recurring on the internet, where videos and images claiming to show supposed deliveries abound [8]. The circulation of these conspiracy theories is often deliberately stirred by professional sycophants hired by certain sectors of government keen to deviate the blame, as was seen in 2019, when "protesters" marched on the French embassy in Abuja, denouncing France's ties with Boko Haram [9]. As for US involvement, the deployment of American military and security operatives to Maiduguri after the 2014 Chibok episode, mentioned above, yielded little fruit, as co-operation remained fraught. In private conversations with this author, Nigerian officials have voiced their suspicions of racism, double standards, spying and neo-imperialism vis-à-vis the United States. Given the little progress made, the American military were progressively withdrawn. By 2019, they had all left.

In fact, suspicion towards international engagement, particularly in Nigeria, has extended to non-military forms of international engagement. In Borno State, international humanitarian organisations have thus been repeatedly called into question, with criticisms ranging from classic denunciations of its negative impacts (the dependency of “beneficiaries” of assistance, the trap of permanent emergency, the hike in rents) and accusations of improper behaviour (excessive salaries, luxury lifestyle) to direct accusations of collusion with the jihadi (through the delivery of food assistance or unfair accusations against the Nigerian military). On several occasions, the Nigerian security services have raided, suspended or banned this or that aid organisation, always to drop the procedures. The overall climate of international engagement is thus very tense.

Reorienting the global fight

The complicated relationship between Western countries and the Lake Chad countries, and particularly Nigeria, has not prevented forms of international engagement. Some have been discussed above already: Western countries have maintained their long standing military cooperation with the Lake Chad armies, sometimes developing specialised programmes [10]. As a token of concern about these armies’ behaviour, these programmes seem to often include training on human rights (“international humanitarian law”). Western countries have also been major donors of humanitarian and development assistance to the four countries, proceeding either bilaterally or through multilateral frameworks like the United Nations agencies, international NGOs, the World Bank or the European Union. Assistance has covered all sorts of aspects, from food support for internally displaced persons and refugees to funding and expertise for “deradicalisation” programmes. But there have also been other pathways for international engagement in the realm of counter-insurgency.

With Nigeria being a particularly difficult partner, the P3 states have looked for other forms and channels of operation. The United States have thus increased their military cooperation with Nigeria’s less controversial neighbours Niger and Cameroon, deploying a small military presence in the Nigerien town of Diffa and the Cameroonian town Mora, two localities at the frontline of the struggle against Boko Haram in order, to provide support and training to these countries’ armies. From Niger and Cameroon, the United States have been flying surveillance planes and drones, often sharing the intelligence with the Lake Chad states [11]. As for France, it has maintained its longstanding close bilateral military cooperation with all three Francophone states of Lake Chad, providing notably various forms of training.

Another channel for international engagement has been cooperation between the Lake Chad states themselves, something which was not easy, given the level of suspicion – and sometimes bad blood – existing between them [12]. As a result of the Chibok crisis, Nigeria reached out to France to improve cooperation with its Francophone neighbours [13]. Paris hosted a dedicated summit in May 2014, which eventually resulted in the relaunch of a Lake Chad-wide security mechanism that had existed for some time. This led to the formation of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the framework of a revamped regional development organisation, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC). More recently, a

forum gathering all the governors of the regions situated in the vicinity of Lake Chad was formed. A host of international partners have been supporting these regional structures in various ways. The P3 assists the MNJTF through a cooperation and liaison cell, a group of officers deployed at the headquarters of the MNJTF in N'djamena, and the European Union has been financing the MNJTF through the African Union.

The MNJTF has been a complex system at all levels, and its operational results have been uneven. It kicked off very slowly and never turned into an integrated force, as each country placed some of its units based in its territory under the MNJTF flag. Coordination has known substantial ebbs and flows. It is probably telling of the limits of the MNJTF that it is precisely in the area of the Lake which was its purview that ISWAP was able to grow after the split from Shekau, turning into a formidable force. At least, international support to the MNJTF has played a part in cementing the much-needed cooperation between the Lake Chad states. Though to be fair, more than the MNJTF itself, the development of bilateral cooperation between the Lake Chad states, sometimes non-institutional and based on “hard” interests, has been the real key [14]. Through these links, Chadian and Cameroonian troops have thus entered into Nigerian territory on several occasions to support the Nigerian military.

The complicated relationship between Western countries and the Lake Chad countries, particularly Nigeria, has not prevented forms of international engagement

The P3 states have not been alone in trying to find alternative routes for international engagement. The Lake Chad states, and Nigeria in particular, have been reaching out to other international partners to try and gain some room for manoeuvre. Thus, at various moments, Nigeria has reached out to countries with no human rights conditionalities (and often with counter-insurgency experience) like Russia, China, Pakistan, Belarus, Turkey or Sri Lanka in order to secure access to weapons or training. In 2014, President Goodluck Jonathan even contracted a set of South African private military companies, which were key in initiating the counter-offensive against JASDJ. The experience was however short-lived. More recently, Nigeria seemed to be considering buying Russian Mi-35 attack helicopters given the United States' reticence to selling AH1 helicopters [15].

Conclusion

For all the mutual suspicion and recurring tensions, notably between Nigeria and the P3 states, the Lake Chad states have received international support in their struggle against the factions of Boko Haram. The Lake Chad states have so far not found a way to prevail, and ISWAP seems stronger than ever after its recent victory over Shekau. How would a stronger, more direct, international engagement have affected this? The recent developments in Mali, Somalia or Afghanistan, where levels of international engagement have been much higher, are not particularly encouraging. For all the problems in the responses of the Lake Chad states themselves, the fact that, for reasons good and bad, they have remained the main

“owners” of the Boko Haram situation might not be such a bad thing after all.

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- 2 — See:
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- 3 — Vincent Foucher, “Last Words of Abubakar Shekau: A Testament in the Politics of Jihadi Extraversion”, *Sources. Materials & Fieldwork in African Studies* n° 3, 2021, p. 1-27.
- 4 — “Statement for the Record Submitted to the Senate Committee on Armed Services by Rosa Brook”, 16 May 2013 [[Available online](#)]
- 5 — See:
 - Temitope B Oriola, T. B. (2021) “Nigerian Soldiers on the War Against Boko Haram”, *African Affairs* 120 (479), 2021, p. 147-175.
 - Amnesty International, “Stars on their shoulders. Blood on their hands. War crimes committed by the Nigerian military”, 2 February 2016.
- 6 — The other Lake Chad states are not exempt, of course. The gruesome execution of two suspected female Boko Haram associates and their infant children by Cameroonian forces in 2018 created a major outcry, and the United States announced in 2019 that it would cut some of its security assistance. Under serious pressure, the Cameroonian authorities stopped denying and arrested the soldiers involved in the execution, and they were convicted. In a telling difference, the Nigerian authorities have never acted so publicly on similar accusations.
- 7 — “Boko Haram: Why US hasn’t released \$7m reward promised on Shekau - Envoy”, *Vanguard*, 29 August 2013 [[Available online](#)].
- 8 — For factchecking, see for instance Faivre Le Cadre, A.-S., “No, a French helicopter did not deliver weapons to Boko Haram”, *Agence France Presse*, 12 de novembre de 2018.
- 9 — On the spectacular rise of pro-government and pro-military NGOs in Nigeria, see Page, M. (2021) “Fake Civil Society: The Rise of Pro-Government NGOs in Nigèria”, *Carnegie International Endowment for Peace*.
- 10 — On the recent history of US security assistance to Nigeria, including information on budgets, see U.S. Department of State (2021) “U.S. Security Cooperation with Nigeria”, *Fact Sheet* [[Available online](#)].
- 11 — The sharing of intelligence can sometimes be complicated: some US officials were concerned that given information on the location of the Chibok girls, the Nigerian military might decide to bomb the location rather than mount a rescue operation. Drew Hinshaw D., Parkinson, J. (2021) *Bring Back Our Girls: The Untold Story of the Global Search for Nigeria’s Missing Schoolgirls*, London: Swift.

- 12 — For long, Nigeria suspected, not without reasons, that its neighbours did not care to repress Nigerian jihadi networks operating on their soil and that some officials actually cooperated with these networks for cash, while the neighbours felt, not without reasons, that it was all primarily a Nigerian situation that the Nigerian state should address cogently. As for bad blood, the low-intensity conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon over the peninsula of Bakassi was only resolved a year before the conflict broke out. For more on regional cooperation, see for instance International Crisis Group, “What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram?”, 7 July 2020.
- 13 — Schmidt, E. (2018) *Foreign Intervention in Africa After the Cold War: Sovereignty, Responsibility, and the War on Terror*, Athens: Ohio University Press.
- 14 — More than the efforts of the P3, it was a growing realisation of the risks that Boko Haram could pose to all the Lake Chad states that has allowed for improved cooperation. This has not gone without suspicions, with rumours circulating about officials, high or low, of the one or the other Lake Chad state selling intelligence or weapons to the jihadi or turning a blind eye on their logistics operations. According to former jihadi fighters interviewed by this author, these rumours were not entirely incorrect, especially in the early days.
- 15 — “Nigeria turns to Russia after being deprived of its US helicopters”, *Africa Intelligence*, 6 September 2021.



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