



Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram

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Headquarters

International Crisis Group

Avenue Louise 149 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

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Executive Summary

Vigilante groups in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad play a major role in the fight against Boko Haram, but their presence raises concerns. They make military operations less blunt and more effective and have reconnected these states somewhat with many of their local communities, but they have also committed abuses and become involved in the war economy. In Nigeria in particular, vigilantism did much to turn an anti-state insurgency into a bloodier civil war, pitting Boko Haram against communities and leading to drastic increases in violence. As the conflict continues to evolve, so will vigilantes. They are enmeshed with high politics, especially in Nigeria, and in local intercommunal relations, business operations and chiefdoms. Their belief that they should be rewarded will need to be addressed, and it is also important for the Lake Chad basin states to address the common gap in community policing, particularly in rural areas. To ensure vigilantes are not a future source of insecurity, these states will each need to devise their own mix of slowly disbanding and formalising and regulating them.

Vigilantism, the recourse to non-state actors to enforce law and order (of a sort), has a history in the Lake Chad region. Colonial powers there relied, to a substantial degree, on local traditional chiefs and their retainers. The multi-faceted crisis in governance and decline in services among the Lake Chad states since the 1980s gave rise to new vigilante groups. The law and order challenges vigilantes tried to address were a factor in the formation and growth of Boko Haram, itself an attempt to provide regulation and guidance.

The vigilante fight against Boko Haram started in 2013, in Maiduguri, the Borno state capital and the insurgency's epicentre, under the twin pressure of mounting jihadist violence and security force retaliation. The Joint Task Force (JTF), led by the Nigerian army, quickly realised the vigilantes' potential as a source of local knowledge, intelligence and manpower and set out to help organise it, with the assistance of local and traditional authorities. Operating under the unofficial but revealing name of Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTf), vigilantes were essential in flushing Boko Haram out of the city, then began replicating throughout the state. The official use of vigilantes to fight the movement spread further in Nigeria, then to Cameroon in 2014 and Chad in 2015, where the groups are known as *comités de vigilance*. Niger has been more cautious, partly because of past struggles with armed groups and because it has not needed them as much.

Vigilantes have played many roles, from mostly discrete surveillance networks in Niger to military combat auxiliaries or semi-autonomous fighting forces in Nigeria. For the region's overstretched and under pressure militaries, they have somewhat filled the security gap and provided local knowledge. They have made the military response more targeted and more efficient, but their mobilisation also provoked retribution by Boko Haram against their communities and contributed to the massive levels of civilian casualties in 2014 and 2015. Paradoxically, this, too, has favoured regional governments' strategy of pushing civilians away from the jihadists.

As the insurgency splinters and falls back on more discrete guerrilla operations and terror attacks, however, the time has come to measure the risks posed by such a

massive mobilisation of vigilantes (they claim to be about 26,000 in Borno state alone). Their compensation demands will have to be addressed, especially if authorities consider offering deals to Boko Haram militants to lay down their weapons. In the longer term, vigilantes may become political foot soldiers, turn to organised crime or feed communal violence. Vigilantism can be a powerful counter-insurgency tool, but there is a compelling need to confront the immediate concerns it raises, notably in terms of impunity, and to begin planning for its long-term post-conflict transformation.

Recommendations

To protect civilians, limit risks to vigilantes and improve accountability

To the governments of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger:

1. Abstain, as much as possible, from creating additional standing vigilante units and focus instead on building intelligence and communication networks through which civilians can obtain state protection when needed.
2. Ensure that as many civilians as possible have access to functional communication networks and can call on regular security forces, especially where risks remain high.
3. Encourage, when necessary to maintain vigilante forces, their formalisation, including registration, and systems for internal oversight and external accountability, and include community oversight in accountability mechanisms.
4. Supply assault rifles only to select groups of better-trained CJTF and for mission-specific purposes, such as when they serve as auxiliaries, while ensuring that those weapons are registered and remain security-service property.
5. Synchronise CJTF accountability mechanisms with those of the federal Nigeria Police Force.
6. Hold to account those vigilantes suspected of abuses, notably for sexual and gender-based violence, and ensure transparent and fair investigation of all suspects in accordance with domestic and international law, while publicising any judicial decisions.
7. Provide vigilantes training programs that mix practical skills (eg, intelligence, first aid, handling of landmines and improvised explosive devices) and instruction in applicable national and international laws, while involving the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and relevant human rights groups (eg, in Nigeria, the National Human Rights Commission) in the latter.

To donors:

8. Adjust legal guidelines to permit assistance in building justice and accountability mechanisms.

To acknowledge the contribution of the vigilantes and manage expectations

To the governments of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger:

9. Combat stereotyping that certain entire ethnic communities, notably the Kanuri, support Boko Haram by highlighting vigilante efforts from those groups.
10. Respect vigilantes publicly and give sufficient and standardised assistance packages to those wounded or killed in the line of duty and their families.
11. Set expectations for compensation transparently through public announcements on what is being offered and to whom, who is not eligible and when it will end, so as not to motivate more vigilantism.

To prepare for a transformation of the vigilantes and prevent the emergence of mafias and ethnic militias

To the governments of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger:

12. Plan to transform vigilante units when the situation stabilises further, with each country following its own pace according to its security situation and according to the extent and role of vigilantism, notably by:
 - a) planning demobilisation processes for the majority of vigilantes that include small grants to help them go back to their former occupations, complete their education or develop businesses;
 - b) creating, given the likely continuation of some form of lower-level jihadist activity and rural unrest, particularly in Borno and Adamawa states, a temporary auxiliary body under the army or Police Mobile Force, drawing on the vigilantes who have received weapons training and served directly with security forces; and providing for their potential integration into the security forces if they meet the educational and other requirements and undergo retraining;
 - c) combatting police and vigilante corruption vigorously, so it does not undermine professionalism, and improving ties with local communities; and
 - d) selecting, vetting, retraining and equipping a number of vigilantes with the help of local civil society organisations, so that they feed reports and early warning into both police and civil society networks.
13. Prepare a disarmament plan that focuses exclusively on taking functional automatic weapons out of circulation.

To donors:

14. Support programs for vigilante demobilisation and to professionalise the police and their capacity to monitor and regulate temporary auxiliary forces.

Dakar/Nairobi/Brussels, 23 February 2017

Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram

I. Introduction

The insurgency launched in 2009 by Boko Haram, a radical revivalist Islamist movement established earlier in Borno state, in Nigeria's north east and adjacent to Lake Chad, is now regional, affecting the border areas of Chad, Niger and Cameroon. In 2014-2015, it gained control of large swaths of territory in north-east Nigeria. Since 2015, Nigeria and its neighbours have progressively developed a stronger military response. Boko Haram has mostly been forced into enclaves on Lake Chad, the hills along the Nigeria-Cameroon border and forested areas of Borno state. It has reverted to suicide attacks and guerrilla war. Military pressure, importantly aided by vigilantes, has aggravated its internal divisions.¹

This report describes how the vigilante groups were born, their connection with state agencies and institutions, how they function and their role in the conflict's evolution. While special attention is paid to Borno, one of Nigeria's 36 federated states and the heartland of the insurgency, it also analyses vigilantes' operations elsewhere in the north east of the country and in Niger, Chad and Cameroon. It assesses vigilantism's long-term impact and risks. As Boko Haram splinters and morphs into more discrete guerrilla forces, with renewed emphasis on terrorist attacks, it is timely to rethink the role of vigilantes and their governance and prepare for their transformation.

Analysts working on all four affected countries were involved in preparation of the report, which feeds into Crisis Group's larger research on curbing violent religious radicalism.² Desk research was followed by interviews in the region's capitals with state and military officials, intelligence officers, international military advisers and senior politicians. Research was also done in Maiduguri and Yola, the capitals of Nigerian Borno and Adamawa states, in Maroua, Mokolo, Makari and other localities of Cameroon's Far North and in Niger's Diffa region and Chad's cities of Bol and Baga Sola, on Lake Chad. Researchers interviewed vigilantes, local state and security and non-governmental organisation officials, human rights activists, journalists, academics and citizens to investigate their understandings of the situation and their perceptions of peace, law and order.

¹ For background, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°s 213, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, 3 April 2014; and 168, *Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict*, 20 December 2010; on recent counter-insurgency progress and its limits, see Briefing N°120, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, 4 May 2016. The organisation has two rival factions, Abubakar Shekau's Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad, JAS) and Abu Musab al-Barnawi's Wilāyat al-Islāmiyya Gharb Afriqiyyah (Islamic State in West Africa Province, ISWAP), affiliated to the Islamic State (IS). This report uses the term "Boko Haram" ("Western education is forbidden", in Hausa) for clarity and given its wide recognition, though supporters reject it as derogatory.

² Crisis Group Special Report N°1, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016.

II. From Vigilantism to the CJTF

A. State and Vigilantism: A Tale of Four Countries

Law and order in the Lake Chad basin bears the imprint of pre-colonial and colonial times, when massive disruption occurred as states formed and disappeared due to a fast-changing regional economy increasingly shaped by global connections.³ Slave-raiding, banditry and cattle rustling fed local forms of self-defence. After often violent conquest, and frequently in alliance with local warlords, colonial states maintained relative peace, but particularly in rural areas they habitually relied on decentralised forces, the retinues of chiefs.

Much has been made of the differences between colonial administrations, France's Jacobin "direct rule" and the British tradition of "indirect rule" and reliance on pre-existing aristocracies.⁴ They should not be overstated: the colonial state relied everywhere on a strata of chiefs and their followers to levy taxes, mobilise labour and suppress dissent. The presence of local forces that are not part of the police or the army but are involved in providing law and order thus has a history in the region.

This tradition became increasingly important as insecurity increased around Lake Chad from the 1980s, due to many factors, including population growth, the states' budgetary problems, the resulting "structural adjustments", urbanisation, the crisis in pastoralist societies (notably the Fulani) and the influx of automatic weapons and battle-hardened men from vanquished armies in Niger's and Chad's wars. Insecurity ranged from banditry (the *kwanta kwanta* in Nigeria and *zargina* in Cameroon) to all-out armed rebellion (most recently the Chad civil war, 2005-2010, and the Tuareg insurgencies in Niger in the 1990s and 2007).⁵ The situation was made worse by deterioration in the security forces.⁶

Alternative local security structures were reactivated or created. In the Lake Chad basin, they have often drawn on brotherhoods of hunters (*yan baka*, in Hausa, the

³ Bawuro Barkindo, "The early states of the Central Sudan: Kanem, Borno and some of their neighbours to c. 1500 AD", in J. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds.), *History of West Africa* (Harlow, 1985), pp. 225-254.

⁴ Nigeria was a British colony; Chad, Niger and Cameroon were part of the French empire.

⁵ See notably Issa Saibou, *Les coupeurs de route: Histoire du banditisme rural et transfrontalier dans le bassin du lac Tchad* (Paris, 2010); Christian Seignobos, "Le phénomène zargina dans le nord du Cameroun. Coupeurs de route et prises d'otages, la crise des sociétés pastorales mbororo", *Afrique contemporaine*, no. 239 (2011), pp. 35-59; Mirco Göpfert, "Security in Niamey: an anthropological perspective on policing and an act of terrorism in Niger", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2012), pp. 53-74; Mohammed J. Kuna and Jibrin Ibrahim (eds.), *Rural banditry and conflicts in northern Nigeria* (Abuja, 2016).

⁶ Drops in budgets, an unreformed authoritarian mindset from colonial times, growing weaknesses in training and command, their instrumentalisation in internal politics, their factionalism and clientelistic turn combined to demoralise and sap the professionalism of the various corps supposed to maintain law and order. See for instance, Samuel Decalo, "Modalities of civil-military stability in Africa", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4 (1989); Eboe Hutchful and Abdoulaye Bathily (eds.), *The military and militarism in Africa* (Dakar, 1998); Herbert M. Howe, *Ambiguous Order: Military Forces in African States* (London, 2001). For Niger, see Kimba Idrissa (ed.), *Armée et politique au Niger* (Paris, 2008); for Nigeria, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°237, *Nigeria: The Challenge of Military Reform*, 6 June 2016.

region's lingua franca) typical of West Africa or on the traditional chiefs' palace guards (*dogari*, in Hausa).⁷ Some scholars argue that contemporary vigilantism has also been influenced by U.S. and European promotion of community policing.⁸ In many cities, night watches appeared, paid for by traders' consortiums or the town councils.

Each country's history of war and rebellion has marked its response to Boko Haram. Chad and Niger view vigilantes with peculiar concern because of their recent revolts.⁹ Nonetheless, Chadian authorities occasionally encouraged vigilantes to fight against bandits in the past.¹⁰ For Niger, neighbouring Mali, where the army has long abandoned its pretence of a monopoly in use of force and communal militias have gained influence, is a powerful counter-model. Nevertheless, Nigerien vigilantes, such as the *dan banga*, were recently patrolling the market areas in the cities of Diffa and Mainé Soroa, and the governor of Niamey tried to mobilise similar groups a few years back.¹¹

Cameroon has long relied on vigilantes. Groups controlled by chiefs played a strong part in the fight against the left-wing Union des Populations du Cameroun from the 1950s to the early 1970s. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the state cooperated with *comités de vigilance* against bandits in northern regions. However, in 2001 it created a well-armed elite force, the Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide (BIR), now at the forefront of the fight against Boko Haram. But vigilantes have always been part of the picture, for instance to combat cotton smugglers.¹² The state is confident enough to mobilise the *comités de vigilance* on a large scale and feels it can control them through its territorial administration and local chiefs.¹³

In Nigeria, history provided both precedents and cautions. As elsewhere, vigilantes have long been involved in fighting bandits, usually without state coordination or

⁷ Crisis Group interview, Adamawa state hunters' association official, Yola, 30 October 2016.

⁸ David Pratten, "The politics of protection: perspectives on vigilantism in Nigeria", *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 78, no. 1 (2008), pp. 1-15.

⁹ There have been frequent armed rebellions in Chad. The Lake Chad area was a refuge for rebels hostile to President Hissène Habré in the early 1980s. Marielle Debos, *Living by the Gun in Chad. Combatants, Impunity and State Formation* (London, 2016); and "La plaine des morts. Le Tchad de Hissène Habré, 1982-1990", Human Rights Watch, December 2013. Niger, too, has a long history with rebellion, from the 1960s Sawaba to the 1990s and 2000s Tuareg insurgencies. Niger's portion of Lake Chad was affected by an ethnic Tebu rebellion in the 1990s, against which Peul (Fulani) and Arab militias formed that eventually proved difficult to demobilise.

¹⁰ In south-west Chad in 2007, for instance, the interior minister explicitly called on villagers to form *comités d'auto-défense* to combat a kidnapping epidemic. "Délégation gouvernementale à Pala en mars 2007", on file with Crisis Group.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, state officials, Niamey, May 2016; NGO protection officer, Diffa, 14 October 2016; Göpfert, "Security in Niamey", op. cit. In Diffa, the *dan banga* disappeared after a European Union (EU)-funded program created local police in 2015. *Dan banga* is Hausa pidgin for "vanguard", initially used to designate Nigerian political parties' youth wings. This suggests a Nigerian model spreading to Niger.

¹² Cameroon cotton farmers were required to sell crops to the state firm, SODECOTON, often well below Nigerian prices, leading to big illegal exports. Crisis Group interview, Cameroon academic, Paris, 29 March 2016. On vigilantes fighting bandits, see Saibou, *Les coupeurs de route*, op. cit. In 2009, a Catholic official called for vigilantes to fight human trafficking. "Catholic church fights tip in Cameroon's North West", U.S. embassy Yaounde cable, 23 April 2009, made public by WikiLeaks.

¹³ The Cameroon authorities insist the *comités* are about "vigilance" not self-defence, thus affirming the state did not default on its obligations to defend its citizens. Crisis Group interviews, Far North, October 2016.

official support.¹⁴ However, they have a record of getting out of hand.¹⁵ Some have become involved in violent local politics or have run protection rackets.¹⁶ The massive communal violence in central Nigeria has also fed authorities' suspicions of irregular local forces. And while the 1999 constitution makes policing a federal prerogative, many states have been forming quasi-police forces.¹⁷

B. *CJTF's Birth: The Battle for Maiduguri*

The quasi-official narrative on anti-Boko Haram vigilantism is that in early 2013 Baba Jafar Lawan, a trader from Hausari, a borough of Maiduguri, went after a Boko Haram militant with a stick, capturing and delivering him to the authorities.¹⁸ Others, the story goes, started patrolling Hausari with him. Little by little, offshoots sprung up throughout the city. Several suspected Boko Haram members were handed over to the authorities; others were brutally killed by crowds. By June 2013, some 500 vigilantes were manning city checkpoints, armed with sticks and cutlasses.¹⁹ They became known as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), indicating they operated as a counterpart to the Joint Task Force (JTF) that coordinated the police, army and other security units fighting Boko Haram in Borno state.

There was more to this than a spontaneous, popular resistance to a bloody and fanatic jihadist insurgency. Boko Haram's violence was certainly hard on people in Maiduguri. Security officers, Islamic clerics critical of Boko Haram and civilians otherwise associated with the Borno state or the federal government were threatened and assassinated, and the wealthier members of the communities were extorted by the jihadists. But the security forces, too, were brutal, as they implemented collective

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, CJTF and civilians, Maiduguri, January 2017.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Kate Meagher, "Hijacking Civil Society: The Inside Story of the Bakassi Boys Vigilante Group of South-Eastern Nigeria", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2007), pp. 89-115; Yvan Guichaoua, "Les mutations d'une milice ethnique sous le régime civil d'Olusegun Obasanjo. Le cas de l'Oodua People's Congress", *Politique africaine*, no. 106 (2007), pp. 92-109; Johannes Harnischfeger, "Ethnicity, Religion and the Failure of Common Law in Nigeria", in Kirsch, T.G. and Grätz, T. (eds.), *Domesticating Vigilantism in Africa* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 51-78.

¹⁶ Crisis Group Report, N°113, *Nigeria: Want in the Midst of Plenty*, 19 July 2006, pp. 27-28; Briefing N°79, *Nigeria's Elections: Reversing the Degeneration?*, 24 February 2011, pp. 5-6; Daniel Jordan Smith, "The Bakassi Boys: Vigilantism, Violence, and Political Imagination in Nigeria", *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2004), pp. 429-455; David Pratten, "The Politics of Protection", op. cit.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, civil society police reform expert, Abuja, 17 January 2017. Section 214 (1) of the constitution provides that: "There shall be a police force for Nigeria, which shall be known as the Nigeria Police Force, and subject to the provisions of this section no other police force shall be established for the Federation or any part thereof". Local police were disbanded after the 1966 military coup. On one such quasi-police force in Kano state, see Fatima L. Adamu, "Gender, Hisba and the Enforcement of Morality in Northern Nigeria", *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 78, no. 1 (2008), pp. 136-152.

¹⁸ See, for instance, "Nigeria: Civilian JTF – Unsung Heroes of the Boko Haram War", *This Day*, 4 October 2015. Variants to the story say it was another man, by the name of Modu Milo, who did the capture, and Baba Lawan, with prior ties to the security forces, possibly as an informant, put Milo in touch with them. An international NGO official suggested Lawan was the victim of a racket by Boko Haram supporters and mobilised youths to fight back, a version CJTF leaders rejected. Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, January 2017; Crisis Group email, human rights worker, 8 April 2016.

¹⁹ "Nigeria deploys vigilantes against Boko Haram", *Deutsche Welle*, 9 July 2013.

punishment strategies, especially when soldiers and police were killed, including the burning of homes and mass arrests of male youths.²⁰ Commanders' unwillingness to curb these abuses provoked mounting tensions in Maiduguri. In addition, a state of emergency, from May to December 2013, that included a shutdown of phone services, fuelled economic problems for city traders.

Many Maiduguri inhabitants felt their community had to fight Boko Haram so as to deflect security forces' suspicion and retaliation. CJTF leaders confirm that many people joined because they feared both the jihadists and that if they did not isolate Boko Haram members, "they would be killed [by] soldiers who could not distinguish them from other youth and were killing indiscriminately".²¹

Professor Mohamed Kyari, a noted analyst of the insurgency, has argued that the army's retaliations were part of "a strategy aimed at compelling residents to cooperate with troops in exposing Boko Haram insurgents", and that the CJTF included "repentant members of Boko Haram who were recruited by the military", a textbook counter-insurgency move. Whatever the truth, CJTF members acknowledge that the security forces, and particularly the army, which had the JTF lead, were quick to appreciate the potential of a vigilante response in Maiduguri. The JTF organised the groups along its own lines of command, with Maiduguri divided into ten sectors. JTF officers were also involved in the selection of CJTF leaders, a chairman and a secretary for each sector, with whom they worked closely. A number of JTF checkpoints were handed over to the CJTF.²²

Soon after, the CJTF formed links to the state's major leaders, the Shehu of Borno, Abubakar Ibn Umar Garbai El-Kanemi, and Governor Kashim Shettima.²³ The army and Borno state government cooperated in structuring the CJTF further. A number of mid-ranking state officials took key CJTF positions. As early as September 2013, an "orientation program", the Borno Youths Empowerment Scheme (BOYES), selected and screened young men, who then received some military training from the army. State authorities gave them uniforms, patrol cars and identification documents (IDs), as well as a stipend. It was eventually announced that BOYES would train up to 6,000, but it stopped at around 1,850, apparently due to the army's uncertainty about training so many potentially unreliable persons. Some recruits, sus-

²⁰ "Spiralling Violence. Boko Haram Attacks and Security Force Abuses in Nigeria", Human Rights Watch, 11 October 2012

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, CJTF members and leaders and civilians, Maiduguri, October 2016, January 2017. See also "Youth vigilantes set another suspected Boko Haram sect member ablaze in Maiduguri", Information Nigeria (www.informationng.com), 27 July 2013.

²² "Civilian vigilante groups increase dangers in northeastern Nigeria", IRIN, 12 December 2013. Crisis Group interviews, CJTF leaders, Maiduguri, 18 October 2016, January 2017. The JTF command (and its successor, the 7th Division), based in Maiduguri, seems to have been in charge. A committee was formed in September 2014 around the Abuja-based chief of defence staff to supervise the CJTF, but it seems to have never really functioned.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, CJTF leaders, Maiduguri, January 2017. The Shehu is the traditional ruler of the Borno Emirate, which was defeated in 1893 and subsequently integrated into the British colony of Nigeria. He is the ceremonial head of the Kanuri people and retains influence over much of Borno through a network of chiefs.

pected of association with Boko Haram and of trying to get training or intelligence, were arrested.²⁴

CJTF-military cooperation has remained very close. The army later provided standard military training to about 200 members to create a “CJTF Special Force”, with greater weapon skills and operational capability, that could be used in front-line operations. By late 2013, Maiduguri was largely purged of Boko Haram cells, and there have been few subsequent attacks in the city, other than suicide operations, often against refugee camps on its periphery. Most intra-city checkpoints have disappeared.²⁵

C. *Spreading the CJTF Model*

Nigerian security services and Borno state authorities cooperated to spread the CJTF model. First, Maiduguri CJTF elements began accompanying the army outside the city. In July 2013, they were involved in operations in neighbouring Jere Local Government Area (LGA), as well as in more distant localities like Dikwa and Dawashi. As the army defended or took back LGAs throughout Borno state, it encouraged the formation of CJTF units, and Baba Jafar Lawan toured the state to raise them. Where there was scepticism, military officers visited communities to insist this was the government’s wish.²⁶ The deputy governor publicly pressed the emir of Biu, a city in southern Borno where CJTF were not well received, to “encourage youth in his domain to form [a] vigilante group”.²⁷ Much like in Maiduguri, communities knew refusing would be suspicious.

The security services were closely involved in identifying local CJTF leaders. In a large northern Borno town, the CJTF chairman was a paid State Security Service (SSS) informant; in a small town close to Maiduguri, the appointee was a trader close to the authorities and security forces.²⁸ CJTF leaders claimed to have recruited up to 45,000 members in Borno state, though the current leadership now speaks only of about 26,000, covering 22 of the state’s 27 LGAs.²⁹

Vigilante forces have also emerged in the other north-eastern Nigerian states, at a pace and intensity largely dependent on the Boko Haram threat, but always in close connection to the security services and state authorities. Boko Haram’s threat in late 2014 to march on Yola, the capital of Adamawa state south of Borno, was met with a mobilisation of hunter brotherhoods.³⁰ In addition to state authorities, several lead-

²⁴ “War against Boko: Borno holds orientation for 800 ‘BOYES’ Civilian JTF”, NewsRescue, 28 September 2013. All who demonstrated unexplained prior mastery of automatic weapons during training were arrested. Crisis Group interviews, CJTF leaders and BOYES members, Maiduguri, 18 October 2016, January 2017.

²⁵ Crisis group interview, member of CJTF special force, Maiduguri, 15 January 2017; observations, Maiduguri, January 2017.

²⁶ “Boko Haram hunters burn suspect alive in Maiduguri”, *Daily Trust*, 25 July 2013. Crisis Group interview, CJTF, Maiduguri, 14 January 2017.

²⁷ “Deputy governor urges Biu Emirate to form CJTF”, *Daily Post*, 5 July 2013.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Diffa region, Niger, May 2016; Maiduguri, 15 January 2017.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, CJTF leaders, Maiduguri, 18 October 2016; “Nigeria- La communauté se retourne contre Boko Haram”, IRIN, 11 August 2014.

³⁰ Multi-ethnic hunter brotherhoods, found in many West African areas, are particularly strong in Adamawa, a forested region with much game. There are hunters in Borno state, and some became

ing local political figures were essential in that, including former Vice President Atiku Abubakar (under President Olusegun Obasanjo), who has vast local investments; the then Senate Committee on Defence Chairman Jibrilla Bindow; Adamawa State House Representative Emmanuel Tsandu; and Federal House Representative Adamu Kamale.³¹ The local hunters played a major part in blocking Boko Haram and helped the army take back the cities of Gombi and Mubi in northern Adamawa.

Adamawa's Kanuri minority formed its own 300-men CJTF in March 2013, in close collaboration with security forces, to help screen internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing Borno state. Many Boko Haram leaders and members are Kanuri, and this sought to show "both the public and security agencies ... that not all Kanuri in Yola were Boko Haram" and to preserve trader livelihoods.³² Civilian and security officials push less for organised vigilantes in Yobe and Gombe states, which were not so affected by the insurgency and where the security forces never seemed overwhelmed.³³

Community leaders from the north east based in other regions have extended the monitoring of suspected Boko Haram activities, notably in Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria's political and economic capitals respectively. They have been reporting to security services and occasionally conducting citizen arrests, sometimes with the support of CJTF who would come from Borno state and take the prisoners to Maiduguri.³⁴

The CJTF model has spread to Nigeria's Lake Chad neighbours. As Boko Haram stepped up activities in Cameroon and Chad, and the state and army realised their limitations, communities were called on to form self-defence groups. In Cameroon, the Far North region governor, Augustine Awa Fonka, issued an *arrêté régional* (regional decree) creating the *comités locaux de vigilance* in June 2014. After suicide bombings in Maroua, the region's capital, in July 2015, the authorities pushed even harder. All villages in the Far North now reportedly have *comités*; according to one source, 16,000 vigilantes are on duty.³⁵ Similarly, after Boko Haram's first terror attacks in Chad's capital, N'Djamena, in February 2015 the territorial administration minister called on local chiefs to "increase their vigilance". During Chadian President Idriss Déby's visit to Baga Sola in October 2015, authorities urged villages around the lake to create their own *comités de vigilance*.³⁶

Niger's case is somewhat unique. Though the mobilisation of armed civilians, based notably on the example of Algeria's war on islamists in the 1990s, was discussed in

vigilantes, but the CJTF did not follow the brotherhoods' organisation. This may be because the Borno state CJTF initially mobilised urban youth.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Adamawa, October 2016.

³² Crisis Group interview, CJTF leader, Yola, 31 October 2016.

³³ Mobs reportedly lynched some Boko Haram suspects in these states. "Jungle justice meted out to man plotting to bomb bus station in Gombe", Sahara Reporters, 18 November 2014.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, CJTF officials, members, Maiduguri, 18 October 2016, 12 January 2017; "Wanted Boko Haram chieftain, five others arrested in Lagos", *The Guardian* (Lagos), 11 July 2016.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, senior gendarmerie officer, sous-préfets, Far North, October 2016; journalist, December 2016. "Arrêté régional n° 19 portant création des comités locaux de vigilance dans la région de l'Extrême-Nord", June 2014. "Tchad: vigilance accrue contre Boko Haram", Xinhua, 21 February 2015.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, civilians and vigilantes, Lake Chad region, April 2016; politician from the Lake Chad region, N'Djamena, September 2016; "Tchad: vigilance accrue contre Boko Haram", Xinhua, 21 February 2015.

Niamey policy circles, fears of ethnic militias, concerns about the cost of their demobilisation and their potential for political instrumentalisation and the country's fragility led President Mahamadou Issoufou to decide otherwise. The Nigerien defeat in Bosso in June 2016 revived the debate, but the idea was rejected again. When militias were formed in 2016 among the Peul and Mohamid Arabs, deemed loyal to the state (or, more precisely, hostile to other communities, such as the Buduma, suspected of supporting Boko Haram), the authorities gave them free rein only briefly and quickly tried to resolve ethnic tensions.³⁷

The cautious approach may also be due to early problems with Nigerian refugees, CJTF members among them, who organised self-defence groups in fear pursuit from Boko Haram. Locals in Yébi and Bosso accused Nigerian vigilantes of abuses and disrupting profitable cross-border trade. Some were detained and sent back with the help of Nigerian authorities.³⁸ Instead of mobilising vigilantes, Niger has been using informant networks, though vigilante groups eventually formed in some of the more insecure areas, such as Bagara and Toumour.³⁹

Officials in Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon recognise the vigilantes' services. Senior officials have met with their leaders and handed out medals and prizes. Chad's President Idriss Déby has visited vigilantes in the field (notably in Ngouboua on 4 June 2016), and then Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan once hailed them as "new national heroes" in July 2013.⁴⁰

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Nigerien officials, Buduma and Peul community leaders, Niamey, Diffa region, May 2016.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, NGO protection officer, Diffa, 14 October 2016; CJTF member, Maiduguri, 14 January 2017.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, local official from Toumour, Niamey, 11 October 2016; vigilante official, Bagara, 14 October 2016. See also "Au Niger, Baouchi Dao veut vaincre Boko Haram avec ses flèches", Voice of America (VOA) Afrique, 21 June 2016.

⁴⁰ "North-east youths hunt insurgents", *Vanguard*, 17 June 2013.

III. Vigilantism, an Effective Counter-insurgency Tool?

A. Variations in Profiles and Structures

Depending on the country, vigilantes have been involved in a variety of missions. Nigeria has made the most intensive use of them, particularly in Borno state, where CJTFs have been carrying out intelligence, surveillance and protection missions in their communities, notably operating checkpoints and patrolling to check on newcomers in public spaces (mosques, markets and the entrances of villages and towns). As some communities were displaced, CJTF have followed, often continuing surveillance in their IDP camps or host communities. They perform arrests and deliver suspects to the security forces, and some have been closely involved as auxiliaries to those forces. They have also screened and interrogated suspects in detention centres. The army has asked them to join in long-distance operations, usually mixing CJTF familiar with the targeted terrain with groups from other areas. They have also been deployed away from their communities, to control newly captured towns or support local CJTF. In several instances, they have launched autonomous armed operations.⁴¹

Niger is at the other end of the spectrum, having made the most cautious use of vigilantes. After incidents with Nigerian vigilantes who had taken refuge in Niger, it banned civilians from manning roadblocks and bearing weapons, demanding that vigilantes work as an informant network with the army's civil-military cooperation teams. Civilians, sometimes bearing crude weapons, have guided security patrols. As the conflict hit Niger harder, some front-line communities, such as Toumour and Bagara, eventually set up or remobilised classic vigilante groups for protection, often mixing local youth and IDPs. They man roadblocks and checkpoints, patrol and perform arrests.⁴²

Chad and Cameroon are between these two extremes. Chad, which has been less exposed to jihadist attacks, is closer to the Nigerien case. Cameroon, attacked early and intensely, is closer to the Nigerian response. For instance, its vigilante units have launched their own small-scale assaults against Boko Haram bands, sometimes pursuing them across the Nigerian border.⁴³

Because the states pushed for formation of vigilantes, they have exerted a degree of oversight, each in conformity with its habits and capacities. In Borno state, the few CJTF selected for BOYES training went through a vetting process, with the support of state authorities and security forces, including background checks and medical screening. The CJTF, though in a somewhat piecemeal fashion, issued IDs and compiled membership lists that were made available to the authorities. All BOYES trainees and some other CJTF received uniforms. Cameroon also tried to register vigilantes,

⁴¹ Borno state Governor Shettima, for instance, "ordered mobilization of some 500 Civilian Joint Task Force elements to beef up security in areas Boko Haram had used as corridors to attack villages in Chibok". "Boko Haram weakening, despite suicide bombings – Shettima", *Daily Trust*, 30 November 2016. Crisis Group interviews, CJTF, Maiduguri, January 2017.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, local official from Toumour, Niamey, 11 October 2016; NGO protection officer, Diffa region, 14 October 2016; vigilante official, Bagara, 14 October 2016.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, vigilante leaders of Limani, Kerawa, Mora and Kolofata, Mora, October 2016; "Limani: 70 membres des comités de vigilance attaquent Boko Haram au Nigéria", *L'Oeil du Sahel*, 3 May 2016.

as it had done in previous instances.⁴⁴ Chad, with a weaker bureaucratic tradition, has relied much more on the chiefs, delegating selection, identification and control to them. In Niger, existing vigilante groups have registered their own members and given lists to the civilian and security officials.⁴⁵

In all cases, oversight falls somewhere between local military commanders, the territorial administration (elected governors in Nigeria, the *sous-préfets*, *préfets* and governors appointed by the territorial administration or interior minister in Cameroon, Chad and Niger) and the local chiefs who answer to the local governments. In all four countries, vigilante leaders reported having the phone numbers of relevant military and civilian officials, and newly arrived officials quickly link up with them. In Cameroon and Chad, chiefs have played a major role in recruitment. In Cameroon, they sign IDs along with the *sous-préfets* and forward membership lists to the administration and security forces.

In Borno state, both governor and army seem directly involved, to the point where they appear to give orders to CJTF.⁴⁶ CJTF leaders, however, now insist they are independent. Symbolically, they have removed reference on their most recent IDs to the 7th Army Division and floated new unit names, probably to avoid too explicit links to the security services and Borno state. Significantly, the designation Borno State Youth Vanguard (BSYV) has now been replaced by Borno Youth Association for Peace and Justice (BYAPJ). But “CJTF” has captured the imagination and often remains on their IDs along with the new acronym.⁴⁷

In Borno state in particular, attempts have been made to increase control over vigilantes, leading to some professionalisation. The initial groups included many underaged youths, but CJTFs are less numerous, and leaders insist they mobilise only adults. This seems largely true, though children still act as informers or are part of crowds that occasionally rally behind vigilantes for arrests. There is also increasing use of women, who are better able to check and search women without creating too much tension in a context where women are playing a greater role in the insurgency. Women are also occasionally involved in patrol and combat roles in vigilante units.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Crisis Group email, human rights worker who visited the CJTF vetting and registration centre in 2013, 8 April 2016. Seignobos, “Le phénomène zargina”, op. cit.

⁴⁵ No ID cards seem to have been distributed. Crisis Group observations, Diffa region, October 2016.

⁴⁶ “Boko Haram weakening, despite suicide bombings – Shettima”, op. cit.

⁴⁷ Committees to supervise the CJTF were created by the chief of defence staff in 2014 and the Borno state governor in 2015 but do not seem to have been operational. Crisis Group interviews, CJTF leaders, Maiduguri, January 2017. For a sample of a CJTF ID, see “#FallenHero: Mustapha was the 03 Sector Chairman of CJTF in Borno RIJF”, www.insidearewa.com, 14 December 2016. CJTF has become so popular that other groups not fighting Boko Haram, for instance in Kaduna, have picked up the name.

⁴⁸ On the female part in the insurgency and female vigilantes, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°242, *Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency*, 5 December 2016; also “Meet Aisha, a former antelope hunter who now tracks Boko Haram”, *The Guardian*, 8 February 2017. In a paradoxical confirmation of the patriarchal nature of societies in the Lake Chad basin, the female vigilante discussed in that piece derived her combat skills from her grandfather. In 2015, CJTF leaders reportedly admitted that children made up “nearly a quarter of the more than 10,000-strong” movement. Quoted in “The child soldiers fighting Boko Haram”, *The Daily Beast*, 3 July 2015.

States have been cautious about weapons, equipment and training. Rather haphazardly, the civilian and military authorities, as well as non-state backers, have provided some non-lethal equipment, such as metal detectors, phones, radios and torchlights, as well as transportation ranging from four-wheel drive vehicles to bicycles. All have been wary of arming and training most vigilantes, in order to limit weapon proliferation in general and avoid creating what a Cameroonian officer called “uncontrollable militia”. That the Boko Haram-affected areas in all four countries are those with ethnic Kanuri concentrations has made the four cautious about arming that community.⁴⁹

In Maiduguri, the vigilantes initially used mostly sticks and cutlasses. As the CJTF expanded into rural areas, they carried traditional weapons such as bows and arrows, spears and “Dane guns” (locally manufactured rifles) or shotguns. In Borno state, only the sector commanders were permitted to own a modern weapon, though the army lent assault rifles to the CJTF for specific operations.⁵⁰ Cameroon does not officially allow vigilantes automatic weapons, though a few former soldiers who have joined the *comités* have kept their modern arms. In Niger, the few Peul and Arab vigilante groups reportedly have some automatic weapons, which many nomads obtain to protect their herds. The Adamawa hunters, who had their own weapons, were given ammunition and additional guns by state officials and local patrons.⁵¹ Chad, more willing to rely on and trust traditional leaders, gave automatic weapons to chiefs and a dozen or so of their guards (the *goumiers*) in some threatened areas.

This reticence to provide weapons is resented. A CJTF leader, an ex-member of earlier, anti-banditry militias, complained they were only *Yan Gora* (people with sticks, in Hausa), a phrase Boko Haram used to mock them. A Cameroon vigilante leader similarly deplored that it would be difficult to “keep terrorists at bay” with their “rudimentary weapons”.⁵² Throughout the region, there are indications that some vigilantes are buying weapons, taking them from defeated Boko Haram fighters and getting them from sympathisers in the security services.⁵³

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria authorities, September 2016–January 2017. On the states’ reluctance to arm vigilantes (and the vigilantes’ frustration), see, for instance, Ngala Killian Chintom, “Cameroon: volunteer vigilance committees call for more help in combating Boko Haram”, *African Arguments*, 23 December 2015. There is little doubt that Boko Haram has roots among the Kanuri, but it is not an exclusively Kanuri rebellion, and the movement has never claimed to fight for that community in particular, despite the assertions of some commentators. See, for example, “Fulani, Kanuri behind Boko Haram, Archbishop says in Jonathan’s presence”, *Premium Times*, 12 January 2015.

⁵⁰ Similarly, only the head of the Adamawa CJTF unit received a licence to buy a gun for self-defence. Crisis Group interviews, CJTF leader, Adamawa, 31 October 2016; CJTF, Maiduguri, January 2017.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, official of Adamawa state hunters’ association, Yola, 30 October 2016.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Diffa region, Niger, May 2016. Chintom, “Cameroon: volunteer vigilance committees call for more help”, *op. cit.*

⁵³ “Nigerian violence spawns homemade responses”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 June 2014; Crisis Group interview, official of hunters’ association, Yola, 30 October 2016.

B. *Resourcing for Vigilantes*

The Lake Chad states struggle with a dilemma: formalising the vigilantes would enable greater oversight but also cost, money that could be applied to other pressing needs, not least the humanitarian catastrophe triggered by the insurgency. It might also raise expectations and feed a sense of entitlement that could prove unsustainable, as well as create incentives that encourage the formation of more groups. Indeed, some vigilantes have been calling for “a permanent mechanism to help [them] provide the basics for [their families]”.⁵⁴ Vigilantes, especially when they are high up in the hierarchy, often insist they are not paid for their service and have to spend their own money on duty.

A variety of support systems provision and compensate vigilantes. The 1,850 Nigerian CJTF members formally recruited in the BOYES program are an exception, as they receive 15,000 naira (about \$50) monthly, plus some health coverage. In Adamawa, hunters received a small state salary only during the tense moments when they were most needed. Otherwise, vigilantes have received haphazard financial support, gifts in cash or kind from state officials, local authorities, politicians, businessmen and military commanders. In Borno state, CJTF members participating in intelligence meetings or going with the army on operations may get per diem or a share of spoils captured from Boko Haram suspects and camps. In IDP camps, they often get a special share of the incoming aid.

Communities used to provide for pre-Boko Haram vigilantes, sometimes raising money to pay small salaries or providing necessities in kind. This still happens, but there are reports that some vigilantes “beg” at checkpoints, where the voluntary nature of “donations” is open to debate. There also are reports of ad hoc, uneven assistance being given to the families of vigilantes killed in action. Communities have sometimes been left to fend for their own casualties.⁵⁵

The same is true in the other three countries: vigilantes have been receiving some equipment and gifts of money and food from the presidency and military, as well as gifts in cash and kind from local notables and communities. Some form of “taxation” of communities has likewise been documented. In Cameroon, there have been several reports of Boko Haram’s loot being appropriated by the vigilantes, sometimes in association with the security forces.⁵⁶

C. *The Vigilante Effect(s)*

Assessing the vigilantes’ impact seems at first rather easy. In operational terms, there is little doubt they have been useful. Most soldiers, recruited from throughout their respective countries, often have little understanding of the local terrain (social or physical). Vigilantes have a better “sense of the normal and the abnormal” locally, which makes them apt to detect threats.⁵⁷ Many people insist that the military’s lack of local language skills is a big problem that has resulted in unnecessary casualties. In the Lake Chad basin’s varied geography, from the marshes of Lake Chad to the

⁵⁴ Cameroon vigilante leader quoted in Chimtom, “Cameroon”, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, CJTF, Maiduguri, January 2017.

⁵⁶ “Scandale autour du bétail saisi à Boko Haram”, *L’Oeil du Sahel*, 21 November 2016.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group, security expert, Maiduguri, 15 January 2017.

hills and caves in Gwoza and the Mandara regions, soldiers can have a hard time without local guidance. Local knowledge explains the contribution of the lightly armed hunters of Adamawa, when they faced a Boko Haram force comprised of many city dwellers.

Having witnessed the growth of Boko Haram groups in their communities, vigilantes often know some of the militants and their business partners, as well as who from their immediate environment is unexplainably absent. On many occasions, they have prevented suicide attacks or limited their impact by detecting suspicious characters early.⁵⁸ Overall, vigilantes have helped make the military response more likely to hit proper rather than collective targets. For all this, they have paid a price. The recent official toll for the Borno state CJTF alone was 600 dead.⁵⁹

Examining the broader impact brings more nuanced results. First, the decision by states to mobilise vigilantes has exposed them and their communities to Boko Haram retribution. As early as June 2013, a Boko Haram audio clip declared “an all-out war” on the youth of Maiduguri and Damaturu, “because [they] have formed an alliance with the Nigerian military and police to fight our brethren”.⁶⁰ Boko Haram has launched many attacks on vigilantes, the traditional chiefs associated with them and their communities. It frequently used suicide attacks against CJTF groups and their markets, mosques and transport terminals. Much of the 2014-2015 peak in casualties was due to such retribution.⁶¹ There is evidence of extreme Boko Haram violence in response to vigilantism in the other three countries. In Niger for instance, the communities of Lamana and Ngoumao, among the few to have set up armed units, were brutally attacked in June 2015, and 38 villagers were killed.⁶²

Promotion of vigilantism was a principal driver that turned the conflict from an anti-state insurgency into a messy civil war, pitting Boko Haram against communities. Early on, a CJTF leader in Maiduguri noted: “We have crossed the Rubicon, and there is no going back. Boko Haram have declared war on us and even if we stop hunting them down, they will still come after us, so we have to fight to the finish”.⁶³ This forced ever more people to pick a side, when many would have preferred not to get involved. In at least one case in a small Borno town, the local traditional leader

⁵⁸ In Cameroon, some vigilante units have a member endowed with charms and mystical preparation and tasked to run at and grab suicide bombers that have not been shot down. Crisis Group interviews, vigilante members, soldiers, local authorities, Mokolo, Tourou, Mora, Yaoundé, October 2016.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, CJTF officials, Maiduguri, 18 October 2016.

⁶⁰ Audio clip, 18 June 2013, from Boko Haram spokesman Abu Zinnira quoted in “Civilian vigilante groups increase dangers in northeastern Nigeria”, IRIN, 12 December 2013. At one point, Boko Haram executed at roadblocks any male traveller from Maiduguri, to punish the city. Crisis Group interview, Maiduguri, January 2017.

⁶¹ See, for instance, “Boko Haram weekend killing spree leaves at least 40 dead in Borno villages”, Information Nigeria, 29 July 2013; and “Au Nigeria, ‘Boko Haram élimine des villages entiers suspectés d’avoir collaboré avec le pouvoir’”, *Le Monde*, 18 March 2014. On a recent attack on the home of the CJTF chairman in Kaleri, Mafa LGA, see “Boko Haram suicide bomber attack home of Civilian JTF commander”, Sahara Reporters, 25 January 2017. On the body count of Boko Haram victims in Nigeria, see Appendix C below.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, IDPs from Lamana and Ngoumao, Ngaroua IDP camp, October 2016; “Niger: attaques meurtrières de Boko Haram dans des villages isolés”, Radio France Internationale (RFI), 19 June 2015.

⁶³ “Civilian vigilante groups increase dangers in northeastern Nigeria”, IRIN, 12 December 2013.

opposed forming a vigilante unit, lest it lead to retribution. When some Boko Haram members came to threaten the community, he mockingly referred the population to the vigilantes, who could only flee and hide when the jihadists returned in force to kill suspected opponents and loot.⁶⁴

Forcing communities to pick a side may well have benefitted the states, as most seem to have favoured their governments. Vigilante mobilisation and Boko Haram reprisals have helped recreate a link between the security services and substantial portions of the population, particularly in Borno state. An observer noted that Cameroon troops no longer detain those who volunteer information, assuming a Boko Haram connection, a habit that would scare off potential informers.⁶⁵

Vigilantism has been a way for some civilians to regain a form of control in a situation of extreme uncertainty and powerlessness. The material benefits have mattered, but perhaps even more important than these occasional profits has been the relative protection from security-service suspicions that vigilante membership affords. Indeed, the groups grew when it became clear they had official support. In the uncertainty created by blunt, abusive counter-insurgency operations, an official ID or being on a list of approved members can mean appreciable protection, a modicum of security that vigilantes can hope to extend to their kith and kin. Affiliation with a vigilante unit can also importantly make travel through government-controlled areas safer.

Vigilantism, however, is not without problems. Cooperation with security forces is not easy: there is considerable mutual suspicion and accusations, particularly in Cameroon and Nigeria. Security sources say that some vigilantes double as Boko Haram agents or resell goods stolen by the jihadists. Several Cameroonian chiefs and *comités de vigilance* members, as well as the CJTF chairman of one of Maiduguri's ten sectors (along with some military personnel), have been accused and arrested.⁶⁶ Vigilantes also have occasionally accused the security services of double-dealing – selling weapons to Boko Haram, or being too lenient with suspects they handed over, sometimes releasing them within hours. In March 2014, CJTF captured five armed men in Maiduguri, whom the army later claimed were soldiers in civilian garb. This led to a clash, with angry youths chanting that “soldiers are the real Boko Haram; soldiers are masters of Boko Haram”.⁶⁷ Two vigilantes were killed. At the least, this episode attests to a degree of mistrust between the army and some vigilantes.

The justice issue is particularly sensitive. Vigilantism, because it emerges from the weak state's inability to maintain law and order and is frequently fed by a desire for revenge for personal losses, has a built-in bias for rough justice. There have been ample reports of abuses. In the CJTF's early Maiduguri days, June–July 2013, several Boko Haram suspects were burned alive. The International Federation for Human Rights says “hundreds of summary executions” took place then. Subsequently, CJTF

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, CJTF leader, Maiduguri, 14 January 2017.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, NGO worker, Yaoundé, December 2016.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, local authorities, security forces and vigilante members of Amchidé, Kerawa, Limani, Fotokol, Far North, October 2016, January 2017; CJTF and civil society activists, Maiduguri, January 2017; “Cameroun : des membres de comités de vigilance complices de Boko Haram”, *L’Oeil du Sahel*, 7 December 2015.

⁶⁷ “Two killed, others injured in Civilian-JTF revolt against soldiers in Maiduguri”, Information Nigeria, 4 March 2014.

were reportedly involved, with the army, in rounding up and killing 600 prisoners who had escaped from the main military detention centre in Maiduguri, Giwa Barracks, in March 2014. According to one account, vigilantes paraded in the town of Biu in southern Borno in November 2014 with the heads of some 40 alleged Boko Haram militants on pikes. In June 2015, Amnesty International reported that Nigerian vigilantes and the army committed severe human rights violations, including torture and execution of Boko Haram suspects. CJTF officials admit to “tough measures” during interrogations.⁶⁸

Some observers suggest that the security services, particularly in Nigeria, have delegated suspect interrogation to vigilantes because of language skills and to keep as clean a human rights record as possible. CJTF says otherwise and seems to defer to the military on summary executions. In 2014, a CJTF reportedly knew it could not “render justice themselves”, so took suspects to the barracks, “where soldiers kill[ed] them”. A CJTF leader mentioned in an interview that he had handed over to the army his own nephew, who he knew was a jihadist militant, and that it had (rightly) executed him.⁶⁹

Several interviewees mentioned that some CJTF members were “pompous”, hinting that they derived an undue sense of self-importance and impunity from their power. Vigilantes also have engaged in other abuses, including sexual violence and extortion. Herdsmen in particular, as they circulate in the bush with valued cattle, have been targets. There are reported cases of vigilantes levelling false accusations against persons with whom they have personal feuds.⁷⁰ Human rights organisations have noted how those with a bit of power in IDP camps demand sexual services or money in exchange for favours, including the right to leave the camps or build a house there.⁷¹ These include the CJTF, though a human rights specialist said that because vigilantes are usually from the IDP communities, they are somewhat less prone to commit abuses. In one instance at least, IDPs in a camp fought abusive vigilantes.⁷²

CJTF leaders assert that an organisation was needed precisely to curb abuses and insist they put in place a structure to monitor behaviour, with provosts and a disciplinary committee chaired by a member who is a lawyer. Sources verified that they

⁶⁸ “Boko Haram hunters burn suspect alive in Maiduguri”, *Daily Trust*, 25 July 2013; “Nigeria. Les crimes de masse de Boko Haram”, International Federation for Human Rights, 10 February 2015, p. 9; “41 Boko Haram members beheaded in Biu after failed attack”, *Daily Post*, 31 October 2014; “Stars on their shoulders, blood on their hands. War crimes committed by the Nigerian military”, Amnesty International, June 2015. For another case, “How I escaped death in Maiduguri – Ex-Borno commissioner”, *Vanguard*, 25 March 2014. For a video account, see “Nigeria’s Hidden War: Channel 4 Dispatches”, Channel 4, 18 August 2014. CJTF officials denied their members were involved. Crisis Group interviews, January 2017; Maiduguri, 18 October 2016.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, human rights experts, Abuja, January 2017; CJTF, Maiduguri, January 2017; “Nigeria – La communauté se retourne contre Boko Haram”, IRIN, 11 August 2014; “Inside the vigilante fight against Boko Haram”, *The New York Times*, 5 November 2014.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, NGO protection officer, Diffa, 14 October 2016; civilians, Maiduguri, January 2017; “Boko Haram: faut-il renoncer aux groupes d’autodéfense?”, *Journal du Cameroun*, 5 August 2016.

⁷¹ “Nigeria: Officials Abusing Displaced Women, Girls. Displaced by Boko Haram and Victims Twice Over”, Human Rights Watch, October 2016.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, Maiduguri, 13 January 2017. “Boko Haram still controls Abadam, Mobbar in Borno – IDPs”, *Daily Post*, 22 January 2016.

suspended or dismissed several members and referred others to the police. The leaders also say civilians have filed abuse charges against a dozen members, though Crisis Group was unable to confirm this. Some CJTF leaders have received instruction in international humanitarian law. There is some understanding among the vigilantes and their state and army partners that abuses can reduce the efficiency of a mobilisation. The replacement of rough justice mobs by partly-professionalised vigilantes and recruitment of female vigilantes are attempts to address these concerns. It seems that community pressure is an important form of control, which is why in Maiduguri (after initial abuses) it was quickly decided that vigilantes would operate close to their neighbourhoods, where they would know and be known by people.

There is evidence the human rights situation has improved somewhat under President Buhari, for a variety of reasons.⁷³ International human rights organisations and civil society activists report changes in Maiduguri, including in the main military detention centre, Giwa Barracks.⁷⁴ International focus on sexual and gender-based violence in IDP camps led to several arrests in December 2016 in Maiduguri, including of two CJTF members. But there is not much solid evidence to suggest vigilantes are often held accountable for human rights violations. Little is known about what goes on during operations in remote territory or the impact of any abuses on local communities and vigilante relations with Boko Haram or the state. Nevertheless, the bottom line for many civilians seems to be that vigilantes have done more good than harm.⁷⁵

⁷³ Beyond Buhari's attitude, other factors include military commanders' realisation they are under international scrutiny for possible war crimes, better organisation and oversight of the CJTF and decline in Boko Haram threats and violence as it was driven farther from Maiduguri.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, human rights experts and civil society activists, Maiduguri and Abuja, January 2017.

⁷⁵ "Ten suspects arrested in connection with IDP sexual abuse scandal", Sahara Reporters, 6 December 2016. Crisis Group interviews, civil society officials, traders, Maiduguri, January 2017.

IV. The Possible Risks Ahead

Vigilantism is a symptom of the weaknesses of the Lake Chad states, especially their disappointing delivery of security and law and order. Almost as soon as vigilante groups formed, especially in Nigeria, a debate began on the risks they could pose for the future.⁷⁶ State and security services understand some of these, as exemplified by caution over providing weapons, attempts at screening and the strong Nigerian army oversight of the CJTF. But the Lake Chad states have often struggled to control the risks resulting from reliance on vigilantes to fight Boko Haram. All these risks are more acute in Nigeria, where the conflict has been most intense, vigilantes are more numerous and active and the state faces bigger challenges and the difficulties of policy-making in a federal system.

A. *The Handling of Claims*

One of the most significant issues may be the handling of vigilante claims for service and sacrifice, particularly when economies are struggling at both national and local levels. The conflict has devastated the interlinked Lake Chad regional economy. Trade in cash crops is banned or severely depressed (often intentionally by the military to prevent Boko Haram from taxing it); many traders have fled, fighting has destroyed much of the physical and social infrastructure, and agricultural production is extremely low. Massive displacement has triggered a humanitarian disaster, especially in Borno state. All this makes it harder to address vigilantes' demands.

Some vigilantes joined not only for protection or short-term material benefits, but also for the rights and prospects they felt membership opened for future state rewards. Many have post-war jobs, scholarship or demobilisation money in mind. Some CJTF members mention the Niger Delta Presidential Amnesty Program, under which insurgents were pardoned, put on the government payroll and given vocational training or education: "These rebels get something, so what should we get, we who have fought for the state?"⁷⁷ Some vigilantes view their service explicitly as an advance against an expected reward. Through cooperation with the security services, particularly in Nigeria, vigilantes have become de facto apprentices, a classic path to a job, including a state job, in West African societies.

Vigilante leaders have sometimes been quite outspoken about their expectations from and frustration with the state, and some political leaders have begun to respond. The BOYES program was one such response. The Borno State Vigilantism and Youth Empowerment Agency Law voted in May 2015 was another, and in April 2016, Borno state Governor Shettima announced a program to create 20,000 jobs for CJTF members. In Borno, the army and DSS have absorbed 280 vigilantes into their ranks, but the actual demobilisation programs are only at the planning stage, which makes sense given the persisting security risks.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ See, for instance, "Civilian vigilante groups increase dangers in northeastern Nigeria", IRIN, 12 December 2013.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, CJTF, Maiduguri, 12 January 2017. The Amnesty Program was set-up by President Umaru Yar'Adua in 2009. Due to end in 2015, it was extended to 2017.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, CJTF leaders, Maiduguri, 18 October 2016; "They're defeating Boko Haram but are they Nigeria's next security threat?", IRIN, 22 August 2016.

One of the tricky aspects in handling claims is their administration. There are several instances where previous rewards and incentives, for instance inclusion in the BOYES program, have created strong tensions and competition among vigilantes, with accusations of nepotism and favouritism. Denouncing how some leaders have gotten rich, secured homes in government housing projects or “privatis[ed]” cars, some vigilantes insist they have left the movement, refuse to register and will not become involved in an eventual demobilisation program.⁷⁹ The handling of vigilantes is even more important at a moment when states are pondering programs to encourage Boko Haram members to “exit”.⁸⁰ Several vigilantes expressed displeasure about these, some asserting bluntly that death should be the only way out.⁸¹ This attitude is fed by vigilantes’ security concerns and memories of Boko Haram violence, but also by their sense of entitlement.

B. *From Vigilantes to Political Thugs, Mafias or Ethnic Militias*

Vigilantism’s downside and risks are well-known in Nigeria, where groups such as the Bakassi Boys and the Oodua People’s Congress have turned into major political forces in other regions.⁸² There are various ways in which vigilante groups can evolve, even as the situation which has given rise to them fades away – and the Boko Haram threat is still far from that.

The first risk, politicisation of vigilantes, notably around elections, is particularly acute in Nigeria, because votes for governors, who control opaque budgets funded by enormous oil revenues, can be extremely competitive and violent.⁸³ Gangs of thugs hired to attack opponents’ supporters and to provide security are common. Indeed, Borno ex-Governor Ali Modu Sheriff relied on a vigilante group, ECOMOG (named after the West African peacekeeping force), for his 2003 campaign. Some analysts argue that soon after his victory, he let most go and that some later turned to Boko Haram in disappointment. An internal source reported that when the CJTF formed, a number of ECOMOG thugs still backing Sheriff joined, but CJTF leaders prevented them from rising in the ranks, fearing they were political proxies.⁸⁴

Whether this is an indication of the CJTF’s neutrality or their own politicisation is open to interpretation. Some observers suspect current Borno Governor Shettima’s BOYES program is partially political clientelism, an attempt to turn the vigilantes into a political network using counter-insurgency funding. At least one episode suggests the vigilantes’ political potential: in 2013, CJTF burned the house of the Borno

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, academic and CJTF, Maiduguri, 14 January 2017; vigilantes and state officials, Maroua, Mokolo, and Mora, October 2016.

⁸⁰ Niger, Chad and Nigeria have all set up programs, though their functionality is not always easy to assess.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, CJTF, Maiduguri, January 2017.

⁸² Crisis Group Report, *Nigeria: Want in the Midst of Plenty*, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

⁸³ Governors also get a “security vote” from the federal government, an undisclosed, unaccounted monthly transfer of money they can use as they want, ostensibly for public safety. Obiamaka Egbo, Ifeoma Nwankoby, Josophat Onwumere and Chibuike Uche, “Security votes in Nigeria: Disguising stealing from the public purse”, *African Affairs*, vol. 111, no. 445 (2012), pp. 597-614.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, CJTF, Maiduguri, January 2017; “Boko Haram: les monstres de Maiduguri”, *Le Monde*, 23 June 2014.

state chairman of the All Nigeria Peoples' Party (ANPP), alleging he supported Boko Haram, but some suspect this had to do with an internal ANPP feud.⁸⁵ During the 2015 election campaign, many CJTF were seen at rallies of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Shettima's current party. It is not clear how much control he has over the CJTF, but throughout the Lake Chad region politicians on all sides are keen on cultivating relations with these groups.

Vigilantism has potential to feed ethnic or ethno-religious cleavages, because its focus is the defence of a specific local community. In the Cameroon locality of Amchidé, for instance, the initial *comité de vigilance* was controlled by Christians and harassed Muslims. It was eventually dissolved by the authorities and replaced by a mixed *comité*.⁸⁶

Vigilantism is often also in an ambivalent relationship with the established orders of chieftom and patriarchy, particularly in rural areas. It can cut both ways, sometimes revalidating "decentralised despotism", a two-tier state system whereby peripheral areas, usually rural, are governed on the cheap, through delegation to chiefs with dubious claims to legitimacy and fitness to rule.⁸⁷ At other times, it can give some autonomy to the young men (and occasionally women) who are the muscle of the vigilante forces.

Finally, if vigilantes are not disbanded, they can become mafias that turn to protection rackets and organised crime. The question is what happens when those who have become accustomed to receiving salaries or "gifts" react when these cease. This is not a new phenomenon in the Lake Chad basin, where the distinction between vigilantes, regular security force members and bandits or rebels can be fluid. Some vigilantes have already been using their relative impunity to engage in crime, from small-scale drug trafficking to resale of stolen goods.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, civil society official, Maiduguri, January 2017. "Our chairman is not a Boko Haram sponsor – Borno ANPP", *Premium Times*, 5 July 2013; "Borno ANPP officials disown state chairman", *Daily Trust*, 12 July 2013. Shettima was a party member at the time.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, vigilantes, Amchidé, March 2016; vigilantes and state officials, Mora, October 2016. For examples from other parts of Nigeria, see Harnischfeger, "Ethnicity, Religion", op. cit.

⁸⁷ "Decentralised despotism" is a phrase borrowed from Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996).

⁸⁸ Janet Roitman, *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa* (Princeton, 2005); Debos, *Living by the Gun*, op. cit. Crisis Group interviews, CJTF and CSO officials, Maiduguri, January 2017.

V. Marching on with Vigilantes

Given vigilantism's size, the persistent insecurity and security forces' overstretch, notably in Nigeria and Cameroon, neither neglect nor suppression is feasible.

A. *In the Short Term, Improving Accountability*

Niger's choice to use vigilantes relatively modestly as surveillance networks is predicated on the ability of its regular forces more or less to keep Boko Haram at bay. This in turn has been possible in part because the jihadists' assault has come later and been less intense, and because, having largely abandoned its portion of Lake Chad, the country's remaining area is more easily watched. These conditions may well be changing, as Barnawi's Boko Haram faction appears to be gathering strength on Lake Chad and along the Komadugu River, which delineates the eastern Niger-Nigeria border.⁸⁹ That there is now a full-fledged vigilante force in Toumour and some other sites may be a sign of the times.

Oversight and accountability improvements are much needed. The institutional mechanisms created by the Borno state CJTF, with provosts and a disciplinary committee, are welcome and could be improved and replicated elsewhere. It also would be useful to show that vigilantes are held accountable by making information publicly available on cases and decisions submitted to the committee, perhaps by a yearly report and periodic engagement with human rights entities.

In any case, the courts must examine allegations of grave human rights violations by vigilantes. Governments should devise a legal framework for their operations that holds members explicitly accountable, and the security services should give vigilantes instruction on human rights and legal obligations along with such practical skills as demining and intelligence work.⁹⁰ The Lake Chad countries should acknowledge a responsibility to those they mobilise. Among other things, they should make sure all vigilantes have access to functional communication networks and can call in regular troops promptly when needed.

B. *Symbolic and Material Rewards*

There is need to acknowledge, including in national media, the effort vigilantes make. In societies where ethnicity can be very political, and the communities most affected by Boko Haram have come under suspicion as a whole, skilful promotion of some exemplary vigilante figures would be a good way both to recognise their commitment and courage and to contain stereotyping that links certain ethnic groups to Boko Haram.

Symbolic rewards also matter. Ceremonies, medals and diplomas have become standard and have some impact. Honouring those killed or maimed in association with some material attention to their families would also help, but action on this count has been too haphazard. Disbanding vigilante groups should be linked with some gainful sustainable employment and be supported by donors. If this is not fully

⁸⁹ A Crisis Group report on Boko Haram in Niger is forthcoming.

⁹⁰ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) might supplement legal training.

practical, perhaps a distinction could be made, particularly in Borno state, between those who have stayed local and for whom militia service has been just one aspect of continuing lives, and those who have been displaced or chosen to move and become security-force auxiliaries. For those who have stayed in their community, governments, with donor help, should plan on some sort of association (as paid labour or staff) with the rehabilitation of damaged infrastructure that is featured in all post-conflict plans.

National security is the sector most often mentioned by vigilantes themselves with regard to jobs after their groups are disbanded. Nigeria has already taken small steps. This should only apply to a small fraction of vigilantes, however, because normal educational requirements need to apply so as to avoid further weakening the security institutions. This is particularly the case in Nigeria, where the constitution requires a balance between communities in public recruitment, according to the principle of the country's "federal character".⁹¹ To make it acceptable that not everyone can be taken, recruitment has to proceed in as transparent a manner as possible.

For the bulk of vigilantes, demobilisation must be carefully planned, with grants to help them go back to their occupations, finish education or develop businesses. Such programs are never fully successful, but they help motivate returns to normal lives. It is the least the countries can do, and partners should assist. It would also help kick-start a regional economy that is in ruins.

C. *In the Long Term, Rethinking Community Policing*

Throughout the Lake Chad basin, police are largely or exclusively national. Nigeria's federal police is a dysfunctional, often brutal force, one reason why vigilantes have formed in the first place and Boko Haram has appeared. Some have suggested recreating local forces as a solution.⁹² Given how tense state politics has become in Nigeria, a full-fledged police force at the governor's command would be risky. At least as far as Borno state is concerned and given the likely continuation of some form of jihadist activity and rural unrest, it would make sense to create a federal body of auxiliaries under the army, State Security Service, Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) or the mobile police to accommodate a portion of the CJTF, notably those with weapons training. Transparent recruitment is essential, and provision should be made for their potential integration, if they meet educational requirements and are retrained. This breach of the principle of Nigeria's "federal character" would need national assembly approval.

With the help of local civil society organisations, other selected vigilantes might be retrained and redirected toward reporting and early-warning mechanisms linked to both the police and civil society organisations. This would build usefully on the fact that, particularly in rural areas, vigilantes have become important connectors to the state.

⁹¹ On this issue, see, for instance, Abdul Raufu Mustapha, "Institutionalising ethnic representation: How effective is the Federal Character Commission in Nigeria?", Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE) Working Paper no. 43, June 2007.

⁹² For an analysis that views local police as an alternative to vigilantes, see Peter Ekeh, "A Review of HRW's and CLEEN's Report 'The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture'. On State Sponsored Vigilante Groups in Nigeria", www.waado.org, 27 May 2002.

D. *For a Reasoned Disarmament*

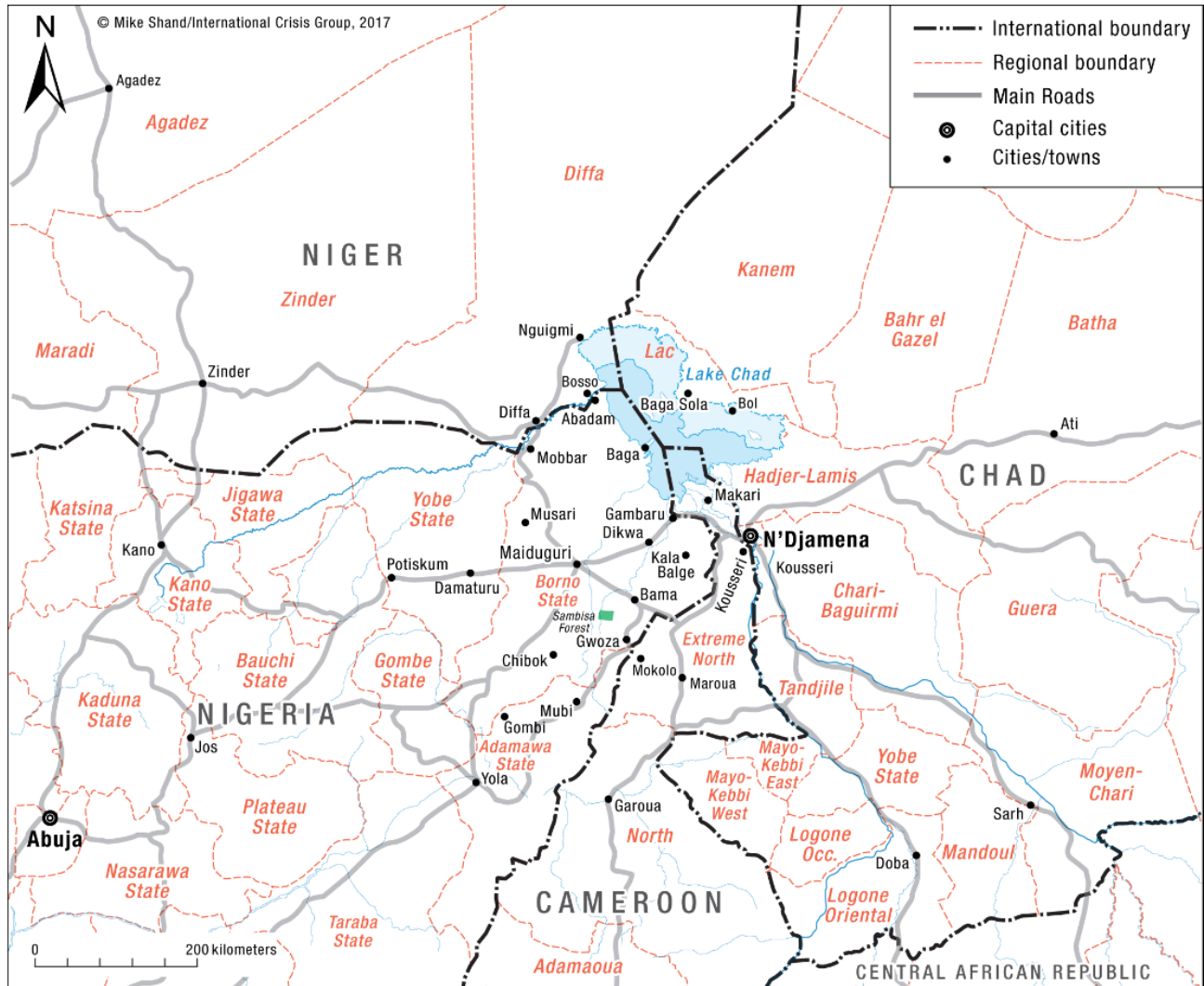
The proliferation of weapons in the Lake Chad basin is part of the structural problems that have fed instability and allowed Boko Haram, at least initially, to portray itself as a provider of (religious) law and order. A disarmament program is necessary. States are already calling for it and have restricted access to gun licences in conflict areas. However, not all guns are the same. The program should be limited to functional automatic weapons and not spend money on decommissioning hunting rifles and locally produced guns, which are easily replaced and less lethal.

VI. Conclusion

Vigilantes have been essential in turning back the Boko Haram tide, but the jihadist group remains resilient. As the conflict continues to evolve, so will vigilantes. They are enmeshed with high politics, particularly in Nigeria, and local intercommunal relations, business operations and chiefdoms. Vigilantism is as much a long-term symptom of state weakness in the Lake Chad basin as a short-term solution to it. To address the drivers of armed extremism, Lake Chad countries must return state presence to the region, not least by reintroducing accountability and law and order. As part of this process, the CJTF and *comités de vigilance* will need either to be slowly disbanded or formalised and regulated. Getting relations and expectations right with their members should be an urgent aspect of rebuilding security in the region.

Dakar/Nairobi/Brussels, 23 February 2017

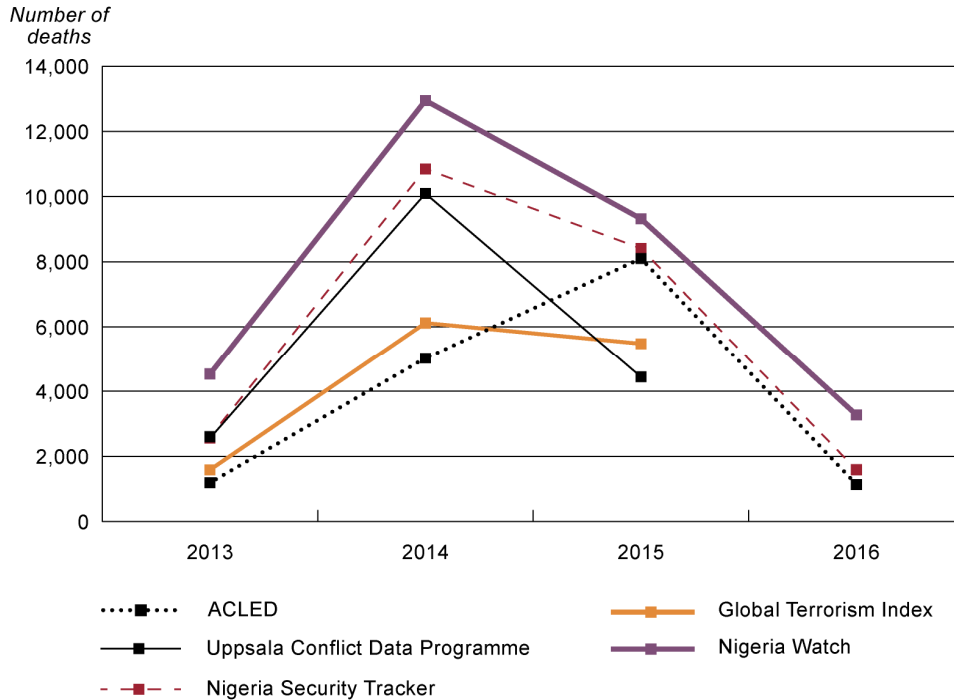
Appendix A: Map of the Lake Chad Basin



Appendix B: Glossary

ANPP	All Nigeria Peoples' Party
APC	All Progressives' Congress
BOYES	Borno Youths Empowerment Scheme
BSYV	Borno State Youth Vanguard
BYAPJ	Borno Youth Association for Peace and Justice
CJTF	Civilian Joint Task Force
CLEEN	Centre for Law Enforcement Education
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
JTF	Joint Task Force
LGA	Local Government Area
NSCDC	Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps
SSS	State Security Service

Appendix C: Number of People Killed by Boko Haram 2013-2016



References: Realtime 2016 All Africa File and Version 6 (1997-2015) dataset. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2016; "Global Terrorism Index 2015. Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism", Institute for Economics and Peace, November 2015; Nigeria Security Tracker; Council on Foreign Relations, 2016; Nigeria Watch, University of Ibadan and the French Institute for Research in Africa, 2016; Uppsala Conflict Data Programme, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, University of Uppsala, 2016.

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Amy Benziger	Matthew Magenheimer	AJ Twombly
Tripp Callan	Madison Malloch-Brown	Dillon Twombly
Victoria Ergolavou	Peter Martin	Grant Webster
Christina Bache Fidan	Megan McGill	

SENIOR ADVISERS

Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

Martti Ahtisaari Chairman Emeritus	Eugene Chien	Miklós Németh
George Mitchell Chairman Emeritus	Joaquim Alberto Chissano	Christine Ockrent
Gareth Evans President Emeritus	Victor Chu	Timothy Ong
	Mong Joon Chung	Olara Otunnu
	Pat Cox	Lord (Christopher) Patten
	Gianfranco Dell'Alba	Victor Pinchuk
	Jacques Delors	Surin Pitsuwan
Kenneth Adelman	Alain Destexhe	Fidel V. Ramos
Adnan Abu-Odeh	Mou-Shih Ding	
HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal	Uffe Ellemann-Jensen	
Óscar Arias	Gernot Eler	
Ersin Arıoğlu	Marika Fahlén	
Richard Armitage	Stanley Fischer	
Diego Arria	Carla Hills	
Zainab Bangura	Swanee Hunt	
Shlomo Ben-Ami	James V. Kimsey	
Christoph Bertram	Aleksander Kwasniewski	
Alan Blinken	Todung Mulya Lubis	
Lakhdar Brahimi	Allan J. MacEachen	
Zbigniew Brzezinski	Graça Machel	
Kim Campbell	Jessica T. Mathews	
Jorge Castañeda	Barbara McDougall	
Naresh Chandra	Matthew McHugh	