
A political economy of the "Boko Haram" conflict in Lake Chad: terrorism, counter-insurgency and humanitarian emergency

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Résumé

Since its re-organization in 2010-2011, the jihadi-Salafi group generally called "Boko Haram" has led an insurgency which, initially limited to Nigeria, has come to affect neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger. The conflict has resulted in the deployment of a multi-national military operation which has in fact transformed the whole Chadic sub-region in a highly-securitized "military zone", where the space for social life and business activities has been frustrated by the vicious circle of insurgency and counter-insurgency. The "Boko Haram conflict" denomination applies to the far-reaching impact of the war: the jihadi-Salafi faction of the group is none but one of the actors along with other competing factions, with the national and multi-national armed forces, with the civilian-led vigilante-style associations and local political-economic actors. In recent years (2014-2018), due to the conflict, almost every social activity, included subsistence farming, has come to an all-time low. Towns, urban centres and villages have been dramatically reshaped due to security concerns, while the forced displacement of entire populations from Lake Chad has redrawn the demographic and environmental balance of the region, pushing it to its very limit. The wider Lake Chad region has a long history as a cosmopolitan space revolving around the traditional political centre of the Kanem-Bornu Empire, a mercantile hub connected to the broader trans-Saharan and trans-Saharan trading routes and epicentre of Islamic scholarship throughout Central Africa. Now divided

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between
four states, the Lake Chad space has turned into a peripheral zone, struggling economically
within
the new political *découpage* and increasingly challenged by desertification and cyclic famines.
Traditional trans-border mobility and trading have been lowered as the lake's free waters have
become a refuge for "Boko Haram" and an outpost for military operations. The state of ex-
ception
issued by decree in the different riparian countries, besides offering a legal instrument through
which enforce authoritative measures, has further aggravated the situation of economic, so-
cial and
political distress, virtually cutting off the region from the countries' economic heart. On a
microeconomic
level, food shortage and increased sanitary problems feed a lopsided dependence on interna-
tional aid, which is progressively taking the shape of a "humanitarian invasion" and is
promoting the vision of this peculiar lagoon borderland as an ungoverned space at the pe-
riphery of
humanity. This idea is further complemented by the lack of medium-sized economic ac-
tivity,
which has further enhanced "Boko Haram"'s capacity to build up a trust net-
work and capture many
informal economic operators' routes and assets, so that large sections of the
population have come
to rely on it. The role of military forces in the region have gradually overcome
the rules of
conventional warfare and alternates between, at best, saviour and arsonist.
Therefore, purpose of
this paper is to provide some necessary tools in order to frame and understand
the micro-political
and economic mechanisms through which the "Boko Haram" conflict is grad-
ually reshaping
existing notions about extra-legal economies (small-scale trans-border trade,
smuggling,
trafficking), political sovereignty and the security-development nexus.

Mots-Clés: boko haram, insecurity, political economy, state