

Reintegrating Former Boko Haram Associates

Perspectives From Far North Region in Cameroon

By **Saïbou Issa** and **Nadine Machikou**
February 2019

Dominant narratives and frameworks defining pathways toward and away from terrorist organizations invariably inform efforts to stabilize societies through the management and handling of persons associated with these groups. The challenges of applying competing frameworks for the reintegration of individuals are particularly evident in the management of persons associated with Boko Haram, a group whose origins are as religious as they are economic, sociological, and political. In Cameroon, this difficulty is compounded by a heterogeneity of approaches, strategies, and policies developed at all levels and the plurality of actors involved, which include security and defense forces; intelligence services; criminal justice actors; administrative, traditional, and religious authorities; civil society organizations; academia; and multilateral and bilateral actors.

The semantic fragmentation of policies being developed contributes to inefficiencies in their implementation and underlies the mounting tensions and frustrations of individuals on the frontlines of these crises. There exists a wide array of terms whose meanings vary at times in English and French, in policy documents, and in common usage. They include concepts of deradicalization, counterradicalization, disengagement, disarmament, demobilization, and

rehabilitation. These terms refer generally to a set of processes designed to undo support for or engagement with violent extremism and to reintegrate individuals formerly associated with Boko Haram back into society. Variations on the terms used to describe former associates of Boko Haram are equally expansive and include “surrendered,” “returnees,” and “defectors” and “disengaged,” “repentant,” “disillusioned,” “deradicalized,” “rehabilitated,” and “traumatized.”¹ In Cameroon, the terms “former fighters,” “former hostages,”² and “former associates” are commonly applied; in Niger, “repentant” and “rehabilitated” are the standard terms used.

Cameroon is the last of the countries in the Lake Chad Basin region to receive voluntary defectors associated with Boko Haram, and the implementation of an approach tailored to the Cameroonian context is ongoing. This brief aims to inform this process. It assesses national and regional strategies and policies in Cameroon against the realities experienced by communities affected by Boko Haram and individuals detained on account of their associations and offers recommendations for actors at the community and national levels. For comparative purposes, references to the experience of Niger are included.

1 For example, see Abdelassem El Difraoui and Milena Uhlmann, “Prévention de la radicalisation et déradicalisation : les modèles allemand, britannique et danois” [Preventing radicalization and deradicalization: The German, British, and Danish models], *Politique étrangère*, no. 4 (Winter 2015), pp. 171–182; Thierry Toutin, “Dé-radicalisation ou désengagement” [Deradicalization or disengagement], *Criminalistique*, no. 1 (2018), pp. 63–66.

2 The term “former hostages” refers to the hundreds of people having returned to Mozogo, including women and children, who have been temporarily relocated to Zamaï under the supervision of humanitarian workers.

This brief is informed by in-depths interviews conducted with security, political, humanitarian, and academic authorities in Mora and Maroua in Far North Region in Cameroon and in Diffa Region in Niger in October 2018, as well as in Niamey. Interviews followed a semistructured interview guide and were conducted with community leaders in areas affected by Boko Haram enlistees, military officials in charge of former fighters in Far North Region, and individuals held in detention centers for their alleged association to Boko Haram. Various reports and studies were compiled and analyzed. Adopting the terminology used in the Lake Chad Basin Commission's regional strategy for Boko Haram-affected areas, the terms individuals "associated with" Boko Haram and "former associates" are used throughout this brief to refer to individuals who have been in contact with Boko Haram or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), including perpetrators, supporters, and victims.³

CHARTING A SHARED FRAMEWORK IN THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

The commission's regional strategy describes the situation in the Lake Chad Basin as "three separate but inter-related and mutually reinforcing crises: a structural and persistent development deficit; a breakdown of the social contract that has manifested in lawlessness and a violent extremist insurgency; [and] an unfolding environmental disaster that cannot be stopped, but which requires attention and resources

to mitigate the impact on people, and to help them to absorb shocks and adapt over time."⁴

Cohabiting in an environment between economic and cultural fluidity across borders on the one hand and state sovereignties struggling to enforce those borders on the other, public authorities in the Lake Chad Basin region have long lacked the adequate infrastructure, equipment, and personnel to effectively secure and govern border areas. Indeed, the real vectors of the security threat remain the state's weakness in its ability to manage the daily problems of local actors, zones with heightened risks, and vulnerable social profiles corresponding to those affected by extreme poverty, social exclusion, lack of local job opportunities for young people, and an absence of state authority.⁵ The entanglement of cross-border ethnicities and nationalities is equally determinant.⁶ In a quasi-cyclical way, intercommunal rivalries and cross-border criminality have used contraventions, transmigration, and solidarity to involve nationals of a neighboring country in a local conflict or in the formation of armed groups, commit armed robberies, and evade prosecution. Weak cooperation between regional security forces has enabled cross-border crime for a long time.⁷

Boko Haram's influence has grown rapidly in these peripheral areas with little surveillance, where governmental services are inadequate and traditional authorities and familial, religious, and economic networks intersect, clash, or develop separately, each able to act across porous borders. For these reasons, the security crisis created by Boko Haram has been met with a regional response, primarily through the

3 [T]he term "association" or "associated to" is intended to be used broadly to mean all persons (regardless of actual age, relationship, gender etc.) with whom the authorities have some responsibility or authority over (i.e., through custody or otherwise), and whom the authorities believe had some contact with Boko Haram or ISIL without presuming or prejudging the nature of their relationship to Boko Haram or ISIL. In this context, the term "associated to" can also, for example, refer to women and children who may be victims of Boko Haram or ISIL.

"Annex 3: LCBC - AUC Sub-Strategy for Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration," n.d., p. 2 (copy on file with authors) (hereinafter strategy annex 3).

4 Lake Chad Basin Commission, "Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience of the Boko Haram-Affected Areas of the Lake Chad Basin Region," August 2018, p. 7 (copy on file with authors).

5 Reda Benkirane, "Radicalisation, violence et (in)sécurité. Ce que disent 700 Sahéliens" [Radicalization, violence, and (in)security: What 700 Sahelians say], Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 20 October 2015, <https://www.sahel-frontieres.org/en/publications/analysis/perception-studies?download=24:etude-des-perceptions-radicalisation-violence-insecurite>.

6 Nadine Machikou and Claude Lindjuom Mbowou, "Rapport national : Cameroun ; Études des perceptions sur les facteurs de l'insécurité et de l'extrémisme violent dans les régions frontalières du Sahel" [National report: Cameroon; Studies of perceptions on the factors of insecurity and violent extremism in the Sahel frontier regions], Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, n.d., <https://www.sahel-frontieres.org/en/publications/analysis/perception-studies?download=9:cameroun-diffusion-pnud> (hereinafter Cameroon insecurity and violent extremism report).

7 See Saïbou Issa, *Les coupeurs de route. Histoire du banditisme de grand chemin dans le Bassin du Lac Tchad* [Highway bandits: History of highway robbery in the Lake Chad Basin] (Paris: Karthala, 2012); Saïbou Issa, *Ethnicité, frontières et stabilité aux confins du Cameroun, du Nigeria et du Tchad* [Ethnicity, borders, and stability on the borders of Cameroon, Nigeria, and Chad] (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012).

Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), established in 2012 to enhance military cooperation to combat the threat posed by Boko Haram.⁸ Although the MNJTF and national forces have achieved certain security objectives, long-standing community grievances and development challenges have yet to be addressed.

Against this backdrop, the regional strategy was adopted in Abuja on 30 August 2018. Recognizing the interrelated experiences of communities surrounding the Lake Chad Basin, it sets out nine priority pillars for action to generate applicable policies and programs geared toward the short- and long-term stabilization and development of the Lake Chad Basin region. The third pillar is dedicated to the disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, reinsertion, and reintegration (DDRRR) of persons associated with Boko Haram, the strategic objectives for which are elaborated in an annex that provides additional context and definitions of terms.⁹ Contrary to the title of the pillar, the annex puts forward an approach consisting of screening, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration (SPRR) and explains that disarmament and demobilization efforts do not formally apply to Boko Haram because the group is listed as a terrorist organization by the UN Security Council and no collective agreement has been made with any government to surrender arms voluntarily.

The variance between the DDRRR and SPRR frameworks may be owed in part to the quick succession of Security Council resolutions putting forward nuanced approaches. In March 2017, Resolution 2349 encouraged governments “to develop and implement a regional and coordinated strategy that encompasses transparent, inclusive, human rights-compliant disarmament, demobilisation, de-radicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives, in line with strategies for prosecution, where appropriate, for persons associated with Boko Haram and ISIL.”¹⁰ Nine months later, in December 2017, Resolution 2396 specified

that strategies for the prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of suspected terrorists should be developed.¹¹ Programming is currently underway in the region to facilitate the implementation of the regional strategy, with support from the African Union, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, and the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate.

These directives aim to support governments in the region in their efforts to devise policies. Yet, policies at the national and local levels are already being implemented or developed in a manner inconsistent with the regional strategy. To assess the opportunities and challenges facing the proper implementation of the regional strategy, two perspectives must be considered: national policies and strategies and community experiences. For both, a regional and foreign dimension shapes and influences policies, strategies, and approaches.

The number of individuals who actually surrender will determine the success of the policies designed to manage associates of Boko Haram, as thousands of young people are reported to have joined the terrorist organization.¹² The appetite for a policy aiming to reintegrate associates, however, is difficult to separate from the tendency toward security-centered responses.¹³ The “exploitation” of those who have become aware of Boko Haram’s operating procedures is a useful intelligence mechanism for conducting the cross-border activities of the MNJTF against this armed group and is consistent with the pragmatic approach adopted in the regional strategy. The concomitance of military operations and surrenders, however, raises the question on the voluntary nature of the disengagement under such circumstances. Consequently, it is more difficult for public authorities and the judiciary to handle cases of surrenderees, which are not so easy to differentiate from those captured on the battlefield.

8 Lake Chad Basin Commission, final communiqué of the 14th summit of heads of state and government, 30 April 2012, http://www.cbtl.org/sites/default/files/communique_final_14_sommet_fr.pdf (in French). See UN Security Council, “Statement by the President of the Security Council,” S/PRST/2015/14, 28 July 2015, p. 2.

9 Strategy annex 3.

10 UN Security Council, S/RES/2349, 31 March 2017, para. 29.

11 UN Security Council, S/RES/2396, 21 December 2017, paras. 29–41.

12 Joan Tilouine, “Le Cameroun face au pari des ‘désengagés’ de Boko Haram” [Cameroon faced with the challenge of the Boko Haram “disengaged”], *Le Monde*, 22 May 2018.

13 Cameroon insecurity and violent extremism report.

FITS AND STARTS IN CAMEROON'S NATIONAL RESPONSE

The transition from Boko Haram affiliate to civilian is an incremental process that is generally initiated by national and local governments. For a long time, a focus on reconciliation, peace, and development was a blind spot in the security discourse. Strong declarations of war by Boko Haram have favored top-down enforcement and monitoring,¹⁴ in turn leading to heavy militarization.

In Cameroon, a national policy for managing defectors from Boko Haram is beginning to be institutionalized, although efforts remain slow. On 30 October 2017, Midjiyawa Bakary, the Far North Region governor, was the first to set in motion efforts to promote defections, inspired by the experiences of neighboring countries.¹⁵ He framed his operational approach around the model employed in Diffa Region in Niger and placed an emphasis on deradicalization, so-called reverse brainwashing, and socialization. Midjiyawa Bakary recognized this would be a long process that would require the assistance of psychologists, psychiatrists, and other doctors.¹⁶ The idea to focus on deradicalization gained ground in meetings and awareness-raising campaigns carried out by the administrative and traditional authorities. It seemed to be a viable option for communities reluctant to welcome back those individuals described by the public authorities as “former members of the Islamic sect” or “former jihadists.”¹⁷ He stated that screening would be employed “to determine who knows how to handle weapons, and who did what, before the experts come to investigate the file thoroughly.”¹⁸

Credited at least in part to Midjiyawa Bakary’s approach and with the help of traditional authorities and relatives of Boko Haram associates, approximately

50 former associates have returned. Due to a lack of housing facilities, these former fighters and their wives and children were sent back to their respective communities. Returnees swore on the Koran before the village community not to resume criminal activities and to cease all interaction with Boko Haram. Many young people who have observed this type of public procession of repentance do not seem to believe in it. In interviews, they expressed their disapproving opinions. One said that “if they feared God, they would not have aligned themselves with the demons of Boko Haram.” Another stated that “a murderer belongs in prison.” A third posed that “when they joined Boko Haram, they also swore on the Koran that they would remain faithful, at the risk of incurring divine wrath. Is it not on the same Koran that they swear the opposite today?” One other said, “Where they went, they learned nothing about religion, quite the opposite. They first have to be re-Islamized before being given the Koran.”

In December 2017, it was decided that returnees be transferred to MNJTF headquarters in Mora on the basis of the threat they posed. Since then, 246 accompanying family members were returned to their villages of origin, and 84 former fighters have been detained in Mora. In the detention facility, frustrations are growing. Among idleness, successful and attempted escapes, and suspected communication with Boko Haram, these detainees, most of whom have been involved in armed violence, show weariness and even signs of irritation, frustrated that promises of reintegration are slow to materialize.

In reality, the public response is characterized by a significant enmeshment between security-based and administrative approaches, centered on the supposed risk level posed by individuals. Many people are in prison for committing acts of terrorism or being accomplices during such acts. In Niger as in Cameroon, defectors are held in military or militarized camps in Goudoumaria and in Mora, which are

14 Léon Koungou, *Boko Haram, Le Cameroun à l'épreuve des menaces* [Boko Haram, Cameroon in the face of threats] (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014).

15 See Marie Malzac, “Le Cameroun veut ‘déradicaliser’ les anciens combattants de Boko Haram” [Cameroon wants to “deradicalize” former Boko Haram fighters], *La Croix Africa*, 3 November 2017, <https://africa.la-croix.com/cameroun-veut-deradicaliser-anciens-combattants-de-boko-haram/>.

16 Jean Marie Nkoussa, “Cameroun - Midjiyawa Bakary (gouverneur Extrême-Nord): ‘Les 50 ex-combattants de Boko Haram sont tous casernés et interrogés’” [Cameroon - Midjiyawa Bakary (Far North Governor): “The 50 ex-combatants of Boko Haram are all billeted and interrogated”], *Actu Cameroun*, 2 November 2017, <https://actucameroun.com/2017/11/02/cameroun-midjiyawa-bakary-gouverneur-extreme-nord-50-ex-combattants-de-boko-haram-casernes-interroges/>.

17 Jean B. Mbonki, “Le management de la communication par les administrations préfectorales en contexte d’insécurité due au terrorisme” [Communication management by prefectural administrations in the context of insecurity due to terrorism], *L’Institut Supérieur de Management Public*, Cameroonian Ministry of Public Service and Administrative Reform, 2016.

18 See Malzac, “Le Cameroun veut ‘déradicaliser’ les anciens combattants de Boko Haram.”

functionally prisons, contrary to the framework document, which provides, in Niger, that “the confinement site is not a prison or a detention center. It represents the transition towards the social reintegration of former [Boko Haram] members. In this center, all recognized rights and freedoms will be respected.” The detention has lasted for two years, with reintegration not on the agenda, and its involuntary nature creates an impasse in realizing a coexistence between associates and rehabilitated members and the population without mobilizing the judicial response, which is so central to counterterrorism policies.

On the margins of Midjiyawa Bakary’s efforts, initiatives have begun at the ministerial level but not concretely operationalized. The Cameroonian Ministry of Health established a deradicalization unit, which receives little attention. During a cabinet meeting on 10 January 2018, the minister of youth and civic education highlighted the tools of his administration to facilitate the deradicalization and resocialization of former members of Boko Haram. In February 2018, an interministerial committee was established by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, with responsibility for coordinating actions aimed at deradicalizing and resocializing former Boko Haram members.¹⁹ Paul Atanga Nji, the minister of

territorial administration, explained that this undertaking aims to rehabilitate “repentant” persons in a compound to be built specifically for this purpose,²⁰ although the initiative has been repeatedly delayed.²¹

Despite sporadic attacks with greatly reduced fatality rates, the military gains as a result of the formal neutralization and progressive deterritorialization of Boko Haram have been effective, even when the possibilities of leaving terrorist violence behind seemed unthinkable.²² Repentance is perceived as a Trojan horse for future terrorist attacks. Consequently, the help offered by the Cameroonian government seemed limited regarding its willingness to absolve the insurgents and to reintegrate them into society. Moreover, the regional strategy clearly distinguishes between those liable for prosecution and those to be rehabilitated or reintegrated, leaving former fighters with the choice “between a slow death in prison and a quick death in combat,”²³ a situation likely to deter individuals from surrendering.

On 30 November 2018, a Cameroonian presidential decree established the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Committee for former Boko Haram fighters and armed groups from North-West Region and South-West Region.²⁴ The

19 Decision no. 00028/D/MINATD/SG/DAP, February 2018.

20 See “Des mesures pour assurer une réintégration sociale des anciens combattants de Boko Haram” [Measures to ensure the social reintegration of former Boko Haram fighters], Agence Cameroun Presse, 30 August 2018, <https://agencecamerounpresse.com/des-mesures-pour-assurer-une-reintegration-sociale-des-anciens-combattants-de-boko-haram/attachment/5450/>.

21 International Crisis Group, “Cameroon’s Far North: A New Chapter in the Fight Against Boko Haram,” *Africa Report*, no. 263 (14 August 2018), p. 12, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/file/6770/download?token=pxZOe8AE>.

22 For the possibility of a policy of overcoming violence through political pardon, something difficult or even impossible, see Sandrine Lefranc, *Politiques du pardon* [Politics of pardon] (Paris: PUF, 2002).

23 Joseph Vincent Ntuda Ebodé et al., “Le conflit Boko Haram au Cameroun. Pourquoi la paix traîne-t-elle ?” [The Boko Haram conflict in Cameroon: Why is the peace process so long?], *FES Peace and Security Series*, no. 21 (December 2017), p. 28, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/14202.pdf>.

24 ARTICLE 2: (1) The Committee shall be responsible for organizing, supervising and managing the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-fighters of Boko Haram and armed groups in the North-West and South-West Regions willing to respond favourably to the Head of State’s peace appeal by laying down their arms.

As such, it shall be responsible notably for:

(1) Disarmament:

- receiving and disarming ex-fighters of Boko Haram and armed groups in the North-West and South-West Regions;
- collecting, listing and storing weapons and munitions voluntarily handed over by ex-fighters;
- taking appropriate measures to destroy the said weapons, munitions and explosives, in conjunction with other relevant government services.

(2) Demobilization:

- setting up and managing cantonment sites for ex-fighters;
- supervising ex-fighters;
- providing multifaceted assistance to ex-fighters to prepare them for a return to civil life.

(3) Reintegration:

- taking the necessary steps to de-radicalize ex-fighters;
- sensitizing and providing multifaceted assistance to home communities to facilitate the reintegration of ex-fighters;
- helping to reintegrate ex-fighters into civil life, particularly by organizing, training and providing them with tools and means of production and assistance for the creation of income-generating activities.

“Decree No. 2018/719 of 30 November 2018 to Establish the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Committee,” n.d., <https://www.prc.cm/en/multimedia/documents/6765-decree-no-2018-719-of-30-11-2018-nddr>.

committee appears to be a political solution reflecting promises made by President Paul Biya during his inauguration on 6 November 2018. The focus seems to be on the deescalation of the crisis confronting the nation. Reactions to the creation of the committee varied. Some observers of the Boko Haram crisis appreciated the help offered by President Biya, who quickly solidified the option to pardon and resocialize all insurgents who voluntarily lay down their arms.²⁵ Others viewed it as an expected framework for action by the state and national and international partners to implement ongoing and future operations in a coherent manner and to provide humanitarian and resilience support for victims or communities. Still others saw it as a diversion in the face of current challenges that are fundamentally political, notably in the Anglophone regions relating to dialogue with secessionists, and socioeconomic, namely radicalization being perceived as the result of exclusion.

Certain aspects of the approach raise some questions. Among these is the lack of clarity on the relation of the committee's work to the national antiterrorism law and the role of the judiciary. Although the word "amnesty" is not used, the choice not to include the Ministry of Justice on the committee's board of directors alludes to such an approach. In the process of promoting a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) approach, the role of the judiciary is left unclear. The 2014 antiterrorism law, although broadly viewed as needing reform, provides for the prosecution of all terrorism suspects, but terrorism

adjudication exposes judiciaries to new challenges that are difficult to manage due to the large volume of cases and their technical nature. The justice system in Cameroon seems to be locked in a repressive logic, unprepared to explore transitional justice mechanisms.

In Niger, the option of amnesty is being explored. On 22 December 2016, Mohamed Bazoum, the minister of state, interior, public security, decentralization, and customary and religious affairs, announced that amnesty would be offered to those who laid down their arms.²⁶ The consideration of amnesty reflects the decision of the Nigerien government, whose president, Mahamadou Issoufou, has clearly identified the socioeconomic vulnerability of the residents of the Lake Chad Basin region as the main driver of violent extremism by Boko Haram.²⁷ The minister's announcement prompted the return of nearly 200 unarmed associates of Boko Haram, who are housed in the Goudoumaria center for deradicalization and reintegration.²⁸ As an alternative to imprisonment, the state promises returning Boko Haram associates accommodation, security, and access to programs to ensure these individuals are "trained and rehabilitated to be better reintegrated into society."²⁹

Outside those at the Goudoumaria center, approximately 1,300 fighters who were captured with weapons have been transferred to the judicial authorities in Niamey after, in most cases, first passing through a military detention center referenced as the

25 Emmanuel, "Disarmament Committee: Fai Yengo Francis Takes Command," *Cameroon Tribune*, 14 December 2018, <https://www.cameroon-tribune.cm/article.html/23014/fr.html/disarmament-committee-fai-yengo-francis-takes-command>.

26 Seidik Abba, "Niger : 'La victoire sur Boko Haram ne sera pas que militaire'" [Niger: 'The victory over Boko Haram will not be military'], *Le Monde*, 18 April 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/04/16/niger-la-victoire-sur-boko-haram-ne-sera-pas-que-militaire_5112184_3212.html.

[T]he government adopted a new stance consisting of its willingness to welcome and ultimately reintegrate all fighters who decide to surrender and return to a normal life in society... The Government intends to take this opportunity to boost the surrender process to reduce the state of belligerency and to normalize the situation in the region. Through this operation, young Nigeriens engaged in this crazy adventure will be gradually reclaimed and pulled from the grip of the terrorist sect, thereby allowing the country to disconnect from the [Boko Haram] crisis, which is after all a Nigerian affair, it must be remembered.

Nigerien Ministry of Interior, Public Safety, Decentralization, Customary and Religious Affairs, "Document Cadre de prise en charge de la reddition des éléments de Boko Haram" [Framework document on managing the surrender of elements of Boko Haram], December 2016, p. 3 (copy on file with authors).

27 Joan Tilouine and Ghalia Kadiri, "Pour le président du Niger, 'le terrorisme ne peut être vaincu seulement par les armes'" [For Niger's president, "Terrorism cannot be defeated by weapons alone"], *Le Monde*, 31 January 2018.

28 The center is currently under the authority of an officer of the National Gendarmerie accompanied by a representative of the Ministry of Justice. Staff include a psychologist, a health worker, specialists in deradicalization, and a cadre from the Nigerien High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace. For more information on the Nigerien High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace, see Haute autorité à la consolidation de la paix, "Actualités" [News], 2016, <http://www.hacp-niger.org/>.

29 "Niger: reddition de combattants Boko Haram" [Niger: Surrender of Boko Haram fighters], BBC, 6 January 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-38527190>.

antiterrorist center in Diffa.³⁰ In view of the low number of voluntary surrenders, compared to the number of suspected Nigerian recruits to Boko Haram at the height of the crisis, the one-year amnesty proposal has been extended.³¹ Yet, the abandonment of the judicial proceedings against former associates is a prospect deemed unthinkable by Nigerian judges, who perceive that as disregarding the rights of victims.³² As one judge explained, “[T]he camps are a waiting game, and there’s a general problem: With reintegration policies, aren’t we encouraging people to join Boko Haram? It’s a moral problem but also a problem of justice for victims.”³³

Unlike the regional strategy, which accounts for a broad range of “associates of Boko Haram,” the Cameroonian presidential decree applies only to ex-fighters. In this respect, it is akin to the Nigerian High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace, which forms part of a transitional process. The current policies in Cameroon and Niger distinguish between those individuals who voluntarily surrender because of food insecurity or territorial gains made by the military and those arrested on the battlefield or denounced. The initiative of laying down weapons, however, does not guarantee surrender or repentance.

Screening is a prerequisite for any initiative that seeks to create a dialogue with Cameroonian communities to work toward a reintegration model accepted by all. As of November 2018, an informal system of distinguishing returnees has begun to take shape. There were three categories of people returning from

areas controlled by Boko Haram in Nigeria: 84 former fighters; 914 former hostages, comprising 235 heads of families and their relatives;³⁴ and around 600 former associates.³⁵ The role in Boko Haram played by each person is undetermined, but there are indications that the individuals who are returning include many former fighters and individuals who were involved somehow in preparing or implementing attacks. In addition to the hundred or so individuals detained by the MNJTF awaiting screening, those residing in Cameroonian communities still need to be identified or screened and held in confinement until a camp planned in Mémé in the District of Mora is set up.³⁶

In Niger, many community members in Goudoumaria remain skeptical in the absence of a “total cure before reintegration,”³⁷ despite initiatives by the administrative authorities to raise awareness among communities. The establishment of the Goudoumaria center received a lukewarm reception from a small group of N’gourti residents. During interviews, representatives of this group of residents explained, “[T]hey’re not our relatives, why bring them to us?”³⁸ This evokes a not-in-my-backyard-type of mobilization³⁹ of a section of Goudoumaria, which sees the center’s residents as privileged in a region where there is next to nothing. According to one respondent, the perception is that these returnees get “a reward when returning from the bush”⁴⁰ while the mayor of Goudoumaria expects economic benefits for his commune that could form “the basis of peace.”⁴¹ Former associates themselves tend not to accept the help offered by the government. For the past two years, the center has

30 For details, see Nicolas Pinault, “Les repentis de Boko Haram du Niger” [The Boko Haram repentant of Niger], VOA Afrique, 17 April 2017, <https://www.voaafrique.com/a/les-repentis-de-boko-haram-au-niger/3814218.html>.

31 Aboubakar K. Lalo, “La déradicalisation en questions” [Deradicalization in questions], Niger Diaspora, 30 January 2018, <https://nigerdiaspora.net/index.php/idees-et-opinions-nigerdiaspora/3101-la-deradicalisation-en-questions-par-aboubakar-k-lalo>.

32 Nigerian judges, interviews with authors, Diffa, October 2018.

33 Ibid.

34 UNDP, “Reintegration Needs of Former Hostages of Boko Haram Established in Zamay, Far North Region of Cameroon, Maroua: Report of the PVE Group,” November 2018.

35 UNDP, “Reintegration Needs of Former Associates of Boko Haram in Eight Communes of the Far North Region of Cameroon, Maroua,” July–August 2018.

36 The camp will be built in 2019 following a provision in the 2019 budget.

37 Gaël Cogné, “Dans l’est du Niger, un programme d’amnistie qui divise” [In eastern Niger, an amnesty program causing division], *Libération*, 8 February 2017, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2017/02/08/dans-l-est-du-niger-un-programme-d-amnistie-qui-divise_1547256.

38 Administrator, interview with authors, Diffa, October 2018.

39 See Claire Dupuy and Charlotte Halpern, “Les politiques publiques face à leurs protestataires” [Public policies faced with their protesters], *Revue française de science politique* 59, no. 4 (2009): 701–722.

40 Administrator, interview with authors, Diffa, October 2018.

41 Cogné, “Dans l’est du Niger, un programme d’amnistie qui divise.”

been housing individuals whose needs have not been fully met by the reintegration policies, attesting to a real stalemate.

FLEXIBILITY AND AMBIVALENCE OF THE COMMUNITY-LED APPROACH

Many factors underlie the community-level approaches to reintegration and reconciliation across the Lake Chad Basin region. The circumstances surrounding the penetration of border communities by Boko Haram insurgents, the victimization of populations by their own children, and the suspected complicity of individuals that motivated village searches for associates of Boko Haram that were later justified by administrative instruction all present conflicting factors that cause the ambivalent attitudes of the community in reintegrating individuals whom they struggle to designate as “repentant.”

In Niger, the failure of a whistle-blowing policy has revealed the importance of community involvement in stabilization policies. The societal roots of insurgency highlight that communities, well outside institutional spaces, facilitate opportunities for defections. According to one Diffa judge, “Boko Haram has profoundly touched every community, and it would have been difficult to demand that the returnees be sentenced to death. When you look at how the attacks are happening here, the communities are inevitably in cahoots with the insurgents.”⁴² Another respondent says, “The people of Boko Haram still have their wives in the village, and they come to eat there at night. Nobody dares to report them. If you do, they kill you. They were still ingrained in society. The whistle-blowing policy didn’t work; women didn’t report them. You don’t report your husband, son, or brother. It’s a complicated fight because they’re with the people.”⁴³

Nationals, foreigners, residents, displaced persons, and migrants, whether voluntarily or under duress, travel across legal, territorial, historical, traditional, sociological, and identity-based boundaries that blend and

clash in the Lake Chad Basin region. These dynamics make it difficult to pursue specific individuals. Whereas long-standing interethnic solidarities create structure, more modern social constructs are continuously evolving. These developing social relations may strengthen the resilience of communities facing contradictory injunctions, denouncing insurgents or mobilizing vigilante committees against them. All the while, they are exercising a form of solidarity with close ones sometimes forcibly enlisted by the terrorist organization or even returned *manu militari* at the request of the state, as was the case in late 2017 in Cameroon. This ambivalence was already evident in a survey conducted on the representations of radicalization and violent extremism in Far North Region.⁴⁴

Communities and local leaders are placed under quickly shifting demands placed by a host of actors—military, administrative, humanitarian—which are acutely felt. One day, a doctrine of forgiveness cannot be found by an imam seeking to apply it to a suspected murderer.⁴⁵ The next day, his repentance is established before religious and traditional authorities.

Members of vigilante committees in the departments of Mayo Tsanaga and Mayo Sava question whether their own security was taken into account in the decision to reintegrate individuals, some of whom they personally know to have been complicit with Boko Haram. One respondent stated, “[N]obody is interested in our fate; what will happen when the soldiers leave?” Moreover, some dispute the use of the term “former hostages” and see it as a kind of factual whitewashing. The escape from the MNJTF camp in Mora of former combatants reinforces these locals’ belief in what they call “the malicious intentions” of people who come “to spy for and inform Boko Haram in exchange for protection and food for their families.” Looking ahead, one of the vigilante committee leaders warns that if nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) “continue to spend a lot of money helping people who have cooperated with Boko Haram without doing the same for victims, we will be frustrated. Thanks to our relationships on the other side, we will eventually

42 Judge, interview with authors, Diffa, October 2018.

43 Academic, interview with authors, Niamey, October 2018.

44 Respondents stated that jihadist groups were “bandits” (39.5 percent), “notorious fanatics” (18.4 percent), and “desperate” (10.5 percent). The other categories of “resisters” or “saviors” were rarely chosen. Cameroon insecurity and violent extremism report, p. 22.

45 Ibid., p. 29.

find out who did what during their time with Boko Haram. People who lied will be denounced. At this moment, they will have to be judged and punished. Right now, things are a blur.”

Parallel to efforts to reintegrate associates of Boko Haram, the fate of vigilante committees should be addressed as soon as possible as part of the DDR policy. Armed with blades and homemade or hunting weapons, their disarmament seems to pose fewer problems than accounting for their contribution to the defense and security of territories, especially in a context where the state will look kindly on those they have fought and persevered. For the moment, in a volatile environment, neither the state nor communities seem to be able to part with the vigilante groups, whose effectiveness in intelligence gathering and preventing attacks is appreciated. The management of vigilante committees will be a stumbling block when reintegrating former fighters into their communities.

Despised by Boko Haram and sometimes suspected of indolence by the authorities, traditional leaders are the heart of community crisis management responses. Yet, a balance remains to be found between the priorities of defense and security, the rehabilitation of community life, and the prevention of resurgence. Despite the existence of awareness-raising campaigns and the strengthening of the crisis management capacities and interpersonal skills of the administration, no handbooks or formal protocols have been created for the return of former associates to their communities, but they are already there. At least three considerations deserve mentioning.

First, while waiting for potential reforms to the 1974 land law⁴⁶ and the 1977 law on the status of traditional authorities⁴⁷ to allot additional powers and response capacities to said authorities, the responsibilities of judicial authorities must be codified and enhanced to ensure a better community monitoring system. In particular, customary court judges should possess knowledge of the rules, have control over conciliation mechanisms and just practices, and ground their judgments in the context of women and children

in inheritance cases and other matters affecting the community.

Second, the initial stages of national efforts to decentralize the government call for increased responsibilities for the municipalities on matters that can influence social cohesion. The communal development plans should include a vision of peace covering, in particular, the strengthening of coexistence, the promotion of the respect for human rights, education, and the socio-occupational integration of the marginalized—in short, local sources of grievances. There is a need to design representative city councils with diverse human resources to help support local development.

Third, a synergy of efforts between municipalities and traditional authorities would be the best guarantee for the sustainability of local mechanisms to organize reconciliation efforts, monitoring initiatives, and socioeconomic development. The elite classes, youth, women, and corporate associations regulate various aspects of community life by relying on the blessing of the traditional chief’s moral authority and by implementing their projects consistent with local development priorities. This cooperation, however, should go beyond the at times heavy involvement of traditional chiefs in municipal and executive councils and allow for a division of labor wherein leaders can play their full role as conciliators, representatives of collective identities, and project coordinators, while the commune would be the ideal place to implement ideas and seek opportunities. When the traditional authorities (*lamido*) and mayors speak the same language, communities are most able to reintegrate former associates in a standardized manner.

COMMUNITY-BASED PARTNERS

In addition to traditional community actors, consideration should be given to the role played by international, nongovernmental, and community-based organizations. Here too, it is difficult to delineate principle from pragmatism, identify good practices

46 Ordonnance n° 74-1 du 6 juillet 1974; Fixant le régime foncier, https://garoua.eregulations.org/media/ordonnance_fixant_regime_foncier_cameroun.pdf.

47 Décret n° 77/245 du 15 juillet 1977 portant l’organisation des chefferies traditionnelles, http://www.gredevel.fr/index.php?option=com_phocadownload&view=category&download=52:loi-nd-200417-du-22-juillet-2004-dorientation-de-la-decentralisation&id=9:portant-sur-les-communes-et-regions&Itemid=116.

and innovation, and navigate around the regionalization and localization of responses and international, national, and community rationales. The high influx of donor-driven activities and funds leaves few alternatives for implementing actors and populations in the face of inadequate national responses. One indication of this is the systematic appearance of donated goods in the local marketplace. Another is the proliferation of organizational logos or signs that congregate around refugee, displaced persons, and “former hostages” camps between Zinder and Diffa in Niger or between Zamay and Minawao in Cameroon. Their common denominator is crisis management and an urgency to replace one another, but there is a shift toward “stabilization” priorities when security may not have been achieved or normalization has not truly begun. This creates a sense of urgency in a race for indicators of success, the scope and impact of which can only be measured on a small scale. Populations reveal the infinite litany of needs and are happy with what they are offered by nongovernmental actors, while the state is unable to compensate for the rest.

Thus, on the periphery of political and administrative insufficiencies, there is a humanitarian aid and community-level synergy of efforts that the state accompanies rather than leads, in part for want of resources and a subnational stabilization strategy. This relationship risks the state simply taking note of rather than guiding the approach to be implemented. As a result, new challenges in the development and implementation of a national policy arise.

Universities and civil society organizations have helped create a space for political dialogue around this burning issue and provide a platform for stakeholders often removed from public discourse.⁴⁸ These different spaces allow for multilevel governance for the management of former associates of Boko Haram, involving bilateral and multilateral actors, international NGOs, independent public institutions such as the Nigerien High Authority for the Consolidation of

Peace, and civil society organizations, among others, who are invited to discuss with political, administrative, and academic actors conditions driving radicalization and violent extremism and jointly consider responses based on the regional context and international good practices.⁴⁹ Their creation has resulted in the establishment of a decision-making tool; the peace and civil security center responsible for developing and monitoring peace indicators in the Lake Chad Basin region; an international institute for peace, dialogue, and development at the University of Diffa; and an interuniversity and civil society network on the prevention of violent extremism and the radicalization of young people.⁵⁰

Whereas synthesis reports are produced on the dynamics of crises, allowing academics to move from basic research to informing decision-making, governments partially open their archives to help strengthen their own understanding of the terrorism phenomena that they cannot properly assess alone. Civil society organizations and researchers compare and harmonize their readings of the internal dynamics of communities, which mutate rather quickly, according to state injunctions, the operations of technical and financial partners, and local circumstances.

Yet, the rapid change in the typical operation patterns of international organizations and financiers is destabilizing for many local implementing partners, who are unable to keep pace and achieve qualitative results. The concepts of urgency, resilience, prevention of radicalization and violent extremism, and stabilization have been introduced in rapid succession over the last four years, forcing NGOs to automatically transition to new operational concepts without having fully grasped or necessarily achieved previous objectives.

If conclusive results have resulted from humanitarian operations and the relaunch of subsistence or low-income activities for vulnerable groups and

48 One example would be the regional workshop titled “Managing Disengaged People of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin” held in Maroua, Cameroon, during 14–16 February 2018. This workshop was largely inspired by the conference titled “International Symposium on the Deradicalization of Young People and the Reintegration of Repentant Boko Haram Members,” held in Diffa during 15–17 May 2017. Another example would be the training for administrators organized by the Global Center and Ecole Nationale de l’Administration et la Magistrature (ENAM) at ENAM during 3–7 December 2018 on good governance and counterterrorism in Cameroon.

49 Nigerien Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and University of Diffa, “Symposium international sur la déradicalisation des jeunes et la réinsertion des repentis de Boko Haram : Rapport général” [International symposium on the deradicalization of young people and the reintegration of repentant Boko Haram members: General report], May 2017, p. 3 (copy on file with authors).

50 Cellule Paix et Développement, University of Diffa, “Plateforme régionale de promotion de la paix dans la Région de l’Extrême-Nord”; Cellule Paix et Développement, University of Diffa, “Plateforme des centres d’études stratégiques dans le Bassin du Lac Tchad.”

communities, it is fair to ask what the mechanisms to prevent radicalization and violent extremism have achieved. Local and foreign civil society organizations have their shortcomings. For local civil society organizations, most of their members are high school graduates, not qualified for analysis, interpretation, or psychological coaching of the people in need. For foreign civil society organizations, limited knowledge of local populations is a weakness. Questions can be raised about the capacity of these organizations to create a human and social environment that can withstand threats to life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Multiple and diverse challenges arise in efforts to achieve peace and reconciliation after a crisis such as that created by Boko Haram. These challenges reflect the complexity of a new phenomenon that is difficult to address using existing social and institutional structures ill equipped to make predictions and unprepared to quickly incorporate innovations. In light of the experiences of Niger and Cameroon, the following recommendations are put forward.

At the national level, policymakers should establish long-term objectives for stabilization and set benchmarks for their achievement by

- securing regular and sustainable funding for the entire stabilization process through reintegration and community monitoring by state and international donors,
- harmonizing the lexicon and laws governing counterterrorism to that of the region and adopting a holistic policy at the national level, and
- creating a framework of specific mechanisms, authorities, and procedures for the management of all Boko Haram associates, with a uniform, publicly available policy and procedure clarifying responsibilities of various stakeholders and helping ensure proper division of labor among them.

At the community level, policymakers and development actors should support authorities and stakeholders by

- improving the capacities of municipal and traditional authorities to deliver community-led governance, including in the identification and management of local priorities and needs for conflict prevention and resolution;
- strengthening the involvement of nongovernmental actors—civil society, community leaders, religious figures, and academics—in the development and implementation of reintegration strategies and postcrisis initiatives;
- developing an approach for demobilizing, compensating, or reintegrating members of vigilante committees into public and formal security systems or providing them with socioeconomic exit paths; and
- involving community members in the screening phases by organizing debriefing sessions to clarify the affiliation and activities of former Boko Haram associates.

The resilience of communities is being increasingly recognized. Conferring social value on the communities at the forefront of reintegration efforts can make state solutions more effective. To do so successfully, there is a need for cooperation among states, partners, and communities so that universal principles of accountability and acceptability, material and financial support, and proactivity are combined to address the needs of all involved parties.

The path that states will pursue to ensure that their national policies of managing Boko Haram associates will help to bring about stability without departing from national and international standards for the rights of victims and accountability in reporting is still a pending issue. The return of more former associates, the detention of former fighters in specialized centers, and their successful reintegration into communities will bear the hallmarks of a compromise forged by realpolitik.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Saïbou Issa

Saïbou Issa is a university professor of history and security studies, Director of the Higher Teachers' Training College, and Coordinator of the Center for Peace, Security, and Integration Studies at the University of Maroua in Cameroon. His main research focus is on criminality, coexistence, and regional dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin region and Central Africa.

Nadine Machikou

Nadine Machikou is a university professor, Director of the Center for Studies and Research in International and Community Law at University of Yaounde II, and Director of Seminars at the International War School in Cameroon. Her research focuses on the political economy of public reforms and the governance of health and environmental policies. She is also focused on political violence and community management of security issues, particularly in the struggle against the Islamist Boko Haram sect and the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Global Center on Cooperative Security gratefully acknowledges the support for this policy brief provided by the government of Norway.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Global Center, its advisory council, or the government of Norway.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Saïbou Issa and Nadine Machikou, "Reintegrating Former Boko Haram Associates: Perspectives From the Far North Region of Cameroon," Global Center on Cooperative Security, February 2019.

ABOUT THE GLOBAL CENTER

The Global Center on Cooperative Security works with governments, international organizations, and civil society to develop and implement comprehensive and sustainable responses to complex international security challenges through collaborative policy research, context-sensitive programming, and capacity development. In collaboration with a global network of expert practitioners and partner organizations, the Global Center fosters stronger multilateral partnerships and convenes key stakeholders to support integrated and inclusive security policies across national, regional, and global levels.