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## LAKE CHAD REGION, BOKO HARAM AND ISWAP: STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS TO A GROWING CONFLICT

On June 15, terrorists affiliated to the criminal organization Boko Haram (BH) and its allegedly larger handler the Islamic State Western Africa Province (ISWAP) attacked the police headquarters in Chad's capital N'Djamena and the town of Potiskum, in Nigeria's north-eastern state of Yobe. These attacks are the most recent in a streak that has seen an average of one per day since the inauguration of Nigeria's president Muhammadu Buhari on May 29th. All of the attacks have been low scale, continuing the 16 months pattern of complementing small scale assaults on villages and towns with suicide bombings in other areas, and increasing in scope beyond Nigeria's north-east region.

This Boko Haram/ISWAP "hot streak" comes as no surprise, not necessarily due to strategic reasons – more on that later – but because it follows an adaptation phase that has been visible with this organization at least since August 2013. Indeed the organization appears to have gone into a lull after being the target of successful security operations. This was visible between mid-September 2013 and very early December of the same year, again from early September 2014 to late October 2014 and earlier this year, from early March to late April. In each instance, this re-assessment phase and adaptation period was followed by a very aggressive and very successful series of attacks by Boko Haram, like the current one.

This intense period of the conflict is raising once again questions about the strength and capabilities of BH/ISWAP, its impact on the region and what the regional security forces can do to vanquish the group and its partners. Questions that I will attempt to answer below.

### **Wasn't Boko Haram on the run and desperate, to the point where it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State?**

It never was. While there is absolutely no doubt that Boko Haram sustained very significant losses due to the MJTF operations in February and March, it was never "desperate" or "on the run". The organization never tried to consolidate any territory it controlled and certainly never stood its ground when some of its bases were attacked. It always fell back to other areas or had left little more than a skeleton crew in those areas. What the operations did was two-fold. First, they forced Boko Haram to revert to its hide and seek guerrilla tactics that it had used until it enjoyed huge amounts of success in 2014, resulting in more stable

“bases”, most notorious of which were its compound in Gwoza and its strongholds in the Sambisa forest. Second, and most important was that they disturbed Boko Haram activities in the east, affecting trafficking routes, income, supplies and fall back positions of the group. This means that BH was left without its most important trafficking corridor, and was now entirely dependent on its northern trafficking axis, the one that goes through Niger, Chad, Mali and Libya, a route strongly influenced by the Islamic State and its presence in Libya.

I mentioned in two previous posts that the Islamic State and Boko Haram had been engaged in discussions that focused on zones of influence, dictated by both organizations’ business needs. As long as Boko Haram was able to control or at the very least seriously affect the trafficking turnpike that is Nigeria, it could dictate terms of its own and negotiate at eye level. Once the eastern routes were affected, the only effective supply route was the north, in effect putting IS in a position to dictate the terms, ultimately leading to the baya’t heard on March 7, 2015.

This new logistical context combined with pressure from the MJTF operations and a new “management” sent Boko Haram into one of its now typical re-structuring/assessment phases, which resulted not only in the current string of attacks but the foundation of the Islamic State West Africa Province, *Wilāyat al Sūdān al Gharbī* in Arabic.

### **Why wait until the Nigerian presidential inauguration to begin this string of attacks?**

There are two main reasons for attacking now. The first is obvious: It’s about sending a message. President Buhari is a former military man and promised he would defeat Boko Haram. In his speech he called them godless and made them a priority, already announcing that portions of the Nigerian army’s command centre would be transferred to Maiduguri. In other words, Buhari is willing to take the fight to the terrorists. By attacking hours after his speech and every day since, simultaneously and in distant areas, ISWAP/BH are showing that they have the capabilities to strike anywhere at any time of their choosing, that they are a force to be reckoned with, and that they do not fear the new president and his policies.

The second reason is tactical. For a variety of reasons, Buhari has either chosen to or was not able to assemble his staff and come up with a strategy to be applied during the transition phase of his presidency. Hundreds of soldiers and officers were dismissed, a new Chief of Staff was appointed, the command center was moved and still no ministers have been assigned. As much depends on the political, this means that there is currently no strategy and no one is really in a position to take over security operations and implement a strategy to counter Boko Haram attacks. This current void is a big weakness that the terrorists have been mercilessly exploiting.

The problems related to the current power flux are compounded by an absent MJTF common strategy. Following last week’s meetings, first between the Chiefs of Staff of the Lake Chad basin states, and then between their heads of state, plans have been laid out for a common strategy under Nigerian leadership, to become effective on July 30. Considering that there already was a structure in place and a mitigated level of cooperation, which were responsible for the successes in February and March, waiting another two months before new strategies can be implemented is highly problematic and can only benefit the terrorists.

However, it is not impossible that in light of the attacks in N’Djamena on June 15 Chad will respond more aggressively and that the start date for possible MJTF operations be pushed forward. But at this point and time, ISWAP/BH are as strong as the vacuum of the transition phase allows them to be.

### **What does that mean for the region?**

Boko Haram was a regional problem long before the name ISWAP. With bases and attacks in Cameroon, Chad and Niger as well as a presence in Sudan, South Sudan, Mali, Libya and recently Ghana and Algeria, Boko Haram has been a regional – even supra-regional – actor for some time. The interesting question is, how does the current situation affect the region and beyond?

First, there are the instability and spill-over effects of conflicts that could be and are affected by the new regional dynamic. Conflict in Mali, unrest in Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, DRC and South Sudan, civil war in Libya, terrible economic situations in Chad and Niger, as well as an economic crisis in Nigeria are all factors that terrorists and insurgents successfully exploited in recent years. These conditions are also quite favorable for trafficking and smuggling, economically and structurally beneficial for terrorists. It also means that any type of border control will be poor at best.

It is under these conditions that the strength of ISWAP is visible. Not in the military resources or advice, but in the capacity of IS to act as a coordinator and facilitator between various groups and factions, making sure the transaction and operational flows run smoothly. Information obtained by MOSECON shows that this coordination is done out of Algeria and Libya and that it remains confined at this point and time to coordination and facilitation, with military commanders planning their own operations.

As this far-exceeds the Lake Chad region, the regional actors must now understand that what threatens their security is no longer at their door step, but much further away. It also means that without supra-regional cooperation, dealing with BH/ISWAP locally will amount to treating the symptoms but not the cause. In short, the security of Nigeria is now directly linked to that of Libya, Democratic Republic of Congo or South Sudan.

The fight against Boko Haram is no longer regional. It's African.

### **Solutions and strategies?**

The first element is to limit the negative impact of the transition. This means involving other elements than the military into the fight against Boko Haram, such as police and state security forces who are already on site. It is a short term solution, but these security branches have the resources and the skills to create pressure on terrorists while the military re-organizes itself. They are also important for the long term. ISWAP fighters are not part of an army. They use guerrilla tactics, with assaults with small numbers of troops and suicide bombings. Police forces can help mitigate the impact of stealth and terrorist operations by improving control and increasing security pressure in specific areas. It is therefore essential for both the short and long term that the various security branches combine their resources and skills, rather than each service going at it on its own.

The second element is to have a real MJTF bound by a common strategy and goal, with a structure that will actually allow joint operations and use tactics maximizing the strengths of the units involved. The current cooperation has been mediocre at best, with every country's grievances and bickering made public. The armies involved must understand that working together is not submission or subordination, but a way to increase effectiveness and efficiency. The humiliating Gambaru/Fotokol incident in which Boko Haram fighters merely crossed the bridge into Fotokol when Chadian troops attacked Gambaru must serve as a permanent example of what the MJTF is to avoid to be truly successful.

It is also vital that this regional cooperation goes beyond the military. It must involve police, border units, intelligence, surveillance and civil society groups to make sure that the insurgents do not simply cross the border, but actually have no place to hide or to fall back to. At this point, Nigeria and other regional states have been unable to contain Boko Haram, and now that it is becoming a fully regional entity, containment has become all the more difficult. It is nonetheless imperative that it be achieved.

Finally, it is essential that decision makers in the area understand the inter-connections which allowed the Islamic State and Boko Haram to expand as they did and to become supra-regional factors. The civil war in Libya and the conflict in Mali, to name but two, are directly affecting the security of dozens of African states, as does the conflict in Nigeria. Understanding that "their problem is my problem" is key to making sure that the various streams and pockets which allow organizations like ISWAP to develop and become sustainable are dried up and make them vulnerable to defeat.

The threat posed by terrorist groups and insurgents in northern and central Africa has only evolved and worsened in the last three years, and the current streak of attacks is showing just how well terrorists adapt to new conditions. Therefore, as long as the affected states are not in a position to offer a coherent,

cohesive, multi-faceted and adaptable response, the threat will continue to grow and expand its reach as seen with Boko Haram since February 2014.

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