

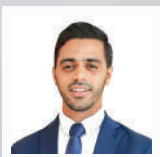


AFRICAN NARRATIVES

Nexus of Climate and Conflict in Africa: Anatomy of the Lake Chad Basin Crisis



Author:



Farouk Hussein Abu Deif

Political Researcher_ specializing
in African affairs

Published by:
African Narratives



Summary

This article sheds light on the profound transformations in the Lake Chad Basin, where the shrinking of the lake and the degradation of its resources have produced a multidimensional crisis that intertwines environmental, security, and political dimensions. Groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State–West Africa Province (ISWAP) have exploited the collapse of traditional livelihoods—fishing, farming, and pastoralism—by converting them into sources of financing through taxation and extortion. This has entrenched a violent economy that fuels their military operations. Meanwhile, remote military outposts, suffering from poor equipment and limited supply lines, have become easy targets for

systematic attacks. Floods and climate change have further exacerbated community fragility, causing mass displacement and the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, which in turn has enabled armed groups to consolidate their influence. Politically, the crisis has become a tool leveraged by both governments and non-state actors, while competition over scarce resources has further complicated the regional landscape. The article concludes that achieving stability in the region requires a comprehensive strategy that addresses the environmental and social roots of the crisis while strengthening governance capacities and regional cooperation.

Key Points

- **Shrinking Lake, Rising Conflict:**

The drastic reduction in Lake Chad's size has led to a loss of fishing, farming, and grazing resources, creating a widespread livelihood crisis and fertile ground for escalating conflicts.

- **Exploitation by Armed Groups:**

Boko Haram and ISWAP have capitalized on the economic collapse by imposing taxes on locals, turning depleted resources into a major source of funding for their activities.

- **The Economy of Violence:**

An informal war economy has emerged, built on extortion, looting, and the arms trade, which reinforces the ability of these groups to endure and expand.

- **Weak Military Infrastructure:**

Remote military bases suffer from poor equipment and logistical challenges, making them easy targets for organized attacks and deepening soldiers' sense of vulnerability.

- **Climate Change and Displacement:**

Environmental disasters, especially floods and droughts, have worsened community fragility, increased displacement, and undermined traditional mechanisms of coexistence, leading to the displacement of over three million people.

- **Breakdown of Social Fabric:**

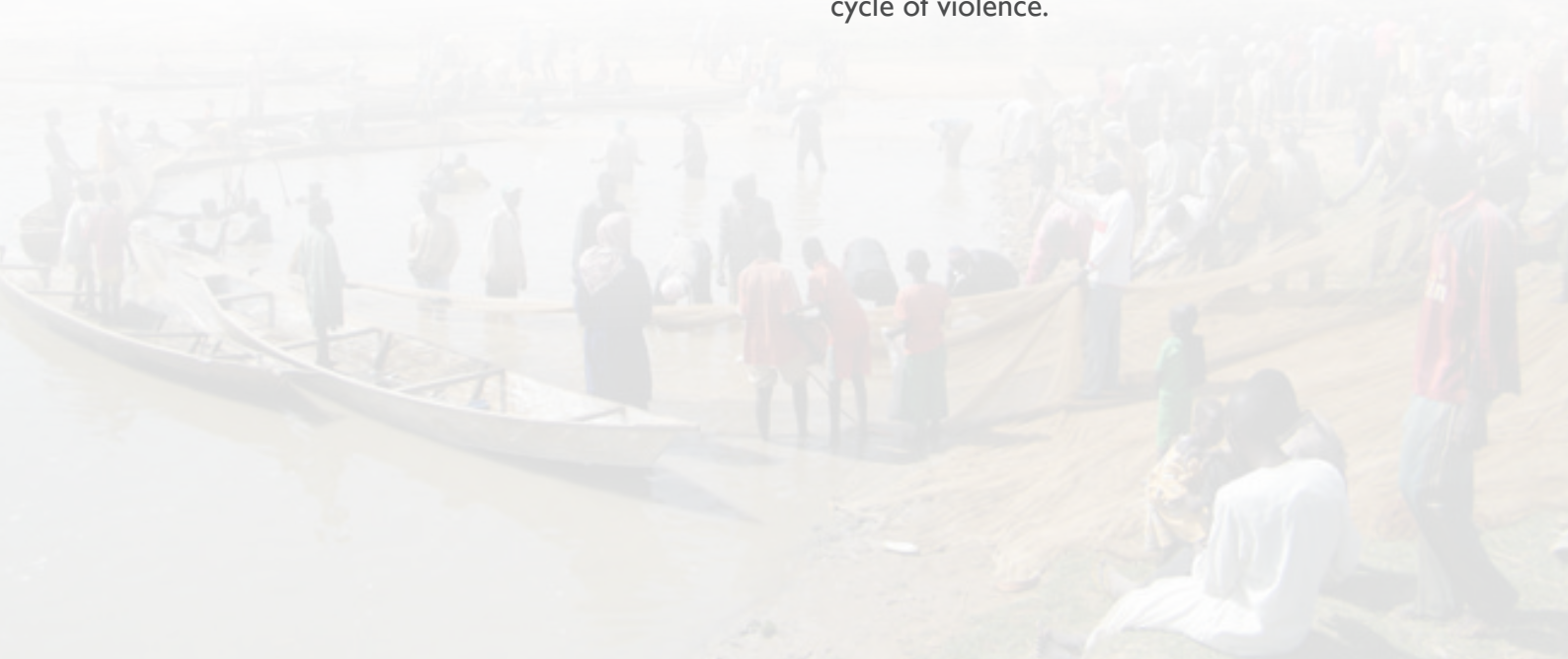
The collapse of traditional dispute-resolution systems has deepened community fragmentation, creating a vacuum for extremist groups to expand their influence.

- **Political Instrumentalization:**

Regional governments have used the crisis as a political tool to secure international aid, while armed groups have leveraged it to consolidate their power.

- **The Race for Resources:**

Intense competition among local and regional actors over dwindling water and agricultural resources has intensified conflict and sustained a cycle of violence.



Introduction

The transformation of Lake Chad's geography has been far more than an environmental phenomenon; it has become a central factor in reshaping the political, security, and social landscape of the Sahel. Since the 1960s, the lake's surface area has shrunk by over 90% due to climate change, recurrent droughts, and the over-extraction of water. This profound environmental shift has directly impacted the livelihoods of some 30 million people, deepening their vulnerability and creating a vacuum for armed groups to exploit the weakness of state authority.

Against this backdrop, extremist groups—chiefly Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP)—have seized the opportunity to expand their influence. They have taken control of vital economic sectors, imposing "taxes" on local populations in what is now known as a "violent economy." This economic control has become a funding base for their military operations, allowing them to purchase weapons, manufacture improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and finance attacks on isolated military outposts.

Meanwhile, the official military presence in the area suffers from structural weaknesses, including poor equipment and logistical difficulties. Remote bases have become easy targets for

ISWAP's systematic "camp-burning" campaign, which aims to seize weapons and expand territorial control. These repeated assaults have not only caused battlefield losses but have also eroded local populations' confidence in the state's ability to protect them.

Beyond the security dimension, climate change continues to exacerbate the crisis. Recent floods have destroyed vast tracts of farmland, submerged villages, and increased internal displacement. As resources dwindle, disputes among farmers, herders, and fishers have intensified, particularly after traditional leaders, who once mediated such conflicts, were targeted by armed groups. This collapse of traditional social structures has left communities more susceptible to recruitment and exploitation.

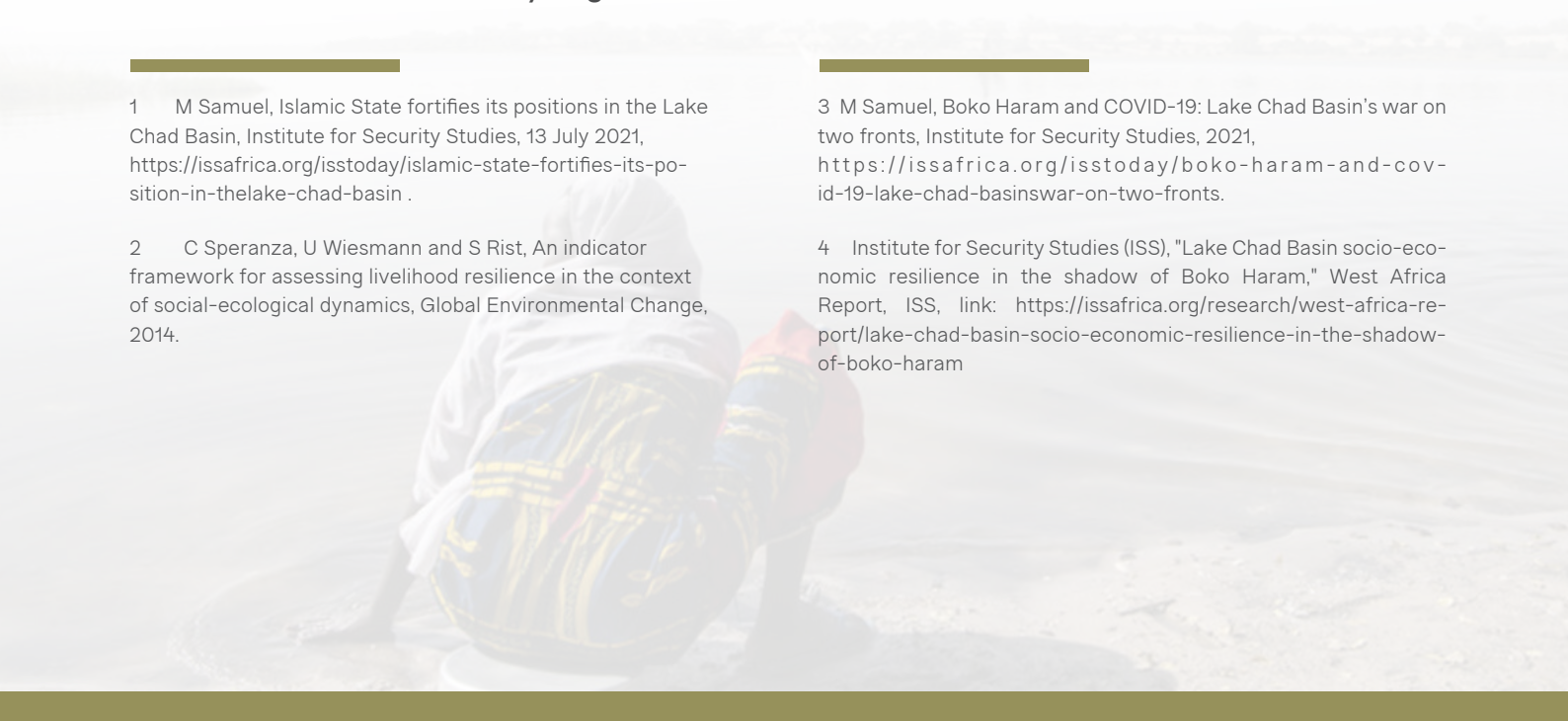
In this context, this article seeks to answer a central research question: **Can the Lake Chad Basin states, along with their partners, develop a comprehensive strategy to address the root causes of the environmental crisis and curb the expansion of armed groups?** Or will the region remain an open arena for violent economies and escalating conflicts, threatening regional stability and human security?

1 M Samuel, Islamic State fortifies its positions in the Lake Chad Basin, Institute for Security Studies, 13 July 2021, <https://issafrica.org/issatoday/islamic-state-fortifies-its-position-in-the-lake-chad-basin>.

2 C Speranza, U Wiesmann and S Rist, An indicator framework for assessing livelihood resilience in the context of social-ecological dynamics, Global Environmental Change, 2014.

3 M Samuel, Boko Haram and COVID-19: Lake Chad Basin's war on two fronts, Institute for Security Studies, 2021, <https://issafrica.org/issatoday/boko-haram-and-covid-19-lake-chad-basins-war-on-two-fronts>.

4 Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "Lake Chad Basin socio-economic resilience in the shadow of Boko Haram," West Africa Report, ISS, link: <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/lake-chad-basin-socio-economic-resilience-in-the-shadow-of-boko-haram>



1. The Violent Economy: How Livelihoods Became War Finance

For the communities surrounding Lake Chad, fishing, farming, and livestock herding have historically been the backbone of their economic and social stability. This foundation has been radically transformed by armed groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP, who have recognized the strategic value of these sectors not only as sources of food but as sustainable streams of revenue. By seizing control of production areas and trade routes, they have imposed taxation systems, turning once-livelihood-centered activities into components of a violent economy where a substantial portion of revenues is funneled into financing their military expansion.

Fishing: Once the lifeline of the local economy, fishing has become a direct target. Armed groups have capitalized on government restrictions on access to fishing zones, forcing fishers to operate under their control in exchange for paying fixed fees on each catch. In some cases, these groups provide "protection" against rival militias, reinforcing local dependence on them as intermediaries.

Farming: Armed groups have exploited the displacement of farmers from fertile lands by taking over these areas and redistributing them in exchange for allegiance or financial terms.

They have imposed post-harvest levies on crops, sometimes raising rates to several times their previous levels, thereby increasing farmers' dependence on the groups that control access to markets, water, and fertilizers.

Herding: The lucrative livestock trade, particularly of the prized Kuri cattle, has not been spared. Armed groups impose levies on herders for the use of traditional grazing areas and confiscate herds from those who resist. The livestock is then sold in markets through intermediaries or smuggled across borders, ensuring a steady cash flow.

This control is part of a broader strategy to establish an alternative governance model. Armed groups have gone beyond taxation to institutionalize a quasi-local administration, organizing economic activities, setting rules for conflict resolution, and providing "services" like securing trade routes. These practices lend them a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of some residents who have lost faith in the state, but in reality, they integrate the local economy into the machinery of war financing and further isolate communities.

This complex reality makes it difficult to separate the economic dimension from the security dimension of the conflict, as purely civilian activities have become embedded within the dynamics of war.

5 VOA Afrique, La culture du poivron de nouveau autorisée au Niger malgré Boko Haram, 18 October 2017 <https://n9.cl/jr43e>

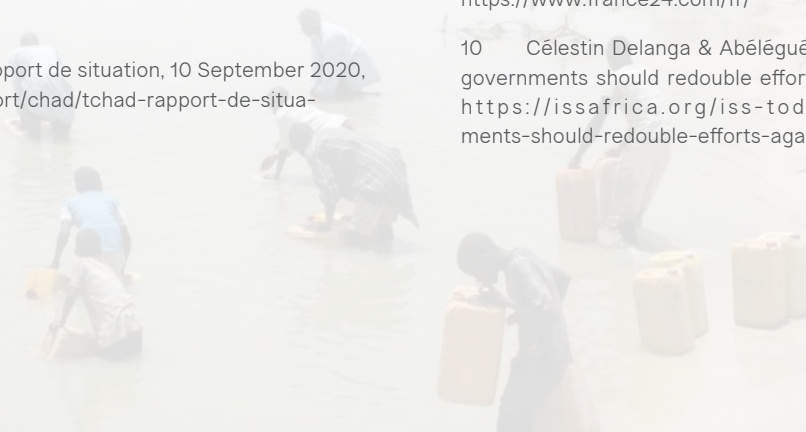
6 Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "Boko Haram's deadly business: An economy of violence in the Lake Chad Basin," West Africa Report, ISS, link: <https://n9.cl/rdOp8p>

7 UNOCHA, Tchad Rapport de situation, 10 September 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/chad/tchad-rapport-de-situation-10-sept-2020>.

8 Institute for the Study of War (ISW), "Africa File: JNIM Seizes Burkina Faso Provincial Capital...", ISW—Africa File, link: <https://n9.cl/lc19e>

9 France24, Nigeria: des dizaines de paysans tués par des activistes islamistes présumés, 30 November 2020, <https://www.france24.com/fr/>

10 Célestin Delanga & Abélégué Alliance Fidèle, "Lake Chad Basin governments should redouble efforts against ISWAP," ISS Today, link: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/lake-chad-basingovernments-should-redouble-efforts-against-iswap>





2. Remote Military Outposts: The Fatal Flaw in Counter-Terrorism

Remote military outposts in the Lake Chad Basin represent one of the most significant vulnerabilities in the region's security architecture. Located in geographically isolated areas amid islands and swamps, they are extremely difficult to supply and reinforce, making them ideal targets for ISWAP. The group has adopted a systematic strategy it calls the "camp-burning" doctrine, in which attacks on these remote sites are designed to paralyze security forces and, more importantly, to seize weapons, ammunition, and equipment.

This strategy is brutally effective. Clashes often last for hours without the arrival of air or ground reinforcements. Documented incidents, such as the attack on Malam Fatori on the Nigeria–Niger border, show troops fighting alone for hours before the attackers withdraw with captured weapons. This breakdown in supply lines not only damages morale but also emboldens ISWAP to repeat such operations.

Geography plays a fundamental role in this vulnerability. The lake's remote islands and intricate waterways offer safe havens inaccessible to government forces, who often lack the advanced naval or amphibious capabilities required. This forces a reliance on aerial strikes, but ISWAP has adapted by constructing underground shelters and fortifications within villages, making it difficult to target them without causing collateral damage.

The repeated targeting of these outposts undermines local populations' trust in the state's ability to protect them, pushing some communities toward cooperation with the militants. Addressing this flaw requires a comprehensive reassessment of military deployment, focusing on strengthening rapid mobility, enhancing naval capabilities, and improving early-warning and communication systems.

11 Fahiraman Rodrigue Koné, "Violent extremism erodes local climate resilience in the Sahel," ISS Today, link: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/violent-extremism-erodes-local-climate-resilience-in-the-sahel>

12 The Cable Nigeria, "Zulum: Army lacks necessary equipment to battle tech-savvy terrorists," The Cable, link: <https://www.thecable.ng/zulum-army-lacks-necessary-equipment-to-battle-tech-savvy-terrorists/>

13 International Crisis Group, *Le Sahel central, théâtre des nouvelles guerres climatiques*, Crisis Group, link: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/b154-le-sahel-central-theatre-desnouvelles-guerres-climatiques>

14 Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "Lake Chad Basin's military bases in ISWAP's cross-hairs," ISS Today, link: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/lake-chad-basin-s-military-bases-in-iswap-s-cross-hairs>

15 Refugees International, "Climate-fueled Violence and Displacement in the Lake Chad Basin: Focus on Chad and Cameroon," Refugees International, link: <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/climate-fueled-violence-and-displacement-in-the-lake-chad-basin-focus-on-chad-and-cameroon>

3. The Political Exploitation of Crisis

The multidimensional crisis in the Lake Chad Basin has become a political pressure card wielded by both governments and armed groups. Some regional governments leverage the counter-terrorism agenda to obtain military and financial support from international partners, transforming the crisis into a tool for legitimizing exceptional powers and restricting public freedoms. In parallel, armed groups exploit ethnic tensions and social grievances to mobilize support against the authorities, deepening divisions and increasing the fragility of local communities.

Security cooperation among the basin states is often subject to complex political calculations, with bilateral disputes slowing the effectiveness of joint military operations.

The media and political discourse surrounding the lake have also become part of a broader power game, with governments sometimes

fying or downplaying the scale of the threat to suit their immediate interests. This manipulation of information obstructs the development of a realistic and sustainable regional response.

Regional and international actors are also implicated. Some major powers view the Lake Chad Basin as a theater for enhancing their military or intelligence presence, with interventions often carrying underlying strategic objectives, such as securing resources or expanding spheres of influence.

Even the humanitarian crisis has become a bargaining chip, with some actors deliberately obstructing the delivery of aid to pressure opponents or punish communities suspected of supporting armed groups.

This politicization of aid compounds civilian suffering and feeds into the narratives of armed groups.

16 Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, From Crisis to Conflict: Climate Change and Violent Extremism in the Sahel, Institute.global, link: <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-andsecurity/-from-crisis-to-conflict-climate-change-and-violent-extremism-in-the-sahel>

17 International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), Unravelling the Niger coup and its implications for violent extremism in the Sahel, ICCT, link: <https://icct.nl/publication/unravelling-niger-coup-and-its-implications-violent-extremism-sahel>

18 United Nations, Activities of the United Nations system in implementing United Nations... (thematic report), OHCHR, link: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77718activities-united-nations-system-implementing-united-nations>

19 Open Docs IDS (by S Herbert), Climate Change, Environmental Degradation and Conflict ... (IDS download), IDS, link: <https://open-docs.ids.ac.uk/ndownloader/files/53147225>

20 SIPRI, Sahel–sud du Sahara: Tendances et conflits climatiques (French fact sheet), SIPRI, link: https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/21_fs_sahel_french.pdf

21 ACLED, "Conflict intensifies and instability spreads beyond Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger," ACLED, link: <https://acleddata.com/report/conflict-intensifies-and-instability-spreads-beyond-burkinafaso-mali-and-niger>

4. The Race for Resources and the Redrawing of Power

The Lake Chad Basin is now marked by an intense competition over scarce natural resources. Decades of declining water levels have driven local communities, armed groups, and states into a frenzied race to control what remains of fertile lands and water sources. This competition is inseparable from the political and military dimensions of the conflict, as various actors exploit the situation to consolidate their influence and reshape the region's geopolitical map.

As resources dwindle, control over specific sites has become a matter of survival for communities and a leverage tool for armed groups. The growing internal displacement has further reshaped the population map, with factions and governments alike exploiting this shift to redistribute influence by supporting certain displaced communities in exchange for loyalty.

The growing internal displacement caused by resource depletion has contributed to reshaping the population map in the region. Armed factions and governments alike have exploited this shift to redistribute influence. For example, one actor might support a displaced community in exchange for political or military loyalty, while other groups may seek to expel rivals from strategic areas to impose exclusive control over land and water.

This manipulation of the demographic map deepens ethnic and tribal divisions, making long-term peacebuilding efforts increasingly difficult. The interweaving of environmental, economic, political, and military factors makes it nearly impossible to address one dimension in isolation from the others, posing serious challenges to any sustainable development efforts.

22 Foreign Policy Research Institute, "Counterterrorism shortcomings in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger," FPRI, link: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/counterterrorism-shortcomings-in-maliburkina-faso-and-niger/>

23 Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "Risks of Burkina Faso's new military approach to terrorism," ISS Today, link: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/risks-of-burkina-fasos-new-military-approach-to-terrorism>

24 Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "Links between violent extremism and illicit activities in Côte d'Ivoire," West Africa Report, ISS, link: <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/links-between-violent-extremism-and-illicit-activities-in-cote-divoire>

25 Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "Does climate change fuel terrorism in the Sahel," ISS Today, link: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/does-climate-change-fuel-terrorism-in-the-sahel>

26 Institute for Security Studies (ISS), "Why a jihadist takeover of a Sahelian capital is unlikely," ISS Today, link: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/why-a-jihadist-takeover-of-a-sahelian-capital-is-unlikely>



Conclusion

The Lake Chad Basin stands as a stark example of the interwoven nature of environmental crises and security dynamics in Africa. Climate change and resource loss do not occur in a vacuum; they interact with weak state institutions, regional power competition, and the rise of armed groups to produce a complex and

constantly evolving conflict. Any effective response must be multi-layered, linking sustainable resource management, the strengthening of local governance, and enhanced regional security cooperation.

The success of such a strategy depends on the commitment of the riparian states to overcome their disputes, build effective mechanisms for regional cooperation, and secure sustained international support that focuses on capacity-building rather than temporary fixes. Without such a comprehensive approach, the economies of violence will remain deeply entrenched, and the conflicts in the Lake Chad Basin will continue to reproduce themselves at an accelerating pace.