

# Strategic Analysis Paper

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## **Boko Haram: Exacerbating and Benefiting From Food and Water Insecurity in the Lake Chad Basin**

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### **Key Points**

- The Lake Chad basin suffers from multiple security stressors, including widespread unemployment, poverty and conflict. Rising food and water insecurity exacerbates the tensions that arise from these stressors.
- Food and water insecurity contributes to a general belief that the state is incapable of bettering the lives of disadvantaged people. Groups that are opposed to the state are able to use this belief to their advantage.
- Increased migration of West Africans towards Southern Africa could contribute to greater social tension and conflict, particularly in South Africa as hostility toward migrants becomes increasingly common.
- Counteracting the popular belief that the state is incapable of providing for its citizens is an integral part of combatting violent extremism in the region.

### **Summary**

In addition to South Sudan, Yemen and Somalia, north-east Nigeria was identified as being at extreme risk of famine in 2017. Food and water insecurity is the result of environmental change, limited socio-economic development and insurgency in the Lake Chad region. Counteracting the popular belief that the state is incapable of providing for its citizens is an integral part of combatting violent extremism in the region. Improving access to food and water will be an important part of changing this narrative.

## Analysis

The UN [states](#) that the long-running Boko Haram insurgency is the primary cause of the dire humanitarian situation in the Lake Chad basin. It identified north-east Nigeria as being at particular risk of famine and, while this threat has since [diminished](#), the regional food and water security situation remains fragile. More than 2.3 million people are displaced across the basin with at least seven million at emergency levels of food insecurity. The Boko Haram insurgency only partly explains the parlous security situation in the Lake Chad basin and the underlying causes of the region's insecurity have been apparent for at least four decades. Environmental change, lacklustre socio-economic development and a lingering insurgency continue to undermine long-term food and water security.

### ***Long-term Threats to Food and Water Security***

Lake Chad is the largest body of water in the Sahel, a semi-arid zone that stretches across the African continent from Senegal to Eritrea, dividing the Sahara Desert in the north from the grasslands of the south. The Lake Chad basin extends across the boundaries of eight countries – Algeria, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Libya, Niger, Nigeria and Sudan. Lake Chad, the waterbody into which the basin drains, lies at the intersection of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.



Source: Wikimedia Commons

Lake Chad was once the centre of the second-largest wetland in Africa and provides freshwater to riparian communities, breeding grounds for fish and fertile soil for crop production. In 1963, the lake covered [25 thousand square kilometres](#), but has since shrunk by 90 per cent.

The decline of the lake's surface area is [attributed](#) to a decrease in rainfall across the Lake Chad basin and a simultaneous increase in the use of irrigation in the region. Irrigation began to be used in the region in the 1960s and 70s, but had a minimal effect on water levels during this time. Rainfall in the Lake Chad basin has decreased since the 1960s, mainly due to a decline in the number of large rainfall events. The use of irrigation increased across the region as a response to this change, and particularly after two severe droughts in the 1980s.

As Lake Chad is a relatively shallow lake – the average depth is about four metres - its size has fluctuated dramatically in the past. The [US Geological Survey](#) estimates that it has dried up many times in the last millennium and it is possible that it will be completely dry by 2030.

Never have so many people relied on the water of the lake. There are more than [three million](#) people living within 200 kilometres of Lake Chad and more than 46 million living within the larger basin. Most of the people living in the basin are concentrated around Lake Chad with 26 million Nigerians, ten million Chadians and six million Nigeriens and Cameroonians living within the basin. Population growth rates across the region are high and are likely to remain elevated, leading to a natural increase in the population by 2030. Larger populations will increase food and water stress in the Lake Chad basin and, unless socio-economic programmes are adopted, will further exacerbate the security threats discussed in this paper.

<b>Population of Countries Bordering Lake Chad</b>		
	2015 Population Estimate (million)	2030 Population Estimate* (million)
Cameroon	22.8	34.1
Chad	14	22.8
Niger	19.9	35.7
Nigeria	181.2	269.5
*Assuming fertility and mortality rates remain unchanged Source: UN, <i>World Population Prospects, 2017 Revision</i>		

Water is supplied to the lake by two major rivers, the Chari and Logone. Most of its water comes from the monsoonal rains that typically fall between June and August. Since the 1970s, however, the number of rainy days in north-east Nigeria has [decreased by 53 per cent](#) and, as temperatures have risen, the rate of evaporation has also increased. Desertification has resulted in the Sahara Desert extending further south at a rate of [one to ten kilometres](#) per year, further reducing arable land around Lake Chad.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation recognises that the Lake Chad crisis is driven by both [social and ecological](#) factors. Decades of neglect and limited rural development have left the region's food and water systems in a parlous state. The decline of the lake has left the food security and livelihoods of populations that are dependent on irrigation and fishing in a precarious position.

### ***Link between Environmental Stress and Non-state Violence***

Environmental pressures add to wider political, social and economic strains that contribute to the prevalence of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) across the region. NSAGs are broadly defined as groups that 'challenge the state's monopoly and its capacity to control violence in

part or all of its territory'.<sup>1</sup> These groups often employ a range of illicit tactics to achieve their broader aims, creating further divisions within society and increasing the animosity between themselves and the state.

Heightened food and water insecurity offers recruitment opportunities to NSAGs, as these groups can offer alternative livelihoods and economic incentives to those most affected by environmental stresses. As individuals often hold the state accountable for their food and water insecurity, NSAGs can also offer a satisfying response to political and socioeconomic grievances. NSAGs mainly gain popular legitimacy by offering social services and protection that the state is either unable to or uninterested in providing.

Boko Haram, the largest NSAG in the region, formed in 2002 and remains most active in north-east Nigeria. While there are multiple pathways to radicalisation a [UN report](#), informed by surveys of members of extremist groups, found that young Muslims in Africa are less likely to join extremist groups through religious motivation than by a sense of frustration at their social situation. A strong belief that the state is limited in its ability to improve their circumstances further influences their decision to join extremist movements. People from the Lake Chad region are most likely to join Boko Haram through a sense of frustration, marginalisation and hopelessness.

Food and water insecurity is a physical manifestation of disadvantage, especially when Nigeria is relatively well endowed with water resources. With 215 cubic kilometres of surface water available each year, Nigeria is not physically water stressed. As it fails to properly manage, use and protect these water resources, however, it experiences [economic water scarcity](#). According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, 5.2 million people in north-eastern Nigeria require food assistance due to persistent insecurity. The failure of the Nigerian state to adequately provide basic needs to its population, when it ostensibly should have little difficulty in doing so, contributes to the popular idea that the state is corrupt and only interested in serving a particular segment of the community.

### ***Non-state Violence in the Lake Chad Basin***

As the region becomes increasingly dry, competition for land and water rises. Most of the Sahelian population is dependent on agriculture, pastoralism or livestock farming for food and livelihoods, and is therefore highly sensitive to climatic change.

Nomadic cattle herders are increasingly moving towards the south of the Lake Chad basin in search of grazing and water. Their increased range brings them into closer contact with sedentary crop farmers that [accuse](#) them of grazing their livestock on crop fields. In an effort to meet increased food demand, crop farmers have also expanded into areas traditionally used by herders. As the state has been slow in its attempts to rectify land disputes, there has been an increase in armed clashes between the two groups.

The weakness of the Nigerian state in the north-east has created an environment in which anti-state rhetoric has taken hold. Opponents of the Nigerian state have been relatively successful in manipulating state weakness to further their own ideological agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> Small Arms Survey, 'Everyday Dangers: Non-Conflict Armed Violence', *Small Arms Survey 2013*, p. 10

According to Boko Haram's doctrinal pledges, it aims to create God's kingdom on earth through justice for the poor achieved by the rigid application of Islamic law. Its members believe that the Nigerian state encourages idolatry, through the swearing of allegiance to the Nigerian flag or the singing of the national anthem, for instance, and that this undermines the relationship Muslims have with God.

For the first six years of its existence, Boko Haram was generally non-violent and its members preferred to withdraw from society rather than actively challenge state authority. This changed in 2009 when the Nigerian Government began to crackdown on the movement by arresting leaders and other prominent members of the movement. The death of Mohammed Yusuf, the founder and leader of Boko Haram, apparently while in police custody, further inflamed anti-state sentiment.

While Boko Haram activity remains contained in the Lake Chad Basin the group has forged links with international terror groups. It pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State in March 2015 and has maintained strong links to al-Qaeda, which allegedly provided it with [financial assistance](#) in the past.

A joint operation between the armed forces of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger has disrupted Boko Haram's activity in Nigeria. The number of deaths caused by terrorism has declined significantly in Nigeria, according to the Global Terrorism Index. Boko Haram expanded its activity in Niger, Cameroon and Chad, however, which have experienced a 163 per cent increase in deaths caused by terrorism.<sup>2</sup>

While some settlements outside of Borno state are [relatively safe to return to](#), for most of north-eastern Nigeria the security situation remains uncertain. Military operations in Nigeria have pushed militants into neighbouring countries and spread food and water insecurity further abroad. For the fourth consecutive year, farmers have been [unable to sow their crops](#) as the security situation remains too uncertain for them to return to their farms. Landmines and improvised explosive devices also make it dangerous for them to return to their fields. As a result, food security has diminished across the region. Disruptions to health care, clean water services and the increased risk of disease further threatens human security in the region. Unless the situation begins to improve, there is a strong chance that people in the region will choose to migrate elsewhere.

### ***Continental Challenges***

While Australia has limited interests in West Africa, it has strategic concerns across the broader African continent. As terrorism becomes increasingly internationalised it cannot ignore the potential threat emanating from the region. Boko Haram currently presents little threat to the security of the African continent beyond the western parts of the Sahel. A failure to confront the group, however, will allow it to consolidate its position in West Africa and, potentially, lend support to extremist movements outside the region.

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<sup>2</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, 'Global Terrorism Index 2016: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism', p. 27.

The deteriorating security situation in parts of Africa and the Middle East encouraged more than [387 thousand](#) people to migrate to Europe in 2016. While most African migrants choose to [remain in Africa](#), as the European Union attempts to reduce the number of migrants entering Europe there is likely to be an increase in migration within Africa. Most migrants from West Africa choose to migrate to Italy or Greece via Libya and the Mediterranean Sea. As it is becoming increasingly [difficult to traverse the Mediterranean Sea](#), a greater number of West Africans might choose to migrate to Southern Africa.

South Africa, as the most developed state in Africa, is the destination of choice for many African migrants. Its migration numbers are often [exaggerated](#) by opponents of migration. A widely held perception that large numbers of migrants are entering the country and depriving the local population of employment led to violent vigilantism, including against members of the [Nigerian diaspora](#). South African President, Jacob Zuma, has claimed that ‘the numbers of foreigners in South Africa are far more than the numbers that Europe is fighting about’. South African media reports have allegedly claimed that [around 800 thousand Nigerians](#) live in South Africa. Data from the 2016 Census shows that the number of migrants residing in South Africa is not as high as Zuma or the media claim and that most migrants come from countries within the Southern African Development Community, and not from countries currently battling Boko Haram.

<b>Major Source Countries of South African Migrants</b>		
<b>Source Country</b>	<b>Number of Migrants</b>	<b>Percentage of South African Migrant Community</b>
Zimbabwe	574,047	39.6
Mozambique	293,405	20.2
Lesotho	160,749	11.1
Malawi	78,796	5.4
United Kingdom	56,412	3.9
Swaziland	38,038	2.6
Democratic Republic of Congo	31,504	2.2
Namibia	30,701	2.1
Nigeria	30,314	2.1
India	25,063	1.7

Source: Statistics South Africa, *Community Survey 2016*

Further destabilisation of the Lake Chad region, through economic hardship, violence and environmental change, and the increased difficulty in getting to Europe could marginally increase the number of West Africans moving to Southern Africa. South Africa is likely to be

a particularly attractive destination, due to its strong economic development and the existence of a comparatively large West African expatriate community. If a greater number of West Africans begin to move into Southern Africa, it could enforce claims that foreigners are undermining the job security of the local population and possibly lead to increased social tension and conflict.

### ***Restoring the Lake Only Part of a Potential Solution***

Addressing the environmental changes in the Lake Chad basin will not resolve all the challenges facing the region. Social development programmes that focus on education and family planning in addition to economic diversification away from agriculture will also be necessary to improve conditions around Lake Chad.

Some of the former fishers and herders that reside near Lake Chad have adapted to the changing environmental conditions. The land that was once covered by the lake is [suitable for growing highly productive crops](#) such as corn, rice and cowpea. As calls to restore the lake are likely to be resisted by these farmers an approach that focusses on climate adaptation, which would allow them to continue with their current practices, would be appropriate.

Better water and land management strategies, including the modernisation of irrigation systems and the fencing of cropland, would help to reduce disputes between herders and crop growers. Access to family planning, education and the creation of new economic sectors in addition to agriculture will also counteract the destabilising forces that currently exist across the region. Borno state, in north-east Nigeria where Boko Haram is based, lacks natural resources and is largely disconnected from the rest of the economy. Widespread corruption, which leads to the misappropriation of government funds, and the limited power of government in the Lake Chad region, also makes the implementation of these goals difficult.

Combatting the Boko Haram insurgency that has spread across the Lake Chad region will also be necessary to improve access to food and water resources. Governmental responses to the insurgency have, at times, undermined food security. In response to the increased terror threat, the Cameroonian Government [banned](#) some brands of fertiliser, which it fears will be used to make homemade explosives, and ordered that crops growing along highways be no higher than three feet to prevent insurgents from hiding in fields. The Nigerian counterinsurgency campaign has also exacerbated food insecurity. Civilians are regularly forced to flee battle zones and are discouraged from carrying out economic activities to deprive Boko Haram of possible sources of revenue. In battling the insurgency, food and water security will need to be taken into greater consideration. A failure to do so could see regional governments fuelling the very grievances that inform people's decisions to join insurgent groups.

### ***Conclusion***

Environmental changes in the Lake Chad basin are not solely responsible for regional insecurity. These changes, however, have increased conflicts over limited land and water

resources and provided NSAGs with a powerful rhetorical tool that attracts disenchanted individuals to their cause. Improving access to food and water in key parts of the Lake Chad region will deprive Boko Haram of a powerful recruitment tool, counteract the popular belief that the state is incapable of improving the lives of citizens and contribute to a better security situation in the region.

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*Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.*

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