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Virginia Comolli

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# The Regional Problem of Boko Haram

**Virginia Comolli**

‘Boko Haram is a typical example of small fires causing large fires’, declared retired general Muhammadu Buhari in his inaugural speech as Nigeria’s new president on 29 May 2015. The analogy was apt. From its inception in the early 2000s, the group has evolved from an isolated, broadly non-violent sect to a brutal, Islamist insurgency engaged in terrorism and criminality.

In the course of 2014 and 2015 Boko Haram’s violence has surged, bringing the death toll well above 15,000 since the start of the insurgency in 2009. Worryingly, the region has witnessed a new pattern of female suicide attacks, as well as frequent abductions, the capturing of towns and villages, and the expansion of Boko Haram’s activities beyond Nigeria’s borders to include a more aggressive presence in Cameroon (starting in the second half of 2014) and the targeting of Niger and Chad (from February 2015). Having previously established relations with al-Qaeda affiliates, Boko Haram is the latest and most prominent group to have sworn allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), rebranding itself Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).<sup>1</sup>

The combination of these factors has made Boko Haram a threat both to northeast Nigeria – where it is mainly concentrated – and the broader region. The threat has repercussions beyond security, undermining the economy, education, food supply, the social contract between the state and its people, foreign relations at the regional level and Nigeria’s reputation

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**Virginia Comolli** is Research Fellow for Security and Development at the IISS. She is the author of *Boko Haram: Nigeria’s Islamist Insurgency* (C. Hurst & Co., 2015).

internationally. This complex mixture, along with the group's successful exploitation of socio-economic grievance and expansion of territorial control beyond Nigeria's borders, means that Boko Haram now requires a cooperative response from several neighbouring countries on multiple levels: security, socio-economic and political.

Boko Haram's attacks in neighbouring countries have, indeed, prompted greater military involvement by Chadian, Nigerian and Cameroonian troops. Cooperation among Lake Chad Basin countries in the form of a Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) dates back to 1998, but a better-funded and operationally better-coordinated MNJTF of up to 10,000 troops has been authorised by the African Union (AU) for deployment by the end of July 2015.<sup>2</sup> The force, headquartered in Ndjamena, Chad, has an initial mandate lasting 12 months and is headed by a Nigerian commander, with a Cameroonian deputy and a Chadian chief of staff.<sup>3</sup> Benin, interestingly, has also been taking part in these discussions. Nigeria's western neighbour has not yet been targeted and, to date, has deployed no troops, but has agreed in principle to join the MNJTF pending a UN Security Council resolution endorsing the mission.<sup>4</sup>

### **Beggared neighbours**

Boko Haram has made the most of porous borders, and exploited the cultural, ethnic and religious affinities that Chad, Niger and Cameroon share with northern Nigeria. The links facilitate smuggling of weapons, recruitment of fighters, and personnel flows between Boko Haram in Nigeria and their Hausa, Kanuri and Muslim kin in Niger, Chad and Cameroon. These countries are already straining to cope with existing problems, including the spillover effect of war in the Central African Republic on Cameroon and Chad, and the presence of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its sympathisers in Niger.

Nigeria's immediate neighbours have been important to Boko Haram from its very earliest days. New recruits from Niger, Chad and Cameroon would travel to Nigeria to listen to the preaching of the group's original leader, Mohamed Yusuf. Members would hide from Nigerian security forces beyond national borders, or would train in Niger, most famously at a

camp in Agwan run by AQIM's forerunner, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat. Yusuf controlled *emirs* (leaders) based in Niger and Chad, moreover, who would report directly to him.

The group thus managed to exert significant ideological influence in Nigeria's neighbours. Yet until 2014, Abubakar Shekau (Boko Haram's leader since 2010) had tried, in operational terms, to avoid confrontation with the governments of Niger, Chad and Cameroon – with the exception of abductions of foreign nationals in Cameroon in 2013. For their part, neighbouring governments were reluctant to launch a major crackdown against Boko Haram both for fear of retaliation and because their capabilities were limited.<sup>5</sup>

It appears, however, that the upsurge of violence in 2014 marked a turning point; Nigeria's neighbours can no longer remain passive. The Lake Chad Basin Commission established a regional force, with Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon pledging at a June 2014 summit in London to jointly deploy 2,800 troops.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, in March 2014 the directors-general of the external intelligence services of Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Chad and Niger, alongside France, signed a deal to increase border-policing coordination and intelligence sharing. There was, in the same year, a diplomatic effort; President Idriss Deby of Chad brokered negotiations between Nigeria and Boko Haram in October, but the talks failed.

### Challenging cooperation

Nigeria cannot defeat Boko Haram by itself; it needs the help of its neighbours. The MNJTF's chances of success are made less favourable, however, by a series of problems.

The first is mistrust. Boko Haram may be a common enemy, but this does not necessarily make the MNJTF countries close friends. The problems that have beset Nigeria's relationships with its neighbours, over a number of years, are unlikely to disappear. Notably, starting in the 1970s, Nigeria and Cameroon have been troubled by territorial disputes over the Bakassi Peninsula as well as in the Lake Chad area.<sup>7</sup> Nigeria and Chad have also had territorial disputes over islands in Lake Chad. And cooperation between Nigeria and Niger was not helped by a recent spat after Niger defence officials accused Nigerian soldiers of running away from Boko Haram.

This mistrust has aggravated a general tendency to blame other countries for problems that are, in fact, mainly internal. Nigeria frequently complains that Chad, Niger and Cameroon are not doing enough to prevent militants from using their territory as safe havens. The same neighbours accuse Nigeria of being unable to contain the insurgency's spillover of militants and refugees across their borders, something which has done real damage to their economies. Checkpoints, curfews and temporary border closures, together with the threat of violence, have significantly reduced cross-border trade and led to food shortages in the border regions.<sup>8</sup> Nigerian authorities have perhaps too often emphasised Boko Haram's international demographic in what was arguably an attempt to deflect blame, and possibly attract greater attention and support from outside the continent.

A second issue concerns the identification of zones in which troops will be deployed. MNJTF's mandate and tasks have been outlined by the AU, but agreement on zones of deployment and the extent to which troops are allowed to operate in foreign territory (particularly into Nigeria) will be difficult.<sup>9</sup> There have already been cases of Cameroonian troops entering Nigeria in pursuit of militants. In January 2015, for the first time, Chadian troops moved into Cameroon.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Nigeria has on several occasions made clear its reluctance to allow foreign military action on its soil. In March 2015, Chadian forces claimed there was no actual cooperation with the Nigerians and that they had been denied entry while pursuing Boko Haram. In June, Nigerian defence headquarters refuted claims by its Chadian counterpart that Chad had conducted airstrikes on Boko Haram camps within Nigeria. Abuja claimed they had taken place in Niger instead.<sup>11</sup>

The national contingents of the MNJTF, thirdly, show uneven levels of training, professionalism and capability. Chadians are generally regarded as effective fighters, while Nigerien forces appear to be underequipped. In Nigeria, leaders understand the importance of acquiring long-range strike capabilities. Recent acquisitions include strike aircraft and multiple-launch rocket systems, and the modification of some *Super Puma* helicopters to accommodate rocket pods. Indeed, one reason for the success of operations by Nigerian forces in the early months of 2015 was arguably the increased availability of weaponry that followed a procurement flurry from sources

as varied as US defence contractors, a company in the Czech Republic that provided formerly Hungarian tanks, and even an attempted acquisition of *Cobra* helicopters from Israel, reportedly blocked by the US. Although many of these deals have not been officially confirmed, photographic evidence and satellite imagery suggest that a number of orders and deliveries took place in a great hurry, including through uncommon and very expensive practices. The delivery by plane and deployment to the front line of at least four T72 tanks from the Czech Republic, for example, was observed to have taken less than six weeks. This haste raises the question of whether the troops operating the new equipment have been adequately trained. Nigeria's possession of Chinese armed unmanned combat aerial vehicles only became known, by way of illustration, when pictures of crash landings in northern Nigeria appeared in January and June 2015.<sup>12</sup> The challenges of operating newly acquired weapons systems may be one explanation for widespread speculation that South African private military contractors have been involved in the anti-Boko Haram effort. President Buhari has made clear his displeasure about the hiring of private military contractors and that their involvement, rather than the actions of Nigerian forces, had made possible the gains registered in early 2015.<sup>13</sup> While there are thus doubts over whether Buhari will re-hire contractors, it is not clear that Nigerian troops will have the necessary skills to operate their new hardware.

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A fourth and pressing problem is one of resources. Analysts have wondered how the AU, already stretched in Mali, Central African Republic and Somalia, can sustain a further engagement.<sup>14</sup> Deputy Chairman of the AU Commission Erastus Mwencha had hoped for mobilisation of funds from across the continent and through UN channels, and in recent weeks President Buhari has pledged \$100 million for the MNJTF.<sup>15</sup> The US and Britain have pledged, respectively, \$5m and £5m on top of existing programmes.<sup>16</sup> The UN, increasingly concerned with the regional situation, is providing technical support.<sup>17</sup> But these contributions may not be enough; it is an open question whether a 10,000-strong MNJTF will be adequate to

fight Boko Haram. For the sake of comparison, the African Union Mission in Somalia has approximately 22,000 troops deployed in the fight against al-Shabaab, which is believed to count between 7,000 and 9,000 fighters. US authorities estimated in February 2015 that Boko Haram had a core force of up to 6,000.<sup>18</sup> Even if foreign support increases, absorption capacity could be a problem. It is already proving difficult for the military, security and justice sectors to undergo training and absorb funding, and widespread corruption will limit the effective distribution and use of resources.

Like any enemy at war, Boko Haram ‘gets a vote’. The group’s resilience is a fifth challenge facing MNJTF troops. Boko Haram’s adaptability has been proven in switches between urban and rural operational environments, widening of funding streams and tactical innovation. This trait means the MNJTF’s apparent successes can be reversed, and it will be vital to exert military pressure on all fronts. A failure to do so, resulting in further Boko Haram gains, will cause recriminations.

The final challenge facing MNJTF countries is public opinion. Greater Cameroonian, Chadian and Nigerien involvement against Boko Haram has already provoked retaliation, in a familiar pattern of escalation. If such attacks increase in number and deadliness (and multiple suicide attacks in the Chadian capital Ndjamena on 15 June suggest that they might) this may prompt Nigeria’s neighbours to rethink their level of engagement.<sup>19</sup> Kenya is a staggering example, on the other side of the continent, of how military intervention – in this case against Somalia’s al-Shabaab – can prompt large-scale attacks at home.<sup>20</sup> These attacks have had serious political consequences for President Uhuru Kenyatta, a fact that will not have escaped the leaders of Nigeria’s neighbours.

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Clearly, the regional fight against Boko Haram will not be easy. It should be remembered, however, that the group is not a monolith. Evidence of the existence of ideological factions, and elements of opportunistic support, suggests that there are divisions that might be exploited. After several months of conflict, moreover, many of the militants are likely to be war-weary.

Yet unless a comprehensive campaign – prioritising economic rejuvenation, education and counter-radicalisation (including strategic communications) – can be pursued in parallel with military operations, there is little hope peace will be restored and maintained in Nigeria and the affected regions of Niger, Chad and Cameroon. This is where states from outside the region can help: the United States, France, the UK and others are already to some extent involved, but continued effort and coordination is needed, with an important role for development agencies in particular. Boko Haram is only the latest regional manifestation of a violent Islamism that capitalises on poverty, underdevelopment and social marginalisation. Job creation among border communities, the tackling of corruption, improving human-rights records of local forces and strengthening the provision of basic services such as education and health will all be crucial. A highly visible Western military presence would risk further fuelling Boko Haram's rhetoric and facilitating recruitment, so it is on humanitarian matters – rather than armed intervention – that Western assistance should be concentrated.<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

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- <sup>3</sup> Adelani Adepegba, 'Nigerian Appointed MNJTF Commander', *Punch*, 3 June 2015, <http://www.punchng.com/news/nigerian-appointed-mnjtf-commander/>.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Benin: Nigerian Summit "Decisive" for Boko Haram Task Force', *Voice of America*, 9 June 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/reu-benin-president-says-nigerian-summit-is-decisive-for-boko-haram-task-force/2813499.html>.
- <sup>5</sup> For more on Boko Haram's regional connections, links to AQIM and earlier regional government responses, see Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015).
- <sup>6</sup> Adelani Adepegba, 'Nigeria, Others



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- <sup>7</sup> Jonathan Oluropo Familugba and Olayinka Olabinpe Ojo, 'Nigeria-Cameroon Border Relations: An Analysis of the Conflict and Cooperation (1970-2004)', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 3, no. 11, June 2013, pp. 183-4, [http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_3\\_No\\_11\\_June\\_2013/21.pdf](http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_11_June_2013/21.pdf).
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- <sup>9</sup> Peace and Security Council of the African Union, Communiqué PSC/AHG/COMM.2(CDLXXXIV).
- <sup>10</sup> Tansa Musa and Joe Bavier, 'Chadian Soldiers Arrive in Cameroon to Battle Boko Haram', Reuters, 18 January 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/18/us-nigeria-violence-cameroon-chad-idUSKBN0KR0IB20150118>.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Chad Airstrikes Against Boko Haram Not on Our Territory - Nigerian Military', *Premium Times*, 18 June 2015, <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/185323-chad-airstrikes-against-boko-haram-not-on-our-territory-nigerian-military.html>.
- <sup>12</sup> This section, on military hardware, is based on unpublished observations and analysis by IISS's Defence and Military Analysis Programme, June 2015. See also 'Nigeria receiving T-72s and other weapons from Czech Republic', Defence Web, 2 February 2015, [http://www.defence-web.co.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=37790:nigeria-receiving-t-72s-and-other-weapons-from-czech-republic&catid=50:Land&Itemid=105](http://www.defence-web.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=37790:nigeria-receiving-t-72s-and-other-weapons-from-czech-republic&catid=50:Land&Itemid=105).
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- <sup>17</sup> In addition to initiatives such as those by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Department of Political Affairs (UNDPA), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).
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<sup>19</sup> 'Chad Blames Boko Haram for Deadly Suicide Attacks in Capital', France 24, 16 June 2015, <http://www.france24.com/en/20150615-suicide-blasts-target-police-chad-capital-ndjamena>.

<sup>20</sup> John Tompo and Joseph Akwiri,

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<sup>21</sup> Freedom C. Onuoha, *A Danger Not to Nigeria Alone – Boko Haram's Transnational Reach and Regional Responses* (Abuja: Fredrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2014).