

African-led counter-terrorism measures against Boko Haram

The latest developments resulting from the terrorist actions of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region have led the African Union's Peace and Security Council to adopt a formal framework to make the multinational joint task force operational. It is expected that the UN Security Council will also back this initiative.

The recent internationalisation of the Boko Haram terrorist threat

Boko Haram, or Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), is an Islamist terrorist organisation based in north-eastern Nigeria. It is driven by an ideology of violent rejection of all Western values, as suggested by the name 'Boko Haram', which means 'Western education is forbidden' in the local Hausa language. The organisation has become known for its horrendous killings of civilians and massive abductions, many involving children. The most notorious such case involved nearly 300 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok, who were kidnapped in April 2014 and are still mostly in captivity. Since 2011, Boko Haram is [estimated](#) to have murdered over 10 000 people; in 2014 alone it was responsible for [around a third](#) of all civilians killed in conflict in Africa. This reflects a significant intensification of its terror campaign.

Since the summer of 2014, Boko Haram has undergone a [major transformation](#), aiming to extend its ideological scope and [territorial basis](#). Unlike in the past, it has recently sought to conquer territory and has gained control of a significant number of [municipalities](#) in north-eastern Nigeria. It is possibly aiming to establish a Caliphate, as declarations by its leader, inspired by ISIL/Da'esh (the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State') in Iraq and Syria, have vaguely [suggested](#). The threat emanating from the organisation has taken on a cross-border dimension. Boko Haram has made incursions into Cameroon, Chad and Niger, attacking villages and military bases, and killing and abducting people. As its militants move quickly across borders, Boko Haram has become increasingly difficult for national security forces, lacking coordination, to deal with. The entire region is at risk of destabilisation through the massive flows of refugees it has triggered. Some [120 000](#) people have fled across borders mainly from, but also into, Nigeria, posing a major problem for an already fragile region.

Although Nigeria has traditionally been an important regional actor in securing peace and stability in West Africa, its army has had obvious difficulties in coping efficiently with the threats posed by Boko Haram. The Nigerian opposition [fears](#) that the government is trying to instrumentalise the threat for political purposes in the context of the presidential and National Assembly elections, which had initially been planned for 14 February but were [postponed](#) for six weeks. The presidential race is [expected](#) to be tight and the three federal states in which Boko Haram operates favour the opposition's candidate.

Meanwhile, international diplomatic efforts to find a solution to the crisis have multiplied, and military operations took on a cross-border dimension in January 2015. Chad, whose capital city N'Djamena is located on the border with Cameroon, close to the area where Boko Haram operates, has obtained explicit authorisation from Cameroon's Government to act in its territory and to deploy military forces along the Nigerian border. The armies of Niger and Cameroon have also officially [joined the fight](#) and other countries such as Benin may follow suit. Chad's army has undertaken some successful incursions into Nigeria, but the Nigerian authorities have been [reluctant](#) to let it operate on their territory. Overall, coordinated military operations have pushed Boko Haram back onto the defensive.

See also our note entitled, ['Political situation in Nigeria: before the elections'](#).

The concept of a Multinational Joint Task Force

Transnational efforts to combat crime in the region predate the emergence of the terrorist movement. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) between Nigeria, Chad and Niger was set up in 1998 in order to combat transnational crime in the Lake Chad region, but was mostly dormant until 2012, when it was reactivated in order to deal with Boko Haram. In order to cope with the spread of terrorism in the region, the Paris Summit of May 2014, which brought together the heads of state of Benin, Chad, Cameroon, France, Niger and Nigeria, and representatives of the US, UK and EU, [decided](#) to enhance regional cooperation in the fight against Boko Haram, by means of coordinated patrols and border surveillance, pooling intelligence and exchanging relevant information. In October 2014, the [Lake Chad Basin Commission](#) (LCBC) member states (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria) and Benin decided [to improve their cooperation](#) to combat Boko Haram, by pledging troops to the MNJTF, which should have become operational inside national borders by November 2014. It was also decided to ask the African Union (AU) and the UN to establish the appropriate legal framework for cross-border military operations. At the beginning of 2015, the MNJTF headquarters fell into the hands of Boko Haram militants, together with the town of Baga in north-eastern Nigeria where it was sited. It appears that, by that time, only troops from Nigeria were stationed there, as Niger and Chad had [withdrawn](#) their own troops because of security risks. It thus became even more urgent to revive the regional approach to combating Boko Haram. On 20 January, leaders from 13 West and Central African countries (Nigeria was not represented) held discussions about setting up a multinational force to combat Boko Haram, the day after the UN Security Council's president issued a [statement](#) in which it called for the enhancement of the MNJTF's operational capacity.

African Union decision on mandating the MNJTF to operate in the region

The AU recently gave the green light to the MNJTF through a [decision](#) of 29 January 2015 by the African Peace and Security Council (PSC), meeting at the level of heads of state and government. The PSC is a standing decision-making body of the AU, competent for peace and security issues. The decision authorised the deployment of the MNJTF, comprising up to 7 500 military and non-military staff, for an initial period of 12 months, which can be renewed. The mission will aim to create a secure environment, restore state authority and facilitate humanitarian assistance in the affected areas. This decision was taken in accordance with the [report of the Chairperson](#) of the AU Commission. The MNJTF's more specific tasks include conducting military operations, achieving coordination at inter-state level, conducting border patrols, finding abducted persons, stopping the flow of arms, reintegrating insurgents into society and bringing those responsible for crimes to justice. In its decision, the PSC also asked the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution authorising the military operation, as well as to create a trust fund and mobilise international support. This path would be similar to that followed in previous cases, in which the AU sent peace support missions (Mali, Central African Republic and Somalia); the missions were authorised and supported, including through the establishment of a trust fund, by the UN Security Council. The PSC decision also noted the need to address the root causes of the crisis, by improving the livelihoods of the people in the region.

The PSC's position was [endorsed](#) by the AU Assembly at the AU's 24th Summit, held in Addis Ababa on 30 and 31 January 2015. The Assembly expressed its support for the international efforts deployed to fight Boko Haram, including for Chad's timely intervention in Cameroon, and for the commitment of troops by the LCBC states and Benin, and the establishment of military headquarters to conduct operations against Boko Haram.

Challenges for the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)

The approach adopted by the AU has raised some doubts among commentators. As far as the timeframe is concerned, logistical difficulties, together with the attitudes of the countries involved – which have always tended to focus more on their own interests than on a regional approach – could [delay](#) the operationalisation of this force. However, recent efforts suggest that the force could [take shape soon](#). The number of troops is seen [as insufficient](#) to combat Boko Haram effectively, given its [military capacity](#). The problem of funding has not yet been solved, and it will require the UN to set up a fund for the operations.

In July 2014, the European Parliament adopted a [Resolution on attacks by Boko Haram in Nigeria](#), in which it firmly condemned the violence. Parliament held a [debate](#) on the atrocities committed in northern Nigeria at the January 2015 plenary.