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Prospects for Dialogue and Negotiation
to Address the Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin

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Contents

Introduction

For more than a decade, the Boko Haram insurgency has plunged the Lake Chad Basin into a devastating security and humanitarian crisis.[1] The insurgency and associated military response have left 3.2 million people displaced and led to another 280,000 refugees pushed across borders.[2] The economies of the region have faltered, and today 11.1 million people across Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon are in need of humanitarian assistance.[3] Despite some initial successes, kinetic efforts to defeat Boko Haram's factions have fallen short, and insecurity continues and even appears to be worsening in certain parts of the region, as intra-factional fighting has taken hold.

With the 2021 death of factional leader Abubakar Shekau, which was followed by the mass exits of some 160,000 people associated with Boko Haram and occurred during a period of improving security in much of the North East, the local population saw a glimmer of hope. The convergence of favourable circumstances raised the question as to whether there was an opportunity to finally end the insurgency. In response to the sense of optimism that infused this period, and some of the emerging dynamics around the mass exits, UNIDIR and ISS partnered to examine the prospects – and support for – different conflict resolution tools, including approaches that are rarely openly considered for listed terrorist groups like Boko Haram – dialogue and negotiation. Oft dismissed as capitulation, dialogue and negotiations, when part of a broader strategy, can be central in weakening and ultimately ending armed groups and/or finding a negotiated settlement to the broader conflict. Dialogue and negotiation can help provide crucial information about shadowy groups that are not well understood, expose group leaders to outside options beyond violence, weaken groups through defection, and/or marginalize their population support.[4] Moreover, dialogue and negotiation may be used for more immediate, narrow, or tactical reasons – gaining humanitarian access, protection of civilians, handover of children, or agreeing to short term ceasefires. As self-imposed political red lines remain one of the primary obstacles to talking or negotiating with terrorist groups, gauging public perceptions on engagement with such groups, and potential concessions that

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[1] The authors recognize that Boko Haram is sometimes considered a derogatory name for the group and is not the name used by the different factions itself. However, recognizing that the name Boko Haram is often used by local populations as an umbrella name – although this varies by geography and interaction – this report will use Boko Haram to encompass both factions. When reference is made to a specific faction, this will be clearly indicated, and the names (Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) will be used.

[2] UN OCHA, "Lake Chad Basin: Humanitarian Snapshot (as of 28 August 2023)," 08 September 2024.

[3] Ibid.

[4] For example, see Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Negotiating with groups that use terrorism: Lessons for policy-makers." Background Paper (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2008).

could eventually be made to them, is important. With this information, officials may have a better picture of the spectrum of conflict resolution tools available to them and anticipate their constituents' reactions to their use.

This report builds on prior research from each team on alternate approaches to listed terrorist groups and negotiation prospects with Boko Haram.[5] The report details extensive qualitative research undertaken in the four countries of the Lake Chad Basin region by UNIDIR and ISS from May – June 2023. It draws from key informant interviews and focuses on group discussions with military personnel, members of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and other community security actors, former associates of Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), government officials and local leaders, staff of NGOs and civil society groups, and community members across the region, who represent key stakeholders and/or have interesting vantage points on their respective country's counterterrorism strategy. The report aims to contribute to a better understanding of the full range of tools that could potentially be employed to bring about an end to the Boko Haram crisis. Findings highlight a range of key considerations related to dialogue and negotiations – and how different segments of local populations view them – which may be of use when considering dialogue and negotiation strategies.

The report finds that:

- **Dialogue can serve as an important precursor to negotiations aimed at a peaceful resolution of the conflict.** Exchanges between respective governments and Boko Haram may serve to gradually develop trust that had been eroded and explore pathways away from violence for the group's members. Further, dialogue between communities and Boko Haram – both individual associates and the group more broadly – can serve to promote reconciliation and acceptance.

- **A lack of trust and unfulfilled promises are a recurrent issue cited and may be a barrier to negotiations.** Former Boko Haram associates interviewed cautioned that their inclination to participate in any future negotiations would depend on the governments' ability to fulfil promises made. Former associates were initially encouraged to exit the group after hearing calls from Borno State Governor Babagan Zulum referenced promises that they would not be harmed as a primary reason for their exit and had messaged back these

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[5] United Nations University and Institute for Integrated Transitions, *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism* (2018); Akinola Olojo, "How Viable is Dialogue with al Shabaab and Boko Haram," Policy Brief 130, (Institute for Security Studies, 2019); Véronique Dudouet and Karin Göldner-Ebenthal, "Challenges and opportunities for conflict resolution with Salafi jihadi armed groups," Policy brief No. 10, (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2020).

positive experiences back to the group to encourage further defections. However, the uncertainty faced by many who exited as well as unmet expectations over promised socio-economic support and poor conditions in reintegration centers and camps appear to be impacting current decisions to exit the group.

- **Boko Haram factions do not have the same capacity and motivations to negotiate an end to the conflict.** While ISWAP exhibits certain characteristics, notably strong leadership, coherence and group loyalty, that may make it a more credible negotiation partner, it is less likely to negotiate. The group's transnational nature (notably its role as an affiliate of the Islamic State and its influence over the group's actions), maximalist goals and hardline ideology, and present military strengths disadvantage efforts to negotiate. On the other hand, JAS appears more motivated to engage in negotiations as conditions appeared ripe following the death of Shekau and the mass exits that followed. However, lacking the same level of centralized control over its fighters, JAS appears less of a credible negotiating partner and may have difficulties in following through on the terms of the negotiations or mitigating potential spoilers.

- **There is an apparent disconnect between the lower-ranking members and the leadership when it comes to negotiations.** Lower-ranking members of Boko Haram are more widely perceived to be accepting of negotiations compared to the group's leadership. As such, it is expected that negotiations could prove successful with lower-ranking members, notably if key factors that influenced low ranking recruitment – a lack of economic opportunities and livelihood concerns – are addressed as part of the negotiations.

- **Even if the group's highest leadership opposes negotiation, there are influential individual commanders who may be open to negotiation and exiting the group with their fighters, notably within JAS.** While there is often a focus on a singular approach to negotiations with armed groups, a multi-faceted approach that targets individual units or regional commanders could help incrementally reduce the overall standing and capacity of JAS. Entry points to negotiations with these individual commanders should be explored, and safe exit pathways should continue to be made available to encourage further demobilizations and exits from the group.

- **Amnesty will be central to a negotiated peace agreement and will serve to encourage further defections.** However, amnesty may not need to be viewed as zero sum – provided to everyone or not provided at all. Amnesty and legal leniency for lower-ranking members can be complemented with criminal justice procedures for leaders and those accused of

atrocities. Alternate justice approaches may serve as a parallel approach to the state-run processes which could help bring about a sense of accountability at the community level and promote reconciliation and peacebuilding.

The findings presented herein reflect the perspectives of communities and key stakeholders in the Lake Chad region at a particular moment of optimism (May and June 2023), prompted by improved security, waves of disengagements, and high levels of community acceptance of former associates. In the months since that time, there have been a number of notable developments that may impact perspectives on how to resolve the conflict including heightened factional infighting which has seen JAS gaining significant grounds and ISWAP militarily weakened[6] and recent Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)[7] campaigns that have greatly affected the factions by reducing and denying ISWAP space to operate.[8] This is to say, that the findings presented in this report may not reflect **current perspectives** in the region, which may have shifted over the last few months with evolving conflict dynamics. Nevertheless, the findings present a unique evidence base for the consideration of policymakers in the region and beyond, particularly because it offers underreported perspectives of the viability of underutilized tools in the conflict resolution toolbox that could potentially be deployed alongside other kinetic and non-kinetic interventions to address the Boko Haram conflict.

Methodology

The general objective of this research was to understand perspectives on the feasibility of dialogue and negotiations with Boko Haram and its factions in Nigeria and the other Lake Chad Basin countries. For the purpose of this report, primacy is placed on Nigeria given that it has been the birthplace and epicenter of the Boko Haram conflict and is on the frontline of managing the exit of defectors from JAS and ISWAP. While Nigeria is the starting point for the analyses that follow, where significant divergence in Chad, Cameroon, and Niger were observed, they are noted.

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[6] International Crisis Group, "JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters," 28 March 2024; Malik Samuel, Boko Haram factional violence worries Islamic State, ISS Today, 25 April 2024.
[7] Created in 2014 by Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria and Benin, the MNJTF is an effort among these countries to coordinate military operations and counterinsurgency efforts as a regional response to the Boko Haram conflict.
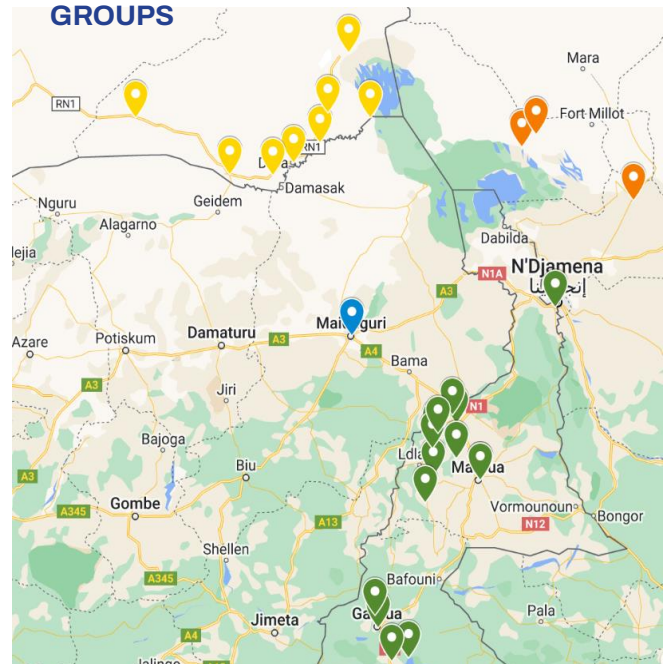[8] This – at least temporarily – resulted in fewer large-scale attacks by ISWAP but more small-scale attacks by JAS, targeting civilians for survival.

UNIDIR (Nigeria) and ISS (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger) ran several qualitative studies that form the basis of the report.

These included:

LOCATIONS OF INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

- 85 key informant interviews in Maiduguri, Nigeria (May-June 2023).
- 69 key informant interviews and seven focus group discussions in the Far North and North regions of Cameroon (May-June 2023).
- 49 key informant interviews and two focus group discussions in the Lac and Hadjer-Lamis provinces (June 2023).
- 92 key informant interviews and 26 focus group discussions in the Diffa region (May-June 2023).

Participants came from key stakeholder groups who may have a stake or role in dialogue and negotiation efforts. For key informant interviews, this included government officials (12 per cent), former associates of JAS and ISWAP (21 per cent), community leaders and community members (23 per cent), representatives of NGOs and CSOs (18 per cent) and community security actors (CSAs) (17 per cent) and members of the armed and security forces (9 per cent). The gender breakdown for participants in key informant interviews was 27 per cent female and 73 per cent male.

A mini survey was administered across all key stakeholder groups in order to facilitate a comparative analysis of viewpoints. Survey questions were designed as a way to understand if, and in what ways, dialogue and subsequent negotiations may play in ending the Boko Haram conflict. Participants were asked for their perspectives on several key aspects of dialogue and negotiations, including who should be involved in negotiations, whether conditions were appropriate for negotiations to occur, and possible outreach strategies.

TABLE 1 – KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW SAMPLES

	Total	Government officials and civil servants	Former Boko Haram Associates	Community Leaders and members	NGOs and CSOs	Community Security Actors	Armed and Security Forces
Nigeria Total	85	12	25	18	15	15	0
Men	79	10	25	18	11	15	0
Women	6	2	0	0	4	0	0
Cameroon Total	69	8	7	24	12	9	9
Men	54	6	5	21	10	4	8
Women	15	2	2	3	2	5	1
Chad Total	49	3	8	16	6	8	8
Men	44	3	8	13	4	8	8
Women	5	0	0	3	2	0	0
Niger Total	92	12	22	11	20	17	10
Men	78	7	22	8	16	17	8
Women	14	5	0	3	4	0	2

Key informant interviews were also complemented by focus group discussions in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. The discussions were held with members of the community, given that they play a key role in any peacebuilding process, including dialogue. As those who are also expected to receive and live with former members of the group, and many have been victims of Boko Haram violence themselves, community members' views are key. Community members were recruited based on their knowledge and experiences in the conflict and their positions in the communities.

Difficulties and Limits

The research took place in an active conflict context and the security situation in the four countries where the research was conducted was often precarious and fluid. In Nigeria, as security concerns precluded the research team from accessing villages and communities located in remote areas of Borno, respondents from communities outside Maiduguri were transported to Maiduguri for the interviews and then returned to their communities. In Chad and Cameroon, the rainy season limited road access to several communities, and several respondents were unavailable as they were engaged in farming activities during the day. In

Chad, Cameroon and Niger, certain subsets of the selected respondents were reluctant to answer some questions given the political sensitivities and local laws about engaging in dialogue with armed groups.

Cultural practices and insecurity made it difficult to get access to women participants in some countries, notably in Chad and Niger. For example, in Chad, several women refused to be interviewed and instead requested the enumerators to speak to their husbands, male family members or colleagues. Efforts were made to include women respondents where possible, including through women-only focus group discussions to encourage their participation. In Cameroon, especially in the Far North, it was easier to gain access to women notably from Christian communities, as women are seen as educators, peacemakers, and counsellors within their communities. Women also play an important role within community security groups, such as the *Comités de Vigilance* (COVIs) and therefore also formed part of those focus group discussions.

Given the fluid and rapidly changing dynamics of the conflict, ex-associates were chosen from the group's factions who left recently in order to ensure their insights were timely. The focus was therefore placed on individuals who left the group within the last two years, following the death of Shekau, as they would better be able to speak to the current dynamics within and between the factions.

Context and History of the Conflict

The emergence of Boko Haram dates back to 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. Originally founded by Mohammed Yusuf and focused on preaching against the corruption of political elites and the perniciousness of the Western way of life, the group gradually slid into violent actions against the Nigerian State and its symbols. Boko Haram took advantage of the situation of widespread poverty and state absence in most of the Lake Chad Basin communities to attract people into its ranks with a discourse that combined religious ideology, denunciation of the State, and the proposal of a new order based on the group's interpretation of Islam. Following a series of attacks on police stations and government buildings, the Nigerian security forces attacked the group's headquarters and arrested Yusuf and some of his supporters. Yusuf later died in police custody.

Abubakar Shekau, who took over the leadership of the movement after Yusuf's death in 2009, enshrined the use of indiscriminate violence, targeting communities, schools, security services, as well as other symbols of the State. The group's abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, in April 2014 increased its international visibility. Starting in 2013, the group extended its actions in Cameroon, then in Niger and Chad and by 2015, the group was conducting attacks in each country, including in the heart of the Chadian capital. At its height in 2014, Boko Haram was the deadliest terrorist group globally, responsible for over 6,000 deaths that year alone.[9]

In March 2015, the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), becoming its official affiliate in the Lake Chad Basin, and rebranding itself as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). However, internal disagreements over the group's approach – primarily over the treatment of Muslim civilians and IS overview of internal dynamics – led to a split in the group's central leadership, splintering the group into two factions. Abu Musab al-Barnawi headed the faction known as ISWAP from 2016 to 2018 and again from 2021 to 2023, while Shekau continued to lead the faction known as JAS until his death in May 2021 when intra-factional fighting culminated in an ISWAP attack on JAS' Sambisa Forest stronghold south of Maiduguri.[10] Although given the option of surrendering to ISWAP, Shekau instead detonated a suicide vest, killing himself and others. Following his death, more than 160,000 people who had been associated with the group or lived in areas under its control left Sambisa and surrendered to the Nigerian Government.[11] Although reduced in size, Shekau's followers continue to operate, led by Bakura Doro, and intra-factional fighting continues to this day.

Efforts in Ending the Boko Haram Conflict – Military Efforts Punctuated by Tactical Negotiations

The use of kinetic force has been the predominant strategy of the four affected countries in the Lake Chad Basin in combating the Boko Haram insurgency. The largely military strategy that

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[9] Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index* (2015).
[10] After some leadership changes between 2016 and 2020, al-Barnawi returned as the leadership of the faction in early 2021 and then led the attack in Sambisa that resulted in Shekau's death.
[11] Daily Nigerian, "Over 160,000 Boko Haram insurgents surrender to Nigerian troops – Zulum," 28 November 2023

was pursued alongside interventions and policies to promote armed group defections, has been punctuated, however, with a slew of tactical negotiations, and in the early days of the group, attempts at dialogue. Two years after the group's initial uprising in Maiduguri, at a time when the group's military capacity was rapidly growing, the first attempt at dialogue between the Nigerian government and JAS occurred. Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo met with Babakura Fugu, the brother-in-law of Mohammed Yusuf in September 2011.[12] The Obasanjo talks, as they were referred to, were reportedly initiated at the request of aggrieved JAS members and centred around objections to the handling of the 2009 uprising, including the rebuilding of mosques, schools, and homes destroyed by the government; the release of detainees; and compensation to the families of those killed by security personnel.[13] The talks were however cut short by Fugu's assassination. Initial suspicions pointed towards JAS members opposed to the talks, although the group strongly refuted this.[14]

A second attempt at dialogue occurred shortly thereafter in March 2012, when JAS voluntarily chose the president of the Supreme Council for Sharia, Sheikh Ahmed Datti, as an intermediary for negotiations.[15] Pre-conditions for dialogue once more centred around the release of detainees and the guarantee of safety for its leaders.[16] Having selected a trusted intermediary of its choice, JAS leadership was reportedly serious in its commitment to dialogue, with the group going insofar as nominating members to attend the dialogue.[17] However, the initiative came to an unexpected end when JAS' chosen representative for the dialogue was arrested in Kaduna, Nigeria during preparatory meetings for the peace talks.[18] News of the talks was shortly thereafter leaked to the press, with Sheikh Ahmed Datti accusing the government of insincerity.[19] JAS publicly criticized the "outright deception and betrayal" and announced that they would not engage in any further talks with the government in light of what had occurred.[20]

[12] Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, "A Matter of Faith? Negotiations with Boko Haram in Nigeria," *International Negotiation*, Vol 25, no.3 (2020).

[13] International Crisis Group, "Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," Africa Report no. 216 (Brussels, 2014).

[14] Akinola Olojo, "Engaging Boko Haram: Militarization, Mediation, or Both?," *IPI Gobal Observatory,* 26 September 2012

[15] Daniel E. Agbiboa, "Peace at Daggers Drawn? Boko Haram and the State of Emergency in Nigeria." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* Vol 37, no.1 (2014); International Crisis Group, "Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," Africa Report no. 216 (Brussels, 2014).

[16] Ibid.

[17] Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, "A Matter of Faith? Negotiations with Boko Haram in Nigeria," *International Negotiation* Vol 25, no.3 (2020).

[18] International Crisis Group, "Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," Africa Report no. 216 (Brussels, 2014).

[19] Akinola Olojo, "How Viable is Dialogue with al Shabaab and Boko Haram," Policy Brief 130, (Institute for Security Studies, 2019).

[20] Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

As initial attempts at dialogue failed, the kinetic response to the crisis escalated. In 2015, the MNJTF received deployment authorization[21] and its subsequent military campaigns eventually succeeded in reducing the group's territorial control. Despite marking a regionalization and further militarization of the crisis response,[22] Boko Haram has proven adept at adapting its tactics. As the MJNTF pushed the group into more rural areas, they reverted to guerrilla-style tactics and employed suicide bombings and the use of improvised explosive devices.[23] Since 2019, the Nigerian military has resorted to a so-called 'super camp' strategy, which sees soldiers pulled from smaller posts into larger, more fortified camps to prevent Boko Haram from overrunning camps.[24] While this has reduced military casualties, it has nevertheless left civilians exposed to more attacks, notably in rural areas.[25] Excessive militarization and the corresponding environment of armed violence have inadvertently amplified grievances among affected communities, with some indications that this alienation of the civilian population may have served to bolster Boko Haram's ranks.[26]

Parallel to counterinsurgency efforts, several tactical negotiations for the release of hostages occurred during the aforementioned period. The most covered was the kidnapping of 276 Chibok girls in 2014, which marked "an important turning point in the conflict and critical for continued negotiation attempts, which henceforth focused almost exclusively on the release of the girls."[27] Several negotiation tracks were reportedly initiated in the wake of the attack, including one led by the Chadian government, and another facilitated by the Swiss and the International Committee of the Red Cross.[28] The inauguration of a new administration under President Buhari, who had previously signalled opposition to negotiations, along with internal rifts in Boko Haram leadership, presented significant obstacles to negotiations.[29] While ultimately a number of the girls were released following two rounds of the Swiss-led negotiations, the negotiation agenda was not extended beyond the release of the Chibok girls, despite hopes that the negotiations could be a springboard to facilitate a broader settlement towards peace in the North East.[30] According to one source, the Nigerian government and

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[21] Multinational Joint Task Force "About the Force", 27 March 2024

[22] William Assanvo, Jeannine Ella A Abatan and Wendyam Aristide Sawadogo, "Assessing the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram," Issue 19, (Institute for Security Studies, 2016).

[23] Saskia Brechenmacher, "Stabilizing Northeast Nigeria After Boko Haram," Working Paper, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019).

[24] The Guardian, "Army opens 20 super camps to check terrorism in North East," 04 September 2019.

[25] Malik Samuel, "Nigeria's super camps leave civilians exposed to terrorists," ISS Today, 30 November 2020.

[26] Saskia Brechenmacher, "Stabilizing Northeast Nigeria After Boko Haram," Working Paper (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019).

[27] Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, "A Matter of Faith? Negotiations with Boko Haram in Nigeria," *International Negotiation*, Vol 25, no.3 (2020).

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

some members of the mediation team reportedly were against any further efforts aimed at a broader resolution of the conflict.[31]

Nigerian government engaged with both factions in simultaneous negotiations for the release of oil explorers and policewomen abducted by ISWAP and JAS, respectively. These 2018 negotiations reportedly formed part of a broader negotiation effort to try to end hostilities and included discussions about the release of detained Boko Haram associates, ending attacks against civilians, and possible amnesty for those who surrendered.[32] While all the hostages covered by the more narrow negotiations were eventually released, the broader negotiation initiative did not end the attacks or make progress toward a negotiated resolution of the conflict.

Several important lessons can be drawn from the past efforts at dialogue and negotiations that have been reported. It must be acknowledged that most negotiations with terrorist groups occur in secret, many are never revealed, and even when there is some reporting on negotiations, it can be difficult to ascertain the details necessary to fully interrogate their impact. That said, from what we know, it appears that with regard to the negotiation efforts mentioned above, the initiative to seek dialogue came from either Boko Haram members themselves or third parties seeking to facilitate dialogue, rather than from governments. Despite at least two government committees set up to identify avenues for dialogue, [33] the government of Nigeria does not appear to have played a significant role in initiating direct dialogue with the group to date.[34] In other instances, the government's publicizing of talks, without the apparent knowledge of the group and without an agreement being reached, appears to have derailed negotiations. These experiences have further served to decrease Boko Haram's trust in the promise and usefulness of negotiations. In light of this history, it can be contended that any future attempts at negotiations would benefit from the involvement of external mediators and negotiators to bring the two parties to the table and help build trust that was eroded by past negotiations.

Further, the agenda of past negotiations may shed light on some of the central demands that could feature in any future strategic negotiations. Initial attempts at dialogue and negotiations (before the group's violence and reach expanded exponentially) were primarily driven by Boko

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Premium Times, "How Nigerian govt, Boko Haram negotiated ceasefire, release of militants," 26 February 2018
[33] In 2011, a presidential committee consisting of eight members was formed to provide recommendations for ending violence in the North East. The committee's report, which recommended amnesty for members who denounced violence and broader talks, was dismissed by the government. In 2013, President Goodluck Jonathan established a 26-person "Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful resolution of Security Challenges in the North" which was tasked with exploring a framework for amnesty and disarmament of the groups. Despite public announcements from the government that Boko Haram agreed to a ceasefire agreement, Shekau refuted these claims.
[34] Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, "A Matter of Faith? Negotiations with Boko Haram in Nigeria," *International Negotiation,* Vol 25, no.3 (2020).

Haram's grievances against the government, namely the release of detained group members and the payment of compensation to the families of those killed in security crackdowns. Opportunities to engage in broader peace negotiations faltered after the escalation of the armed conflict in 2013, which were then replaced by tactical negotiations primarily concerned with ceasefires or the release of hostages. Notably, to date, negotiations do not appear to have centred around the group's religious demands, namely the implementation of Sharia law or the establishment of an Islamic caliphate.[35] This may be due to insufficient evidence available on negotiations, and/or the fact that the group's religious claims are already in part realized: the extension of Sharia law into criminal matters dates back to 2000 in both the North East states of Borno and Yobe.[36] While the degree of application of Sharia in these areas may continue to be a matter in question for the group, its exclusion from the negotiating agenda may reflect that religious claims are only one aspect of the group's objectives. Rather, these religious ambitions may reflect a critique of the state embodied in that ideology, which saw Western values undermining the pious Muslim existence sought after by its leaders.[37] Indeed, the repeated emphasis on grievances such as accountability and compensation for extrajudicial killings at the hands of security forces and detention of group members may be more important than previously recognized.[38] If there are future negotiations, addressing some of these specific grievances – and other, more recent excessive force claims – may go a long way as a show of good faith in engaging in credible negotiations that seek to move into the strategic realm.

A key part of the response to Boko Haram has been the exit programmes designed to incentivize individuals to come out of the group and reintegrate into civilian life. These programmes have required dialogue (even if one-sided in the form of communication campaigns about amnesty offers) and at times, negotiation. These programmes include Operation Safe Corridor, a federal programme established in 2016 that targets low-level individuals;[39] the Sulhu programme for high-level individuals who held roles of importance with the group;[40] and in recent years, the Borno Model,[41] which has received thousands of surrenders to date. These efforts are relevant to mention here, as they overlap with dialogue and negotiation efforts, and often serve similar goals. In addition to providing a bridge to peace, these programmes serve to deplete the ranks of Boko Haram's factions and thus reduce their

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[35] Ibid.
[36] Heather Bourbeau with Dr Muhammad Sani Umar and Peter Bauman "Shari'ah Criminal Law in Northern Nigeria" (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2019)
[37] Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, "A Matter of Faith? Negotiations with Boko Haram in Nigeria," *International Negotiation,* Vol 25, no.3 (2020).
[38] Ibid.
[39] International Crisis Group, "An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor," 19 March 2021.
[40] The New Humanitarian, "Nigeria's secret programme to lure top Boko Haram defectors ," 19 August 2021
[41] May Salem, Lina Raafat,Maya Ragab and Norhan Amin, *Advancing Holistic and Comprehensive Efforts to Confront Africa's Growing Terrorism Challenge*, (CCCPA, 2022).

overall capacity to fight. Over time, such programmes could help build trust in the government's messaging to *potential* defectors, who while still in the group can influence its approach to dialogue and negotiations. For example, for several years now, the Borno State Government has issued radio messages and distributed flyers calling upon fighters to put down their weapons and come out of the group. Although there is limited visibility on how these calls fit into a grand strategy to end the conflict, they are arguably an example of well-timed and successful outreach. As individuals came out, they were encouraged to communicate their experiences back to those still with the factions, resulting in a cascade effect of surrenders. Indeed, respondents interviewed for this study mentioned that they had trusted the message as it came from the Borno State Governor himself – and perhaps more importantly – because the promises from the Governor that they would not be harmed if they defected were bolstered by the experiences of those who left before them and had messaged back that they had not been harmed.[42] The impact and sustainability of these efforts will have to be assessed over time and will likely yield insights that are important for future dialogue (as well as one-sided communication) and negotiation efforts, including on how to build trust with and conduct outreach with hard-to-reach and isolated populations.

Overview of the Dialogue and Negotiation Efforts with Terrorist Groups

After more than a decade, it is clear that military efforts alone against Boko Haram are no panacea. Indeed, military campaigns against terrorist groups rarely bring about the desired outcome – a strategic defeat of the group in question. Studies on the effectiveness of military force against terrorist groups suggest a poor record, with only 7 per cent of terrorist groups operating from 1968 to 2006 ending due to military campaigns.[43] Political processes are the most common way terrorist groups have historically come to an end: 43 per cent of terrorist groups that existed between 1968 and 2006 ended their campaigns by negotiating an end to the conflict.[44]

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[42] MEAC, Key Informant Interviews with former Boko Haram associates, (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 25 May 2023).

[43] Seth G Jones and Martin C Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida* (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2008), p. 19.

[44] The second most common reasons terrorist groups end is because "local law-enforcement agencies arrest or kill key members of the group (40 percent)." P. 18-19. Ten percent of groups achieved victory during this period. Ibid., p. 18-19.

States have traditionally been reluctant to engage armed groups – particularly listed terrorist groups – in dialogue and negotiations, for fear of legitimizing their violence, and the possibility of these groups exploiting ceasefire arrangements for military gains.[45] Following the 'Global War on Terror,' this approach has become entrenched in international policy and practice where engagement with proscribed groups is de facto forbidden through a complex system of sanctions regimes which places significant obstacles to their participation in negotiations.[46]

Yet, engagement with these groups may be a necessary step in resolving conflict through a number of means, including, ultimately, working towards a negotiated settlement. Dialogue – where conflict parties share their positions and views, although without necessarily making concessions – preceeds negotiations. The threshold for establishing contact for dialogue is lower than the commitments needed to enter into negotiations and may take various forms, including one-way strategic communications campaigns to broader talks with all conflict parties. Dialogue is an important engagement strategy to identify key intermediaries and decision-makers with parties to conflict and establish relationships, and even trust, that could be built upon for future negotiations. Dialogue may also serve to clarify the views, grievances, and priorities of the group beyond those laid out in their public messaging and propaganda and thus identify entry points to engagement.[47] Not all members may share an equal commitment to the group's publicized goals or their commitment to violence: identifying such variations within the group speaks to engagement and disengagement dynamics and may allow for an opening to be identified for formalized negotiations.[48]

Moving beyond dialogue, negotiations are a dynamic process aimed at resolving disagreements and differences between conflict parties by finding common ground and reaching some form of mutually acceptable solution. Negotiations with armed (including terrorist) groups can be thought of as existing in two categories: tactical or strategic. Tactical negotiations are those whereby a specific issue or set of limited demands are being discussed. For example, in situations of armed conflict, armed groups often exercise some level of territorial control and in many cases, perform some form of governance in these territories,

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[45] Harmonie Toros, "We Don't Negotiate with Terrorists!': Legitimacy and Complexity in Terrorist Conflicts," *Security Diloague,* Vol 39, no. 4 (2008)

[46] Thomas Biersteker and Zuzana Hudáková, "UN sanctions and peace negotiations: possibilities for complementarity," Oslo Forum Papers. no.004 (Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2015).

[47] Audrey Kurith Cronin, "When Should we Talk to Terrorists?" Special Report (United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

[48] Ibid.

including determining access to the territory and its population.[49] In such cases, it may therefore be necessary for humanitarian actors to negotiate with these groups to facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection for vulnerable populations.[50] Closely linked, tactical negotiations may also occur following kidnappings or hostage-taking situations, where the limited goal of the negotiations is the timely and safe release of those who have been abducted. While tactical negotiation may have limited ambitions that are closely related to a singular issue, they can nevertheless serve to establish trust and the communication structures upon which strategic negotiations can later be built.

Strategic negotiations are those negotiations geared towards bringing about an end of hostilities as part of a broader peace agreement, whereby a state seeks to address some of the group's overarching demands. Such negotiations can be a catalyst to the decline, end, or transformation of the group, which would see members disarm and transition to civilian life. In some cases, armed groups transition into a political party.[51]

While strategic negotiations with terrorist groups are possible, they are challenging and often are impervious to the lessons derived from interstate negotiations. Unlike state counterparts, armed, including terrorist, groups are not necessarily rational, monolithic actors with clear command and control structures and easily identifiable leaders who could enter into negotiations on behalf of a clearly identifiable constituency.[52] Difficulties can arise in identifying the right gatekeepers to negotiations while decentralized membership may mean that individual cells act independently of one another, and do not abide by centrally made decisions, thereby potentially derailing negotiations. Such is the case with JAS, which has, since the death of Shekau seen independent cells operate throughout the region and beyond. These nodes of power, led by influential commanders such as the likes of Aliyu Ngulde in the Mandara Mountains or Adamu Sadiqqu in the North Central and North West of Nigeria, each operate with significant autonomy in their operations, and often compete amongst themselves for influence, resources and territory.[53] Closely linked is the issue of the ideology of terrorist groups, who are often dismissed as potential negotiating partners because the goals or ideology they promote publicly is seen as too broad or maximalist for finding common ground. For example, research

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[49] According to the ICRC, between 50-60 million individuals globally live under the full control of armed groups, while an additional 100 million live in an area where this control is contested. See: Irenee Herbet and Jerome Drevon, "Engaging armed groups at the International Committee of the Red Cross: Challenges, opportunities and COVID-19," *International Review of the Red Cross,* Vol 102, no. 915 (2020)

[50] IASC, *Humanitarian Negotiations With Armed Groups A Manual for Practitioners* (2005)

[51] Seth G Jones and Martin C Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008).

[52] Audrey Kurith Cronin, "When Should we Talk to Terrorists?" Special Report (United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

[53] Malik Samuel, "Boko Haram teams up with bandits in Nigeria," *ISS Today*, 03 March 2021.

found that amongst self-proclaimed Islamist groups, those with religious ambitions of a transnational nature were less likely to be involved in negotiations than those groups that had "separatist or revolutionary Islamist claims."[54] The issue of commitment to the group's professed ideologies and ambitions also varies within groups, with some extreme hardliners unwilling to negotiate or seeking to spoil potential agreements. As negotiated settlements rarely find compromised solutions that address the demands of all individuals involved, assessing the influence, position and goals of potential spoilers must occur during preliminary preparations for negotiations. Identifying potential spoilers is likely to be of particular relevance when considering which actors should be included in peace processes. A broader approach that includes a range of actors and interests in society may serve to prevent excluded parties from emerging as spoilers later on.[55]

Terrorist groups are not generally perceived to be credible negotiation partners, a reputation that is not helped by their opaque nature. This is a central obstacle to negotiations, where governments generally distrust the terrorist group's willingness and capacity to keep its promises. Unlike in inter-state negotiations, there are no enforcement mechanisms that exist to punish these groups for reneging on their commitments, and this may exacerbate the group's incapacity to keep to negotiated settlements.[56] Indeed, past tactical negotiations with Boko Haram have shown the group does not always abide by agreements, which makes a strong impression on governments. For example, following the hijacking of a Kaduna-bound train from Abuja by suspected bandits and the JAS cell led by Adamu Sadiqqu, the government began negotiations for the release of the hostages. Despite the government initially meeting demands to release one of the group leaders' wives, and secondary demands for the release of detained children, the group continued to renege on agreements and escalate its demands.[57] A final demand for a ransom payment was denied by the government, and eventually paid by the families.[58]

Beyond a terrorist group's capacity to negotiate, contextual factors will influence the prospects of successful negotiations with these groups. Negotiations are best initiated when both sides sense they have reached a mutually hurting stalemate or a situation where further violence is painful to both parties. This mutually hurting stalemate is a key opportunity, or moment of

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[54] Desiree Nilsson and Isak Svensson, "Resisting Resolution: Islamist Claims and Negotiations in Intrastate Armed Conflicts," *International Negotiation*, Vol 25, no.3 (2020).

[55] Lisa Blaydes, and Jennifer de Maio, "Spoiling the Peace ? Peace Process Exclusivity and Political Violence in North-Central Africa." *Civil Wars*, Vol 12, no. 3 (2010).

[56] Navin Bapat, "State Bargaining with Transnational Terrorist Groups." *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, no. 1 (2006).

[57] Ahmad Sahabi, "Train attack: FG did what kidnappers asked... we expected all captives freed, says Garba Shehu", *The Cable*, 12 August 2022.

[58] Daily Trust, "Exclusive: families paid N800 million to secure release of 7 Kaduna train captives", 11 July 2022

ripeness, when both parties find themselves locked in a conflict which they cannot win, and this deadlock is painful to both.[59] It is in this situation when an alternative policy or 'way out', which has oftentimes been aired before, begins to look increasingly attractive compared to the deadlock in which they presently find themselves. Moments of ripeness may both be about objective and subjective considerations. Objective evidence of such a stalemate may include increasing casualties or battlefield losses, while subjective perceptions may include calculations that further violence may not advance the group's cause or result in diminished popular support.[60] Ultimately, understanding the conditions and motivations that have given rise to this moment of ripeness is important in determining whether negotiations are likely to lead to a resolution of the conflict. Such moments of ripeness occur infrequently and can only bring about positive negotiations if seized and built into momentum. Indeed, while dialogues, and to a certain extent, tactical negotiations, have historically occurred throughout the Boko Haram conflict, these do not appear to have contributed to a sustained push for strategic negotiations. Prompted by a sense that Nigeria was experiencing a moment ripe for resolving the conflict in 2023, as demonstrated by the mass exits and a period of improved security, this report examines prospects and support for dialogue and negotiations with Boko Haram's factions.

Findings

This section presents perspectives from various respondent populations in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria who were interviewed about the prospects of a negotiated end to the Boko Haram conflict. Key aspects of dialogue and negotiations are explored, and the report places particular attention on how both factions are perceived by key stakeholders involved in the conflict. Lessons are drawn from past attempts at initiating dialogues and negotiations, and the report concludes with policy and programmatic recommendations as well, as key considerations for policymakers and government officials as they pertain to future negotiations are explored.

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[59] William Zartman, "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments," *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, Vol 1, no. 1 (2001).
[60] Ibid.

Perceptions of the Different Boko Haram Factions and Implications for Dialogue and Negotiation Prospects

Whether or not a distinction is made between the different Boko Haram factions depends on who you ask and where they are from. The perceptions of Boko Haram factions also vary with conflict experiences. In Nigeria, interviewees often differentiated between the various factions of Boko Haram, with references made exclusively to JAS and ISWAP, but in Cameroon, Niger and Chad, participants rarely differentiated between the various factions unless prompted by the survey question. For example, respondents in the three countries differentiated between the ISWAP and JAS when asked which faction cannot be negotiated with, but otherwise referred to the group as "Boko Haram." While JAS and ISWAP are active across the North East of Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, the epicentre of the conflict has indeed been the states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe in North East Nigeria. In particular, intra-factional fighting has occurred mostly in the North East of Nigeria, in the Sambisa and Alagarno forests, in Borno State.[61] After the 2016 split, fighters from both sides were also known to differentiate their factions to civilians when they entered into villages.[62] It is therefore to be expected that knowledge of these various factions is greater in the North East of Nigeria than in the rest of the Lake Chad Basin.

The perspectives on the different factions across all four countries of the Lake Chad Basin, particularly from key stakeholder groups who influence counterterrorism strategy and implementation, have implications for dialogue and negotiation efforts. Perceptions regarding both factions' capacity and motivation to negotiate – and whether these match reality – are discussed below.

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[61] International Crisis Group, "Fighting among Boko Haram Splinters Rages On," 30 May 2023.
[62] Respondents formerly associated with ISWAP were keen to stress to civilian populations in villages that they were from "*Tabkin Chadi*", which in Hausa translates as 'Lake Chad Area', and that they were not after civilians. They also stressed that they were interested in protecting civilians, sometimes telling them evacuate to avoid being caught in fighting with security forces. On the other hand, JAS fighters, during raids against communities, would boast that they were "*Yaran Mallam*," meaning "Mallam's followers". *Mallam* (title associated with someone knowledgeable in the Koran, a cleric or teacher) was what JAS fighters called Shekau. JAS fighters also use the words Yaran Mallam to instil fear and command compliance from civilians when they attacked their villages. For instance, they would say everything belonged to Mallam as the Imam of the Dawla (Islamic state) and that they (civilians) were his slaves: saying this to the civilians meant the fighters could take whatever belonged to the civilians without their consent. ISWAP views the population as a source of recruits, taxes, and support, whereas JAS takes a more predatory approach towards civilians.

Perceptions of JAS and Prospects for Dialogue and Negotiations

Perceptions of armed groups lend themselves to interesting insights into how these groups may be viewed at a negotiating table. Integral characteristics of these groups – their ideology, leadership structure and relative strength – will influence whether the group is capable of and willing to negotiate and abide by negotiated terms. Generally, across the different types of respondents, JAS was perceived as brutal, predatory towards civilians and exhibiting little cohesion and control over its fighters after the death of its leader Shekau. At the time of conducting the interviews, it appeared Bakura Doro did not exhibit the level of centralized control over JAS as Shekau had done during his leadership. On the other hand, respondents perceived ISWAP as the ideological hardliner amongst the two factions, although it was acknowledged to have adopted a more moderate stance towards civilians and noted for exhibiting greater control amongst its ranks. These perceptions align with documented differences in the way JAS and ISWAP treat Muslim civilians and the way they govern the territory they exert control over.[63] JAS treats civilians with brutality and predation. All those refusing to join JAS and live under its rulings and within its *Dawla* (state), whether Muslim or not, are described as *Kafir* (apostate), thereby making it permissible to attack and raid these communities.[64] The indiscriminate targeting of civilians by JAS was seen as a key factor in contributing to Boko Haram's split in 2016. Its indiscriminate violence, alongside its decentralized and unstructured nature, undermines JAS as a credible negotiation partner, which would have the capacity to follow through on the terms of the negotiations and ensure its members do not spoil the negotiations, or violate the terms of the negotiations.

While the JAS faction may not have as much credibility or capacity as a potential negotiation partner, it was generally perceived by respondents to be the more motivated of the two factions to engage in negotiations. Former associates of JAS linked this motivation to the group's relatively weaker position amid factional infighting and mass defections. Following the death of Shekau and the loss of territory in Sambisa, among the former JAS associates interviewed, it became clear that they did not see a military way forward for JAS. Rather, at that time, they saw themselves as having three options: either they could join the ranks of ISWAP; make the risky

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[63] UNDP, *Conflict Analysis in the Lake Chad Basin 2020-2021*, (2022)
[64] International Crisis Group, "Fighting among Boko Haram Splinters Rages On," 30 May 2023.

journey from Sambisa to Niger to join the new JAS leader Bakura Doro; or surrender.[65] Several former JAS associates in Nigeria (including a notable contingent of middle-ranking commanders (e.g., Munzir and Naqib) whose responsibilities specifically included carrying out raids on communities), chose to surrender following the death of Shekau. Some disengaged because they thought they would have no way of surviving without conducting raids on communities or abducting civilians and/or were afraid of the punishment that would be meted out to them for violating ISWAP's no-raid orders. ISWAP's prohibition on attacking civilians and raiding villages – and its reputation for harsh punishments – proved as a deterrent for switching to the group from JAS. The same fear of punishment exists within JAS[66] and has influenced disengagement from the group. For example, while conducting the research for this study, a community leader in Nigeria informed the interviewer that he had been in contact with a JAS commander from the Mandara mountains who was looking for a way out with his fighters. Having been encouraged by the Borno State governor to support exits from Boko Haram, this community leader sought to help this defecting commander by brokering safe passage with the authorities and relevant security forces. During later interviews, reference was made to this specific incident, whereby it was revealed that the commander and his fighters had raided a civilian community without Aliyu Ngulde's permission and did not disclose their raid. Ngulde issued an order for their arrest, prompting them to defect as they feared they would be executed for their actions. These factional differences not only impact perceptions of their viability as negotiation partners but also contribute to the conditions conducive to negotiations.

Several respondents were optimistic that the mass exits had created conditions ripe for a negotiated solution to the conflict. Another key factor that contributed to their optimism was the group infighting in JAS. At the time of writing, at least five senior commanders (all of the rank of Qa'ids), led by a senior commander called Abu Hasana (later killed), including Ba Isa, Abu Sulaiman, Bakura Jega, Ikrima, and Bayero, were known to have opposed the Bakura Doro-led JAS leadership. When they were interviewed, former JAS associates believed that if the government could negotiate with the senior commanders challenging Bakura Doro, it would incentivize further exits among their followers and seriously weaken JAS. The commanders were known to have grievances against the group leadership including the killing of Abu Sa'alaba, who took over as JAS' Imam after Shekau, by Bakura in a power tussle.[67] Sa'alaba

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[65] Bakura Doro is reportedly based on the Barwa island in the Diffa Region. He reportedly fled the Nigerien side of the Lake in 2016 when the Mamman Nur and al-Barnawi-led faction arrived from Sambisa after the split, given that he opposed the split and denounced the current ISWAP group.

[66] While ISWAP outlaws unsanctioned raids on civilian communities, JAS only frowns upon it if those who engage in it do not remit or declare what they get from the raids or if they keep some for themselves.

[67] Bakura, who was Amirul Jaish (JAS' head of military) wanted to become Imam after the death of Shekau, but clerics and some commanders favoured Sa'alaba because of his position as a respected senior cleric. Around the week of 1 April 2022, Sa'alaba was killed by Bakura after some leadership tussles. There was a lot of discontent

was the one who had promoted them to their present ranks, and his killing was therefore badly perceived by these commanders who were loyal to him. In light of these divides within the JAS faction, and as proven by the mass surrenders, negotiations with middle-ranking commanders – not just Bakura Doro – should be considered. Offering exit pathways for aggrieved middle-ranking commanders and their men may therefore help to bypass the reluctance of some of the central leadership and deplete the group's rank and file.

Looking beyond intra-group fighting, it is important to consider current battlefield dynamics, and how these play into the group's willingness to engage in negotiations. Particularly for JAS, logistical challenges, fighting with ISWAP, and internal discord have exacerbated, further weakened and impacted the decisions of those within the faction. The attack on Sambisa and the subsequent mass exits have greatly strained the ability of these JAS cells to access necessary resources such as food and fuel. Such logistical difficulties have significantly diminished their ability to conduct operations and engage in combat with the other factions (or the State). For the remaining cells led by the five aforementioned commanders[68] challenging the Bakura Doro-led JAS leadership, the situation is all the more dire. They are not only contending with operations by security forces but are also engaged in fighting with ISWAP and the Ali Ngulde-led cells. In part fuelled by their continued attacks on civilians and control over territory, these commanders have engaged in intense fighting with ISWAP. In one of such clashes in March 2023, according to a respondent, who was a bodyguard to one of the JAS' senior commanders involved, ISWAP killed 100 of their fighters. Many of those who survived chose to exit the group and surrender to the authorities. Indeed, when considering the current dynamics faced by JAS, it appears they are logistically and morally weakened and have reached a hurting stalemate. A former associate from Nigeria explained that "*since the incident that happened between the two factions and led to the leader's death, the group is now not organized as before and almost all the members are fed up with the operations and are ready to leave the group*." Such a stalemate, especially when considered against the backdrop of internal discontent with the Bakura Doro-led leadership may present a unique entry opportunity for dialogue, and possibly negotiations to occur.

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surrounding his death, but people feared openly criticizing Bakura for fear of being executed. The five commanders were able to get away with their opposition because they were far away from Bakura in the Sambisa area.

[68] Former associates interviewed estimate there to be 2,000 active members across these five cells. These cells have tried to carve out a territory, which they call Darul Gazuwa, comprising villages in the local government areas of Bama, Konduga, Dikwa, and Mafa in Borno state, but current conflict dynamics make it difficult for this sub-faction (or factions) to hold or control territory.

Perceptions of ISWAP and Prospects for Dialogue and Negotiations

As ISWAP sought to strategically differentiate itself from JAS, it adopted a more moderate stance towards civilians than its rival faction. The group's centralized leadership hands out harsh punishments for those who do not respect the group's rules with regard to the treatment of civilians. For example, one former JAS leader explained that, after having joined ISWAP, he and his associates were detained by the leadership for 15 days for having raided a village. The group's centralized leadership and strict enforcement of its rules have brought about a renewed sense of professionalism, coherence and loyalty among associates, which has allowed ISWAP to establish a strong presence in remote areas near the Lake Chad Basin. In the absence of state presence in these communities, ISWAP has sought to fill the gap by establishing a modicum of governance. It has established and secured trade routes, enhanced conditions for commerce; carried out humanitarian services; and set up measures for civilians to report abuses by fighters. ISWAP taxes the revenues of those living under its control.[69] By presenting itself as an alternative government to these communities, ISWAP seeks to advance its goal of establishing a legitimized state based on its interpretation of Sharia law.[70] By showcasing that it is not only able to govern but also effectively control its rank and file, ISWAP gains credibility in the eyes of local populations. Such credibility is crucial in a potential negotiating partner, with regard to both 1) having the capacity to ensure that conditions for and compromise made in negotiations are met and respected, and 2) speaking on behalf of a constituency.

Overall, ISWAP was perceived by survey respondents to be less likely to engage in negotiations. The group's transnational nature and international command structure were generally perceived by respondents as an obstacle to negotiation efforts. ISWAP's integration with ISIL is well documented and the latter's organization, financing, and ideological beliefs have fused with that of its local affiliate. ISIL is reported as having influenced the factional divides between JAS and ISWAP and authorized the operation that ultimately killed Abubakar Shekau.[71] ISWAP has benefitted from financial support and training from ISIL, allowing it to develop and maintain a better-trained and more disciplined rank and file. Today, ISWAP has a designated command structure, recruitment strategy and training regiment, comprised of both

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[69] These taxes are critical to ISWAP's operation and sustenance, for more, see: Malik Samuel, "Boko Haram's deadly business: an economy of violence in the Lake Chad Basin," *ISS Today*, 05 October 2022.

[70] UNDP, *Conflict Analysis in the Lake Chad Basin 2020-2021*, (2022)

[71] International Crisis Group, "After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East" Africa Report no. 180 (Brussels, 2022).

physical and ideological education.[72] To various extents, ISIL's financial, operational, and ideological influence over ISWAP will likely reduce the capacity and interest ISWAP would have in pursuing a negotiated end to the conflict.

Indeed, ISIL's influence has been crucial in establishing the current setup and re-organization of ISWAP, starting with the return of al-Barnawi as interim leader around 2021. Before his return, the group was weighed down by widespread corruption, the mismanagement of resources, and the settling of personal scores through detention and sometimes the execution of fighters, amongst other problems. As a result, many fighters fled the group, some moving to Sudan and Libya, while others either surrendered or discreetly reintegrated into communities.[73] Al-Barnawi's success in reforming ISWAP could ultimately make it more difficult to potentially negotiate with.[74] After al-Barnawi's return, ISWAP reorganized into at least four semi-autonomous units under the control of a central Shura Council. This was done to enhance the stability of the group's leadership, which had previously been shaky. Between Boko Haram's split in 2016 and 2021, power tussles within ISWAP resulted in five known leadership changes.[75] In the three years since al-Barnawi's return, however, there were no known changes in leadership suggesting a more stable command and control structure had been established.

It is unclear if that stability has been due to al-Barnawi's leadership, the structural reorganization, and/or some other factors as in late 2021 several Nigerian security sources reported al-Barnawi's death.[76] Since then, however, the al-Barnawi status has been disputed. Other sources with insights into ISWAP operations have reported that al-Barnawi is alive and was given a larger, although yet unspecified, role within ISIL following an injury incurred during fighting with JAS.[77] Sources familiar with ISWAP in Nigeria said al-Barnawi was promoted to a position on the ISIL Shura Council as a reward for ISWAP's expansion both within and beyond Nigeria's North East under his leadership.[78] As ISIL's biggest affiliate in terms of fighting force size, organizational structure, operational success, longevity, and revenue generation, al-

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[72] Bulama Bukarti, *It's a Bit Tricky: Exploring ISIS's Ties with Boko Haram* (George Washington University, 2022)

[73] Malik Samuel, "Islamic State's determined expansion into Lake Chad Basin," *ISS Today*, 03 August 2021.

[74] Upon his assumption of ISWAP's interim leadership, Al-Barnawi released an audio message targeting members of the group, including those who had left. He admitted that a lot of wrong had been done to fighters. He promised reforms, starting with investigation and accountability for the corruption and human rights abuses that had become rampant within ISWAP. Crucially, he addressed the issue of fighters' welfare by declaring that fighters would have control of what they did with their shares of spoils of war. The issue of spoils of war had been pivotal in the dispute within ISWAP and fighters leaving. Usually, after every attack, the spoils of war would be shared, and a portion given to fighters that took part in the attack. This is a way of compensating and motivating fighters, but the previous leadership refused to implement this and kept everything for the Dawla.

[75] Malik Samuel, "Islamic State fortifies its position in the Lake Chad Basin," *ISS Today*, 13 July 2021.

[76] Aljazeera "West Africa's top ISIL leader is dead, says Nigerian army," 14 October 2021

[77] International Crisis Group, "After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's North East" Africa Report no. 180 (Brussels, 2022).

[78] Malik Samuel, "Islamic State fortifies its position in the Lake Chad Basin," *ISS Today*, 13 July 2021

Barnawi is viewed by the global terror group as strategic in its African expansion. Either scenario – with al-Barnawai still at the helm or someone(s) else taking over would significantly impact potential prospects for negotiations with the faction. Both situations suggest there is a leadership vacuum within ISWAP. At present, there have been no official communications from ISWAP or ISIL regarding al-Barnawi's successor in the Lake Chad Basin, and there appears to be some confusion on who holds the leadership and influence within the group.[79] The inability to identify the key leaders within the group with the position to make decisions on its behalf undermines the potential for dialogue or negotiations. The continuity of ISWAP military actions and the steadfastness of the group's members in light of these leadership questions highlights the success of reforms and discipline implemented by al-Barnawi. ISWAP maintained a steady flow of operations against the JAS faction. Its ranks (which experienced fewer defections than JAS) were also bolstered as people fled Shekau's faction. Whether or not its military assault on JAS and lack of defections continue in the absence of clear leadership will significantly factor into ISWAP's decision-making, including its interest, and prospects for being a viable party, in negotiations. Maintaining its military strength – both vis à vis JAS and the States in the region – the group would be even less likely to negotiate, as its violent tactics would appear to be yielding some successes, and thus undermine the perceived utility of a negotiated settlement. Separate from the issue of military strength, if al-Barnawi has indeed moved up in the ISIL hierarchy, the two entities may be more deeply intertwined and as a result, ISWAP may be more constrained and thus may find it harder to pursue dialogue or negotiations, even if its interests changed.

While further integration into ISIL appears to limit the prospects of dialogue or negotiation with ISWAP, there are potential opportunities associated with it that can be exploited by States in the region. It is possible that not everyone within ISWAP is happy or will be happy with further integration and related reforms, especially if they think they are excluded from benefiting from them. This applies to both fighters and commanders, and these individuals can be targeted for piecemeal dialogue or negotiation. For instance, researchers for this study independently spoke to a former senior commander of the rank of Qa'id and a former rank-and-file member who recently left ISWAP (in December and November 2023, respectively)[80]. According to the former rank-and-file member, he left because he was dropped from the fighter payroll in ISWAP's reorganization. ISWAP had decided to pay its fighters a monthly salary,[81] but knowing it couldn't pay them all, had screened out those not deemed fit. The Qa'id, who confirmed the reorganization of ISWAP's fighting force, said he left because he needed better medical

[79] Ibid.
[80] While originating from other research conducted by members of the research team outside the scope of this study, the information reinforces findings within the context of this study
[81] International Crisis Group. JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters, 28 March 2024

attention for shrapnel wounds than what ISWAP's clinics could provide.[82] The stories of these two individuals highlight how recent reorganization efforts may alienate ISWAP members, a dynamic that could be seized by States. In addition, despite its military capacities and attempts at governance, some fighters and leaders within the group are likely to be frustrated by its limitations in providing for them – including medical care – and there may be frustrated individuals who can be enticed to leave through defector programmes, dialogue, and/or piecemeal negotiation efforts.

Foot Soldiers and Leadership: An Apparent Disconnect

Notwithstanding the varying prospects for dialogue and negotiations with the leadership of both Boko Haram factions, there appears to be a general disconnect between how negotiations would likely be seen by high-ranking leaders and the rank and file across both ISWAP and JAS. Across all four countries, lower-ranking members of Boko Haram self-identified – and were identified by key stakeholders – as being more open to negotiations and exit opportunities. Former associates, notably those of JAS, cited the difficulties they faced while with the group as the primary motivations for wanting to exit the group and being open to negotiations.[83] These included limited food, difficult living conditions, deteriorating psycho-social well-being and disillusionment with the group's ambitions and ideology. Some respondents were made aware of better conditions in rehabilitation centers by their former colleagues who had already defected and assured them they would be treated well should they leave the group. Indeed, one former associate from Nigeria explained: "*I personally left because my parents called me and asked me to leave the group and join them in the Hajj camp. They also told me that life outside the group is far better than the group in terms of food, health and peace of mind.*" This anecdote is indicative of the strong ties existing between former associates who have left and those who remain with the group that could be leveraged to further communicate exit options with lower-ranking members experiencing similar difficulties.

Interviews and focus groups showed that the leadership of both ISWAP and JAS were overwhelmingly perceived as unlikely to accept a negotiated end to the conflict. Former associates in Nigeria appeared to have greater insights into the JAS leadership, with several

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[82] While he had visible wounds to suggest he was telling the truth, some former fighters questioned his reason for leaving. Some of these former fighters, who knew him during The Qa'id's time with ISWAP, claimed he was caught taking drugs and detained. They claimed he escaped for fear that his hand would be amputated for his offense.
[83] Fonteh Akum, Remadji Hoinathy and Malik Samuel, "Managing the Journey Out of Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin," West Africa Report 32 (2021)

respondents naming the anticipated response of specific leaders, including Bakura Doro, who it was thought would oppose negotiations. Respondents from the other three countries agreed but did not ruminate on the specific perspectives of individual JAS leaders, but rather talked about the group's leadership more broadly, potentially suggesting less visibility on the leadership. For ISWAP, former associates in Nigeria noted that the leadership would not be able to accept any negotiated end if the group's foreign ISIL leadership disagreed. As such, a singular approach to negotiations through the leadership to bring an end to a faction's fighting may not be viable, but that does not rule out the possibility of using dialogue and negotiations entirely. By separately targeting lower-ranking members and mid-ranking leadership or renegade Qa'ids, especially in light of the hardships they face and resentments they have, States in the region could chip away at the military capacity and reach of each group. Such approaches, especially if combined with other "carrots and sticks," could significantly alter conflict dynamics and the level of support that each faction enjoys internally and with the communities that live under their influence.

Past Dialogue and Prospects for Future Dialogue

Respondents across all key stakeholder groups were asked if they were aware of previous efforts to dialogue with any of the Boko Haram factions. Efforts at past dialogue were more likely to be known in Nigeria and Niger than in Chad and Cameroon, which may indicate that such approaches have been employed more frequently as an alternative form of resolution to the conflict in these contexts (or were more reported).

In Nigeria, when asked which dialogue efforts they were aware of and their consequences, former associates overwhelmingly referenced government messages heard on the radio aimed at encouraging Boko Haram associates to surrender and promising them that they would not be harmed. They also cited promises of support from the government, notably in terms of education, shelter, and capital to set up their own businesses. These are very likely references to a strategic communications campaign by the Borno Government, which sent messages from Governor Babagana Zulum encouraging defections from the group. In Niger, similar mentions were made to broadcasts by the military on their radio platform *Radio Bouclier* that encouraged members of Boko Haram to leave the group. Crucially, former associates across both countries were aware of the success of these efforts, with several respondents claiming that "thousands of Boko Haram members" had surrendered after hearing these messages. Although not a typical dialogue effort given its one-sided nature, it is increasingly evident that

these strategic communications campaigns had positive effects on encouraging mass exits from the group. In a context where Boko Haram associates feared they would be killed by security forces should they surrender, reassuring safe pathways for exits influenced members of Boko Haram to defect, particularly those disillusioned with the group's ideology.[84]

Interestingly, dialogue efforts mentioned by former associates in Nigeria were not limited to efforts between Boko Haram and the government: two former Boko Haram associates also referenced intra-factional dialogues between JAS and ISWAP. During these dialogues, ISWAP reportedly sought to encourage the JAS faction to change its mode of operations and cease killing and kidnapping Muslim civilians and looting and destroying property. Ultimately, however, the dialogue was unsuccessful and led to intense inter-factional fighting, which culminated in the death of Shekau. Even after Shekau's death, there were attempts at dialogue between both factions, with the latest (confirmed by the time of writing) taking place between September and October 2023. Those familiar with the talks said both sides agreed to arrest and return fighters from either faction, who were caught trying to defect and surrender to governments in the region. Talks broke down when ISWAP rejected JAS's demands to not intervene when its fighters attack civilian communities, a red line for ISWAP. Despite having failed, the attempts at dialogue between the two factions nevertheless indicate that they are capable of at least trying to address issues through non-violent means when it is in their interest – even with another faction with which it has been actively fighting. While the talks are a potentially positive signal for dialogue with other stakeholders, their breakdown may present an opportunity for States to exploit as they engage with one or the other in order to isolate – and try to delegitimize – its rival.

In Niger, a notable majority of respondents across the respondent sub-populations surveyed were aware of the government's declaration of a general amnesty for Boko Haram associates in 2016, which launched the country's official DDRR process.[85] Respondents generally viewed the call for amnesty as a successful dialogue effort – even if one-sided, citing the many defections that have since occurred. Interestingly, among the former associates of Boko Haram interviewed, the majority of respondents also highlighted the promises of socio-economic reintegration made by the government during the call for amnesty. The emphasis placed on socio-economic reintegration by former associates surveyed may indicate a key negotiation point going forward. Reports of Boko Haram offering food, money, and other basic material goods to recruits suggest that the group exploits poor economic conditions for

[84] International Crisis Group, "An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor" Africa Report no. 170 (Brussels, 2021).
[85] IOM, _Gendered Dimensions of Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation: The Niger_. (IOM, Geneva. 2022).

recruiting.[86] Indeed, past research by MEAC in Niger found that boys with low economic well-being were found to be significantly more likely to become associated with Boko Haram.[87] Promises of basic economic support to associates who exit Boko Haram may therefore be key in successful communications campaigns to promote defections with lower-ranking members of the group or even in piecemeal negotiations with individual mid-ranking commanders.[88]

As was the case when asked about knowledge of past dialogue efforts, there was notable regional variation regarding the possibility of future dialogue efforts. Respondents from Niger appeared to be most open and optimistic about dialogue between Boko Haram and the government. Indeed, 90 per cent of former associates in Niger felt that their faction would be open to dialogue, with similar optimism expressed in Nigeria (87 per cent of ex-associates). In stark contrast, not a single former associate in Chad viewed dialogue with their former factions to be possible. It is possible that ex-associates view dialogue in terms of calls for defection and amnesty offers as perceived support appears correlated with the level of maturity of defectors and DDR programming in each country. The state of DDR programming is most advanced in Nigeria[89] and Niger[90], where the respective governments have devised national programmes aimed at incentivizing and managing exits from the group.[91] At present, there is no dedicated

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[86] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Debriefing statement on its mission to Chad, 16 – 23 April 2018," 25 April 2018; International Crisis Group, "Niger and Boko Haram: Beyond Counter-insurgency," Africa Report 245 (Brussels, 2017).

[87] Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Anamika Madhuraj, and Saniya Ali, "Child Recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin," *MEAC Findings Report 22* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

[88] The basic needs of low-ranking associates must be understood against the backdrop of the wide scale humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin countries, which is dire. The latest projections suggest approximately 5.6 million people face severe food insecurity. UN OCHA, "Lake Chad Basin: Humanitarian Snapshot (As of 08 December 2022)" 15 December 2022 . Needs are often more acute for individuals who were once associated with Boko Haram. Past MEAC research has shown former Boko Haram associates were even less likely to report having food than unassociated community members (46 per cent versus 54 per cent). Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, Niamh Punton, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Mohammed Bukar, and Anamika Madhuraj, "Child Exits from Armed Groups in the Lake Chad Basin," *Findings Report 31*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.

[89] In Nigeria, such programmes include Operation Safe Corridor for low-risk defectors, the *Sulhu* programme for high-level defectors, and the more recent Borno Model in the North East. Individuals entering these exit corridors are screened and categorized into high or low risk. Low-risk members of the group are the target of the government DDR programme and are typically sent through a DDR programme prior to being handed over to their state government for reintegration, while high-risk individuals are meant to go through the criminal justice process. For more, see Fonteh Akum, Remadji Hoinathy and Malik Samuel, "Managing the Journey Out of Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin," West Africa Report 32 (2021).

[90] In Niger, there is the National Programme for the Management of the Surrender of Boko Haram Elements. The penal code was specifically amended to guarantee that Boko Haram members who had not been involved in terrorist activities or atrocities would not be prosecuted but rehabilitated and reintegrated back into society after screening and participation in DDR programming at a Socio-Economic Reintegration Center in Goudoumaria.

[91] Sophie Huvé, Dr Siobhan O'Neil, Dr Remadji Hoinathy, Kato Van Broeckhoven with Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Teniola Tayo, Jessica Caus, and Adja Faye, "Preventing Recruitment and Ensuring Effective Reintegration Efforts: Evidence from Across the Lake Chad Basin to Inform Policy and Practice," *MEAC Lake Chad Basin Case Study Report* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

DDR programme for Boko Haram associates in both Cameroon[92] and Chad,[93] although there are efforts in the latter to redress this.

Dialogue between the government and Boko Haram was seen to be an important precursor to any future negotiations by respondents. Furthermore, dialogue – broadly conceived – was seen as a means for promoting reconciliation among community members and former Boko Haram associates, both individually and with the group. Across all four countries, former Boko Haram associates overwhelmingly noted that strategic dialogue efforts should include community members to facilitate their reintegration and acceptance. As explained by a former associate in Nigeria, "*Dialogue with the government alone is not enough. Communities must also be included because repentant Boko Haram will be staying with the community members and not with the government, so it is important to prepare communities to accept returnees.*" Indeed, past MEAC and ISS findings have indicated that communities are very receptive to having former Boko Haram associates, both men and women and children and adults, return to their communities.[94] Acceptance of former associates rose when presented with more specific, albeit fictionalized profiles of former associates were provided that gave respondents additional information, including age, names and the fact they were repentant.[95] Receptivity rose even higher when it was grounded in their experience; respondents expressed even higher levels of receptivity were asked about people they knew (community members or family) who had been with the group and returned home.[96] Indeed, these results suggest that, beyond community engagement before and after the arrival of former Boko Haram associates, there is value in investing in communications campaigns around reintegration. Communication campaigns aimed at further bolstering acceptance may benefit from highlighting returns and normalizing reintegration experiences through real stories of positive or even just uneventful reintegration experiences.[97]

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[92] In Cameroon, a National Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration Committee (NDDRC) was founded in 2018, which is tasked with managing the return of former Boko Haram associates and Anglophone separatists in the South West. Former Boko Haram associates meant for DDR programmes are currently received at a provisional facility in Meri, in the Far North. However there has not yet been any official reintegration of these individuals into communities. A new DDR center, which will reportedly see reintegration activities occurring, is currently being built in Mora, although there are no indications at present when the new center will be ready to host former associates.

[93] In Chad, exits from Boko haram are currently occurring without an official DDR programme, although efforts are ongoing to remedy this, with the creation of a DDR Steering Committee, an Inter-Ministerial Committee, and the creation of a National DDR Framework which is presently under review.

[94] Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Zoe Marks, "Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates," *MEAC Findings Report 7* (New York: United Nations University, 2021), and Fonteh Akum, Remadji Hoinathy and Malik Samuel, "Managing the Journey Out of Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin," West Africa Report 32 (2021).

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid.

Past Negotiations and Prospects for Future Negotiations

Respondents across all key stakeholder groups were asked if they were aware of previous efforts to negotiate with any of the Boko Haram factions. The purpose of this question was twofold. First, it served to clarify if, and to what extent, past negotiations were known about and identify any regional variations that may be present. For those that were aware of past efforts to negotiate, a subsequent question was asked on the outcome of the negotiation, and what lessons may be drawn from these attempts.

In all four countries, awareness of negotiation efforts among respondents was limited to tactical negotiations for the release of hostages taken by Boko Haram factions. Once again, respondents in Nigeria appeared to have more knowledge of these negotiations than respondents in the other countries. This higher rate of knowledge among respondents in Nigeria may be explained by the country's more frequent experience with mass kidnappings by the Boko Haram factions, notably of school children, than the other three countries, where mass kidnappings remain an anomaly.[98] The kidnappings in Nigeria have been widely publicized and have served to bring international attention to the group. In addition to negative attention, they also may serve to boost morale within the group, attract new recruits, and, through the payment of ransoms, sustain the campaign of armed violence.[99] Among respondents across all four countries, the most well-known negotiation effort was to release the 276 Chibok girls captured by JAS in 2014. In Nigeria, almost all former associates had detailed knowledge of the various negotiations that occurred, with some former associates even appearing to have been personally involved in the negotiations. Associates described the locations where several of the girls were held and the subsequent conditions for their release, which included large sums of cash and the release of Boko Haram leaders detained by the Nigerian government.[100]

In Niger, there was a sharp contrast between what security actors knew and what local communities did. All CSAs interviewed indicated knowledge of past efforts, and 90 per cent of security force respondents similarly expressed knowledge of negotiations. However, similarly to Nigeria, none of the community leaders interviewed knew about past negotiation efforts. In

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[98] International Crisis Group, "Preventing Boko Haram Abductions of Schoolchildren in Nigeria" Africa Report no. 137 (Brussels, 2018).
[99] Ibid.
[100] The Nigerian government has denied that any prisoners were released as part of the negotiations to release the Chibok girls.

some sense, this is surprising. In both Nigeria and Niger, community leaders such as Bulamas, Lawans, camp leaders, chairmen, women's leaders and district/ward heads have some degree of responsibility for the safety of their communities and have been found to exert significant influence in communities' acceptance of former Boko Haram associates.[101] In light of their position, it would be reasonable to expect they would have had some knowledge about past efforts. This significant discrepancy may very well be indicative that historically, local community leaders have not been engaged as interlocutors in outreach and negotiation with the Boko Haram factions in Niger.

In Nigeria, there was significant optimism in the potential of negotiations between the government and Boko Haram. In interviews and the mini survey, most respondents (76 per cent) said that a negotiated end to the conflict could be achieved. A successful resolution was, however, perceived to be dependent on several key factors, namely the affiliation and rank of the interlocutors involved and the ability of the government to fulfil promises made. Based on their experiences and knowledge of past dialogue and negotiations, former Boko Haram associates also cautioned that their inclination to participate in future negotiations, as well as the negotiation's success, would be contingent upon the government fulfilling the promises it has made. Indeed, the issue of unfulfilled promises and unaddressed grievances appears throughout several past initiatives and has had a detrimental effect on the group's trust in negotiations,[102] and the same unmet expectations appear to be impacting current decisions to exit the group. As described by a former associate, "There *were a lot of people in the group who wanted to surrender after hearing about the promises made, but when they found out that the promises were not fulfilled, they decided not to surrender."* The importance of government credibility and follow-through and the affiliation and rank of interlocutors involved in negotiations are explored in detail across the sections that follow.

Authority to Negotiate within Boko Haram

As expected, when thinking of negotiation potential, most respondents focus on each faction's top leadership. Several former JAS associates unsurprisingly cited Bakura Doro as the individual who would have the authority to enter into negotiations for a peace settlement. JAS's decentralized nature, characterized by distinct operating cells, each with its own commanders, loyalties, and dynamics, also raises the possibility of using negotiations with individual

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[101] Hilary Matfess, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, and Mohammed Bukar, "Community Leaders' Receptivity to Returning Former Boko Haram Associates and its Impact on Peacebuilding," *MEAC Findings Report 15* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

[102] Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, "A Matter of Faith? Negotiations with Boko Haram in Nigeria," *International Negotiation* Vol 25, no.3 (2020).

commanders to demobilize components of the faction in the absence of a broader negotiated settlement. It is also important to note that entering into an agreement is not the same as abiding by one. In discussing who would be key in possible negotiations, several respondents referenced specific lower-level commanders who would be crucial in ensuring that their followers abide by a negotiated agreement, given the loyalty they command among fighters. For example, Ali Ngulde, a commander in the Mandara Mountains near the Cameroonian border, exerts significant influence over his followers, and respondents explained his followers would follow him should he negotiate an exit with the government. Another notable commander mentioned at the time was Ari Gana, who was later killed by Nigerian security forces in September 2023.[103] After his death, many fighters loyal to him exited the group and surrendered to the government. In general, the former Boko Haram associates emphasized that JAS members would support, or at least not oppose, negotiations in the event that their direct leadership decided to negotiate with the government. These responses highlight the importance of recognizing the role of other high- and even mid-ranking leaders and their relationships with their fighters in considering possible negotiations with the JAS faction. Understanding the complex power dynamics and everchanging relationships at play between the faction's tiers of leadership will be crucial when deciding if to pursue, and which individuals would need to be engaged in, any potential negotiations.

Negotiation Agenda

Each group of respondents had their distinct views on what should be included in a potential negotiating agenda. While some groups, such as former associates, addressed potential realities and red lines of negotiation, other groups were less explicit and rather gave insights into what their respective groups could, and could not, support in exchange for a negotiated end to the conflict.

Regional variations were once again evident in the responses from former Boko Haram associates across countries. In both Cameroon and Chad, former JAS associates overwhelmingly stated that their faction would be unlikely to make any concessions during negotiations. In contrast, all former associates interviewed in Niger, and the majority of those interviewed in Nigeria (which included former associates of both JAS and ISWAP) felt that their faction would be open to certain concessions, including cease attacking and kidnapping civilians, conducting raids on communities, and attacking government infrastructure. It should

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[103] Sahara Reporters, "Nigerian Troops 'Kill Top Boko Haram Commander, Ari Gana, 5 Others' In Borno Ambush," 26 September 2023.

be noted that the latter are tactical concessions, not the strategic ones of focus when considering negotiating with Boko Haram – i.e., abandoning political violence.

Among former associates, an obvious red line emerged when it came to the implementation of Sharia law. Across both factions, former associates cited that their factions' leadership would be unlikely to accept a negotiated settlement that did not include some provisions for the implementation of Sharia law instead of the existing democratic system. This raises several challenges for a negotiated end to the conflict, as the imposition of Sharia is in sharp contrast with the national legal system of surveyed countries, which generally underscore secularity and a non-denominational approach to public life. That notwithstanding, conventional wisdom on the conflict has not only overly simplified Boko Haram's religious ideology but also overemphasized its role in the group's rise, which rather emerged due to local grievances and sentiments of injustices against the Nigerian State. Considering that the North East of Nigeria and many other affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin already abide by conservative religious norms, and elements of Sharia law are already in place, such an impasse to negotiations may not be as inherently unsurmountable as thought.[104]

Interestingly, in Niger, a majority of respondents formerly associated equivocally stated that prosecution at the hand of a national judicial body would be unacceptable to group members, irrespective of whether they were low-ranking foot soldiers or part of the group's leadership. In Nigeria, respondents were split on the possibility of faction leadership accepting that they would go through the criminal justice system but did not make any reference to the potential reaction of lower-ranking members. Many former associates felt that their leadership would only agree to negotiate if there was a formal amnesty deal as part of the negotiations. As one respondent explained, "*accepting to be prosecuted would mean they accept that they were wrong, which they would not*." The concept of amnesty for top-ranking former Boko Haram officers is not new. Indeed the Nigerian State Security Services (SSS)[105] has been operating the Sulhu programme for several years which is specifically aimed at senior Boko Haram leaders and officials, who, once having left the ranks of the group, work with the SSS to encourage other commanders to surrender.[106] Approximately 150 individuals have reportedly defected through the programme between 2019 and 2021, with some suggesting that this is evidence of the programme's effectiveness.[107] However, visibility on the Sulhu programme is limited, with no official comment from authorities in Abuja given its sensitivities.[108] While

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[104] In 1999, the Nigerian constitution allowed for the enshrinement of Sharia law in the country's northern states as far as civil and criminal matters are concerned.
[105] The State Security Services are also referred to as the Department of State Services (DSS).
[106] The New Humanitarian, "Nigeria's secret programme to lure top Boko Haram defectors ," 19 August 2021.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.

amnesty may prove to be a key incentive to defect or take part in a negotiated settlement, it would be incorrect to view amnesty as zero-sum – either it is absolute, total, and provided to everyone, or there is no amnesty at all. Past negotiations with other rebel – and even terrorist – groups have balanced amnesty or legal leniency for lower-level members or for those who have not committed certain crimes or atrocities while subjecting certain leaders or those credibly accused of certain acts to the criminal justice process.[109] In addition to the state-run criminal justice system, there is a range of other complementary alternate justice approaches that could help advance justice and accountability, redress the needs of victims, and ultimately promote reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Transitional justice approaches (e.g., traditional justice, community service, public apologies, truth and reconciliation commissions) have been promoted and adopted in a number of post-conflict-affected countries. However, support for these measures tends to dissipate when they involve listed terrorist groups. Past MEAC findings indicate, however, that the evidence for Nigeria is more mixed, and there is public interest in transitional justice approaches, including from victims of the conflict.[110] Interest in such approaches is crucial given the size of the population that has been associated with the group at some level, the inability to distinguish between victims and perpetrators, and the limited capacity of the criminal justice systems in affected countries.[111] For victims and communities, transitional justice approaches may have greater appeal than those that are hierarchical and associated with the State. Transitional justice applications, such as public apologies, generally occur at the community level where they are visible to community members. This visibility that comes from local, traditional justice mechanisms may be greater than that on State prosecutions or national reorientation programmes, which have thus far, been minimally communicated to the public.

Parties to the Negotiations

Based on past experiences with negotiations, it is reasonable to expect the Boko Haram factions would not embrace direct negotiations with the state, at least initially. The dearth of trust between the factions and the government, particularly in Nigeria, was reflected in many of the survey responses, which indicated the need for a trusted intermediary to facilitate indirect negotiations between the parties.

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[109] United Nations University and Institute for Integrated Transitions, *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism* (2018) and Akinola Olojo and Maram Mahdi, "Transitional justice: testing the waters in the Lake Chad Basin," West Africa Report 39 (2022).

[110] Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Criminal and Transitional Justice Preferences for Former Boko Haram Associates," *MEAC Findings Report 12* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

[111] UNDP, The State of Play: Process and Procedures for Screening, Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration in the Lake Chad Basin Region (2023).

Traditional and religious leaders were an obvious preference among respondents to facilitate negotiations given the respect and authority they hold. Their role could also further ensure community buy-in for any resulting settlements, given the important historical role traditional and religious leaders tend to play as mediators and peacebuilders within their communities. While this response is in part not surprising from many of the groups surveyed, it is interesting that this finding holds for former associates, who also indicated this preference, given that under Shekau, JAS specifically targeted local religious leaders who opposed its strict interpretation of Sharia or methods. The focus on local leaders among former associates may indicate the former's general position in society but also may highlight disagreement with Shekau's actions. With Shekau's death and the broad support for local leader engagement, the latter's potential to serve as trusted intermediaries in future dialogue or negotiation efforts must be recognized.

In Nigeria, former associates suggested that recently surrendered commanders with their significant influence amongst former associates – would be well placed to serve as intermediaries. As explained by a former associate: "*Those [leaders] who surrendered earlier should be the link because they are now familiar with both the government and the group. I also believe it is easier for other Boko Haram members to trust what people who left the group say to them than any other person who was not part of them.*" Leveraging the trust in and knowledge of former commanders to facilitate negotiations may serve to identify a key entry point in the factions for outreach in Nigeria. This may, however, be less relevant to ISWAP, which has not experienced mass defections at the same scale,[112] nor has seen as many commanders exit through the Sulhu programme. Few commanders are believed to have left the faction before al-Barnawi's 2021 assumption of interim leadership. While there may be fewer opportunities to leverage former ISWAP commanders given their smaller numbers and timeline of exit, any opportunities with former faction leadership who have exited are worth exploring. In general, with their high profile, influence and loyalty from rank and file, former commanders could foreseeably play important roles in State efforts to reach other fighters and convince them to exit. However, the former commanders' experience since they defected may influence how much role they want to play. A few former ISWAP commanders are known to have regretted leaving the group because of their experience at the hands of the government. For instance, at least one former senior and popular commander escaped from government-provided accommodation while waiting for enrolment into the Sulhu Programme[113] because of unmet promises and a lack of clarity as to when they would start their reintegration. Another

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112 International Crisis Group. JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters, 28 March 2024
113 Malik Samuel, Boko Haram teams up with bandits in Nigeria, *ISS Today*, 03 March 2021.

reason for the regret was the reformation that ISWAP underwent after they left, which included giving more attention to fighters' welfare (a grievance that had motivated some defections). While those who fled to Libya, Sudan, and other places without surrendering to government forces were welcomed back, those who joined the government Sulhu programme were considered traitors by their former faction, further contributing to their regret. While States have limits in addressing all of these issues, they can ensure that they manage expectations for defectors – especially high-level ones – and keep their promises when dealing with them – which will be key in any future dialogue and negotiation efforts.

There was no regional consensus on the value of involving State forces in negotiations. In Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad, respondents were mostly favourable to the military's involvement in both dialogue and negotiations. As a party to the conflict, and their frontline experience in combatting Boko Haram, the military was perceived as bringing additional value and perspectives to the negotiations. However, in Niger, respondents overwhelmingly did not want the military to be involved in either dialogue or negotiations. Reasons for their exclusion from negotiations centred primarily around the anticipated reaction of Boko Haram, who would not accept the military's presence and the belief that negotiations did not form part of the military's purview. Some even saw the military as a potential spoiler in future negotiations. This is particularly interesting when compared with respondent views on the involvement of community security actors in negotiations, which was overwhelmingly favourable.

While both CSAs and the military have been involved in the conflict, there were diverging attitudes with regard to their potential involvement in negotiations. CSAs were viewed as having a peacebuilding role within their communities, having already facilitated the return of former associates. In this respect, they were viewed as being better placed to be involved in negotiations given that they are more likely to inspire confidence among Boko Haram representatives at the negotiation table. This support for CSA involvement may stem from the fact that they are not part of the core of the state security apparatus and are viewed first and foremost as community members by many in the region.

Other Faction's Reaction to Negotiations

Amid the ongoing factional infighting between JAS and ISWAP, formerly associated members of Boko Haram were asked how their rival faction would react to news their faction was negotiating with the government. The responses showcased several interesting observations about inter-faction dynamics. The majority of JAS respondents surveyed, unsurprisingly, said that ISWAP would view JAS' negotiations with the government negatively. They would confirm

ISWAP's view that JAS supporters are "non-believers." Several respondents expressed concerns that public knowledge that their faction is negotiating may result in attacks against its members. Other respondents expressed that ISWAP might view JAS negotiations as being favourable, as they would no longer have a rival and would therefore be able to exert control over the entirety of contested territory. Some thought JAS exiting the conflict through negotiations could lead to ISWAP adopting more extreme positions or lead to an uptick in attacks as there would no longer be a countervailing ideological or military competitor to hamper it. This further highlights the sensitivity of negotiations and the need to ensure the confidentiality of talks, both so that trust between parties is built, and to ensure the safety of those still associated with the group, as well as those living under the group's control. Any physical reprisals towards members – whether of the faction that is negotiating or others – and civilians may risk derailing negotiations or discouraging future talks.

Security Actors and Dialogue and Negotiation Efforts

Since the start of the Boko Haram conflict, communities across the four countries have organized various vigilante committees and self-defence groups to protect themselves and contribute to the response against the insurgency. The existence of many of these groups, such as the Hunters and Charmers in Nigeria, actually preceded the conflict, and some were repurposed towards supporting the conflict against Boko Haram.[114] While these community security actors (CSAs) have been instrumental in protecting communities, they have nevertheless been implicated in various atrocities against civilians,[115] and there are concerns that these armed vigilantes may become the region's next security threat or spoil efforts at broader peacemaking for their own ends.[116] In light of this, the survey also sought to gauge the role that security actors, whether formal or informal, may play in potential dialogue and negotiations to holistically end the conflict. Such a holistic approach would cover all harm caused during the conflict, including by CSAs and the military.

Across all four countries, community security actors were perceived by other groups of respondents to be generally supportive of both dialogue and negotiation efforts between Boko Haram and the government. This corresponded with the responses of current CSA members

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[114] Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report 18* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

[115] Center for Civilians in Conflict, *Civilian Perceptions of the Yan Gora (CJTF) in Borno State, Nigeria* (2018).

[116] Saskia Brechenmacher, "Achieving Peace in Northeast Nigeria: The Reintegration Challenge," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 05 September 2018

themselves, who frequently indicated that their groups would overwhelmingly support negotiation efforts to bring an end to the conflict and believed their groups should be involved in negotiations. The end of the conflict would, in fact, be a point of pride for CSAs, given that they joined to protect their communities.[117]

Respondents across various groups highlighted two key reasons for the involvement of CSAs in negotiations. Firstly, many felt that the extensive knowledge of Boko Haram that CSAs had acquired by fighting against the group may prove beneficial in negotiations. Indeed, many CSAs have extensive local intelligence, and knowledge of local terrain, and languages, which formal security agencies lack.[118] As one respondent from Nigeria explained: "*The CJTF leads the military in terms of knowing the nooks and crannies of Boko Haram hideouts. Therefore, involving us in negotiations will bring about positive results*." Secondly, some CSAs surveyed felt that including them in negotiations would be a sign of respect and value from the government for the role they have played in the Boko Haram conflict. Indeed, the groups have received varying levels of recognition for their work, with many members expressing discontent over the lack of recognition and remuneration. Such discontent may increase the potential for escalated violence and a new phase of the conflict if not properly addressed.[119] As such, their inclusion in dialogues and negotiations may not be about the value they bring, but it may be needed as recognition for past sacrifices.

This recognition could assist with managing potential CSA spoilers to a negotiated settlement, but such recognition is not likely to be sufficient on its own. Indeed, without a comprehensive reintegration plan for CSAs, the end of the conflict with Boko Haram may result in these individuals – who are trained in combat functions and potentially desensitized to violence – being left without meaningful ways to sustain themselves in civilian life. CSAs surveyed expressed mixed views on the above point. A significant majority indicated that the end of the conflict would not have an impact on their daily lives, as they would either return to the trades that they were engaged with prior to the start of the conflict or believed they would be able to find alternative employment due to the skills they have acquired during their time with their respective group. In Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, almost all CSAs emphasized that they did not receive remuneration for their role. Concerns for future employment were however most evident in Chad, where several CSA respondents feared that due to the end of the conflict, and therefore their current engagement, they would be plunged into poverty.

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[117] Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report 18* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).
[118] Ibid.
[119] Center for Civilians in Conflict, *Civilian Perceptions of the Yan Gora (CJTF) in Borno State, Nigeria* (2018).

Gendered Perspectives on Negotiations

The respondents surveyed for this report were overwhelmingly men, with only 14% (40 of 295) of individuals interviewed identifying as women. While the number of women interviewees appears low, the number nevertheless represents a fairly accurate level of gender representation within the subgroups interviewed (e.g., State militaries), which are disproportionately made up of men.[120] The focus groups and interviews with community members were exceptions and had greater gender diversity. The sample of women interviewed across the four countries may not represent the typical views of women in the region. The women interviewed generally held some position of authority or power within their respective social groups, and therefore had greater knowledge and access to information than can be expected from the average woman in these communities. It is possible their prominence also impacts their conflict exposure level as well.

Considerations for Future Dialogue and Negotiation Efforts

The data collected as part of this UNIDIR and ISS study highlight various considerations when exploring dialogue and negotiations as conflict resolution tools for the Boko Haram conflict. Several important reflections stand out that may be of practical consideration for policymakers and government officials:

- Dialogue and negotiations with listed terrorist groups are not signs of capitulation. Rather, these can form part of a broader, more robust long-term conflict resolution strategy to manage, and ultimately end political violence. Indeed, dialogue and negotiations can occur simultaneously with kinetic, counterterrorism and intelligence operations aimed at weakening the group's military capacities and reducing its space to operate, potentially pressuring the group into negotiations if the cost of continued operations becomes increasingly unsustainable.

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[120] Zoe Marks, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, and Rebecca Littman, "Understanding Receptivity to Returning Former Boko Haram Associates Through a Gender Lens," Findings Report 30, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.

- Dialogue and negotiations do not necessarily take the same form and can be used in a myriad of ways, at various points in time, to achieve specific desired ends. As shown in the case of Boko Haram, one-sided communications campaigns have successfully prompted the exits of several respondents to this study, while tactical negotiations with both factions have resulted in the release of various hostages. Piecemeal negotiations may be used to achieve specific desired ends, such as an end to attacks against civilians and may signal a desire to engage in further negotiations and serve to build trust among parties.

- While recognizing the challenges posed by the fact that Boko Haram consists of several factions, each with its own internal bureaucracies, rivalries and personalities, these findings have shown that alternate entryways exist to dialogue and negotiate rather than through the highest leadership. Identifying individual influential commanders who may have their own motivations to negotiate an exit for their fighters, and engaging with them directly may serve to bypass ISWAP's centralized hierarchy and capitalize on JAS's decentralized structure.

- While reflective of a particular moment in time, the findings from this study nevertheless indicate a more positive vantage point towards dialogue and negotiations with Boko Haram than previously assumed. Of notable interest is the position of community security actors, who were generally supportive of dialogue and negotiation efforts for an end to the conflict, despite concerns that a loss of their employment may cause them to spoil efforts for their own ends. Without a comprehensive plan to professionalize, integrate or retrain these security actors, there is considerable risk of a new phase of the conflict.

- A holistic end to the conflict must therefore take into account the role that security actors – both formal and informal – have played in the conflict. Addressing the atrocities and harm caused by these security actors, while recognizing their uncertainties about their professional future, in a context where many do not have other livelihood options, is equally crucial in ending political violence.

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