

Oyewole Oginni

How to Stop 'Jihadi Banditry' from Becoming the New Normal in the Lake Chad Basin

The violent conflict in the Lake Chad Basin is ongoing. Boko Haram insurgents are now adopting the modus operandi of other non-ideological criminal groups to reduce their risk profile in areas they previously controlled. This change in tactics and the resulting dual identity formation complicates the achievement of sustainable peace and necessitates policy adjustments.

Recommendations

1 Prioritise local perspectives on evolving security risks, including jihadi banditry

There is a mismatch between local and high-level knowledge of emerging security challenges in areas previously controlled by Boko Haram/ISWAP. The perspectives of local communities, authorities and security agencies on emerging security challenges (including jihadi banditry) need to be strengthened. Structured and regular communication in the form of 'town hall' meetings in localities where Boko Haram is active are potential mechanisms to ensure the exchange of information and co-create solutions to the problem.

2 Boost social services in areas affected by jihadi banditry

Most areas reclaimed from Boko Haram/ISWAP remain hotspots for drug trafficking and cross-border banditry. There is also widespread unemployment among the youth, coupled with inadequate social services. Military operations alone cannot replace the absence of the state in these areas and curb (re-)recruitment by Boko Haram. Governments should strengthen service provisions (that is healthcare, education services and employment opportunities) in areas reclaimed from the armed groups and where military operations are still ongoing to prevent people from (re-)joining Boko Haram/ISWAP.

3 Ensure swift and sure justice in ongoing local resource disputes that jihadi insurgents exploit

Poor management of natural resources (that is access to land and water) has created rivalries among different ethnic and religious groups in areas formerly controlled by Boko Haram/ISWAP, leading to ethno-religious tensions due to perceptions of injustice. To prevent jihadist insurgents from exploiting local tensions, the governments of affected countries should strengthen justice mechanisms (such as magistracy and/or traditional dispute resolution mechanisms involving community representatives and the use of restorative justice methods) to be quicker, more accountable and transparent and allow prosecutors, police and courts to work more effectively together on local resource disputes.

Jihadi Banditry: A Latent Threat

Bandits are generally referred to as a group of individuals or gangs engaged in different types of criminal activity who use violence or the threat of violence to achieve their objectives. While they operate outside the bounds of legal authority for financial gain, jihadi insurgents are a group of individuals motivated by a particular interpretation of Islamic ideology known as 'jihad'. Jihadi insurgents engage in violent struggle ('holy war') and use violent threats against perceived enemies, including governments or individuals with differing views on Islamic interpretations. There are evolving and complex interactions between bandits and jihadi insurgents that have raised concerns about how best to address these groups in contexts of conflict, giving rise to concepts such as 'jihadisation of bandits' or 'banditisation of jihadism'.

Bandits are often perceived as less of a security risk to the state than jihadi insurgents who have political ambitions that compete with the sovereign power of the state.

As a result of government offensives and ongoing infighting among Boko Haram's splinter groups (ISWAP; Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad—JAS; Bakura faction), large-scale attacks by jihadi insurgents on civilians and state institutions have declined compared to the number of violent incidents reported in the LCB region five years ago (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). However, this change has been accompanied by an increase in banditry, particularly in Nigeria but also in neighbouring countries. This radical shift reflects the weakened capacity of the jihadi insurgents to violently appropriate the rich agricultural and livestock resources around Lake Chad and the limitations on funding for 'jihad activities'. In response, their ideologically driven agenda (such as the establishment of an Islamic caliphate) is shifting towards the banditisation of jihadism, which we call "jihadi banditry".

The jihadi bandits target cross-border traders, herders and farmers for kidnapping, cattle rustling and revenge attacks. The invasion of farmlands/civilian homes in remote areas appears to be a new strategy jihadi insurgents have adopted to compensate for food shortages in the camps controlled by armed groups. Interviews with defectors in 15 border communities in the Far North region of Cameroon and northeast

Background

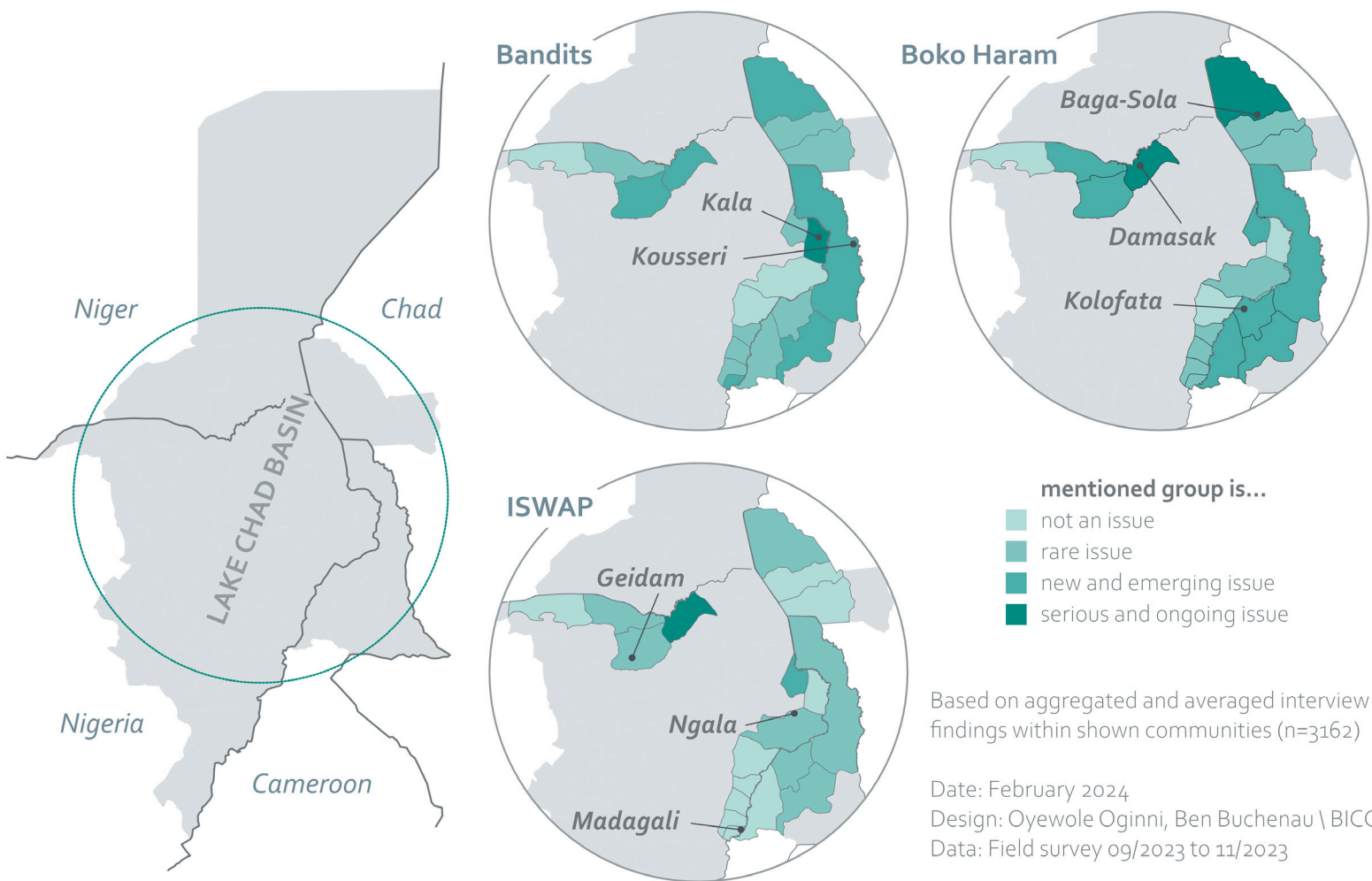
Since 2017, government actors and international agencies (USAID, 2017) have repeatedly indicated that the situation in north-eastern Nigeria, the epicentre of the Boko Haram conflict, was returning to 'normal'. In January 2023, for instance, President Muhammadu Buhari, in a statement from the presidency, expressed his "delight at the return of peace and normalcy in Yobe State and Northeast Nigeria" (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2023). This narrative is not new (Oginni, 2023) and has been used repeatedly by the Nigerian military (Agence France-Presse, 2018), among others.

We argue that while Boko Haram's capability to launch large-scale attacks against civilians has diminished in recent years, this does not imply a return to normalcy in areas formerly controlled by Boko Haram/ISWAP (Islamic State of West Africa Province) insurgents in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) region. Rather, our research shows that Boko Haram's strategies are evolving as the violent conflict continues. Doing nothing risks normalising a new insurgent activity that could further destabilise the region: jihadi banditry.

Nigeria linked the mass exodus of Boko Haram family members and associates to the food shortages in the jihadi insurgents' camps. Unlike ISWAP insurgents, who mainly target the state apparatus, a similar pattern can be observed in the community threat perceptions of bandits and Boko Haram (Figure 1).

Bandits are often perceived as less of a security risk to the state than jihadi insurgents who have political ambitions that compete with the sovereign power of the state. As a result, state forces pay less attention to them. However, our survey in 20 border provinces with 4,575 respondents¹ in areas formerly controlled by Boko Haram/ISWAP shows that where banditry was reported as a serious and persistent problem, so was the presence of Boko Haram. For example, in communities bordering Niger, 72 per cent of respondents considered the incidence of banditry and the presence of Boko Haram insurgents to be a serious and ongoing problem.

The transformation of Boko Haram from jihadi insurgents (with an Islamic caliphate in mind) to criminal insurgents unfolds as follows: First, Boko Haram insurgents engage in looting/property destruction using the same tactics as other non-jihadi armed groups in the areas (e.g. armed herder militias and organised criminal networks). Second, Boko Haram insurgents collaborate with the existing organised criminal networks, feeding into the unresolved and ongoing ethnic and resource conflicts at the community level (see below). Third, the jihadi insurgents maintain a good channel of communication with some community members who help them access the market to sell the proceeds of banditry activities. For example, a participant in one of the Nigeria–Niger border communities shared that “individuals who agree to work with them [Boko Haram] are paid for their services; Boko Haram is not the same one we knew a few years ago, who attacked villages indiscriminately. They operate in a solo mode.”



In the Lac and Hadjer-Lamis provinces of Chad (that is Liwa, Bol, Mani, Baga-Sola), 63 per cent of the respondents held the same view that the incidence of banditry and presence of Boko Haram insurgents were a serious and ongoing problem.

Figure 1: Community threat perceptions in former areas controlled by armed groups

In response to the security risks posed by jihadi banditry in areas won back from Boko Haram/ISWAP, this *bicc policy brief* recommends the following policy responses:

Prioritise Local Perspectives on Evolving Security Risks Including Jihadi Banditry

As noted above, Boko Haram's current tactics mimic the way bandits operate in the region: uncoordinated and isolated looting and kidnapping with no clear message to the local population. Moreover, our study findings² show that more than 50 per cent of the local population could distinguish the operations of the jihadist insurgents from those of the bandits and thus provide an accurate account of the insurgents' evolution as the violent conflict continues. **This provides a window of opportunity to strengthen the perspectives of local communities, authorities and security agencies on emerging security challenges in areas formerly controlled by Boko Haram/ISWAP.** These actors are best placed to advise on how to optimise warnings of and responses to the jihadi insurgents. Structured and regular communication in the form of 'town hall' meetings in the localities where Boko Haram is active is a potential mechanism for ensuring information sharing and co-designing solutions to the problem.

As one of the study participants pointed out,

it is easier to communicate with Boko Haram in the forest than it is to have a common understanding with the military authority on security issues at the community level (interview, northeast Nigeria, August 2023).

Governments should therefore use the regular exchanges suggested above to improve local reporting systems, for example, to address the protection needs of the community members who are willing to share information about potential or imminent security risks and to strengthen security agencies' adherence to rules of engagement in these areas.

Boost Social Services in Areas Affected by Jihadi Banditry

In many communities previously controlled by Boko Haram insurgents, there is a high risk of re-recruitment of the unemployed individuals into jihadi insurgent and organised crime networks due to the difficulties of returning to a normal livelihood, accessing basic services and earning a living. Most of the ex-associates interviewed shared that they had joined Boko Haram/ISWAP for financial gain or to protect themselves or their communities. Participants in our field research shared their experiences of the potential risk of re-recruitment in Nigeria–Cameroon border communities:

About two weeks ago, around eight youths came from the forest with guns. They could not have had the money or means to buy those guns. They were children of the poor (interview, Madagali, northeast Nigeria, August 2023).

...there were female teens at Sambisa; when they returned home, people were celebrating their return. After a few months, these females went back to Sambisa because they had no money; they sold their properties and left (interview, Michika, Nigeria, August 2023).

Despite the progress made by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) in containing the expansion of the Boko Haram insurgents, our field research suggests that areas formerly controlled by the armed groups remain hotspots for drug trafficking and the trafficking of medical products by the jihadi insurgents. In the Nigeria–Cameroon and Nigeria–Niger border communities, we observed, and our study participants expressed serious concern about, the large number of pseudo-pharmacy shops used for trafficking a highly addictive and illegal synthetic psychostimulant drug known as 'ICE'. As one of our study participants reported, "a young man was arrested for trafficking 'ICE' into the bush [that is, forest] in exchange for N500,000 [US \$608] from Boko Haram." Our research also shows a correlation between drug trafficking and

the presence of Boko Haram in these communities. Poverty is another key factor that drives people into the drug trade. To prevent re-recruitment or return to Boko Haram/ISWAP, governments should:

- Strengthen basic services such as education, health and medical care in areas won back from the armed group and in areas where military operations are still ongoing.
- Encourage and implement targeted interventions, starting with the creation of employment opportunities, focussing on youth. This can prevent re-recruitment for financial gain and build individual and community resilience.

Ensure Swift and Sure Justice on Ongoing Local Resource Disputes that Jihadi Insurgents Exploit

Poor management of natural resources (that is access to and use of land) has led to unhealthy rivalries among different ethnic groups at the community level. Due to perceived injustices, rivalries between farmers and livestock owners are especially prevalent in the government-reclaimed areas around the Lake. The phenomenon of jihadi banditry exacerbates an already complex situation and reinforces the mistrust between these communities, creating a context conducive to the emergence of armed insurgencies.

They [Boko Haram and ISWAP] come to places where there are natural resources, because, for example, fish that are now abundant in the river area of Geidam LGA. They are catching fish and selling them. That has been a blessing for them where they earn their livelihood (interview, Geidam, Nigeria, September 2023).

In many communities along the Nigeria–Cameroon border (Mokolo, Koza, Gella, Hong and Mubi) and the Cameroon–Chad border (e.g. Kousseri), banditry is associated with the activities of certain ethnic groups or even seen as revenge attacks perpetrated by perceived competing ethnic/religious groups. Jihadist insurgents are now exploiting the prevailing community/ethnic rivalry to obtain vital information on specific individuals to target for kidnapping. As a result, there is an even greater risk of conflict escalation in these communities due to increasing banditry. To prevent jihadi insurgents from further exploiting local tensions, the respective governments should:

- Strengthen justice mechanisms, such as magistracy and/or traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, involving community representatives and the practice of restorative justice, to be swift, that is, quicker, more accountable and transparent. This will enable prosecutors, police and courts to work more effectively together on local resource disputes and to provide effective deterrence and punishment that will restore individual and community confidence in the justice system.
- A number of initiatives to promote inter-ethnic and inter-faith dialogue and to improve communication between farmers and livestock owners have already been implemented in these areas. However, these are often ad hoc and short-term projects. **Governments and international partners should fund community violence reduction programmes on an ongoing basis to adapt to the evolving violence situation in these areas.**

Footnote

● 1 Survey conducted in border areas in the Lake Chad Basin (n= 4575), covering 20 border provinces and 40 border communities. ● 2 Survey conducted in border areas in the Lake Chad Basin (n=4575).

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bicc – Bonn International Centre
for Conflict Studies gGmbH
Pfarrer-Byns-Straße 1,
53121 Bonn, Germany
+49-(0)228-911 96-22
pr@bicc.de
www.bicc.de

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EDITOR: Elvan Isikozlu
COPYEDITOR: Heike Webb
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A close-up photograph of a hand holding a wooden stick, pointing it towards a hole in the ground. The ground is dark, moist soil with small rocks and pebbles. The lighting is natural, creating shadows on the soil.

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The logo for the Johannes-Rau-Research Community (JRF) consists of a grid of small dots forming the letters 'JRF'. Below the grid, the text 'MEMBER Johannes-Rau-Research Community' is visible.

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