



# Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency

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## *Executive Summary*

Boko Haram's rise and insurgency have dramatically changed the lives of thousands of women and girls, often casting them voluntarily or by force into new roles outside the domestic sphere. Some joined to escape their social conditions; others were abducted and enslaved. Seven years of war have caused gender-specific suffering. While men have disproportionately been killed, women are an overwhelming majority among the estimated 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the North East. As former wives, slaves or fighters, many bear the stigma of association with the insurgents and are barred from reintroduction into their communities, in part because the lines between militant, sympathiser and forced accomplice are blurred. Although Boko Haram faces strong pushback, it remains capable of launching attacks and conducting multiple suicide bombings. Understanding how women experience the conflict, not only as victims but also as actors, needs to directly inform policies and programs to tackle the roots of the insurgency and strategies for curbing it, as well as facilitate women's contribution to lasting peace.

Since its emergence in 2002, Boko Haram has paid particular attention to women in rhetoric and actions, partly because of the intense debate surrounding their role in society in the North East. Among other revivalist Islamic movements, the sect called for tighter restrictions on them in some areas of life but also promoted their access to Islamic education and offered financial empowerment. With patriarchy, poverty, corruption, early marriage and illiteracy long thwarting their life chances, some women saw an opportunity in Boko Haram to advance their freedoms or reduce their hardship. Many valued the religious and moral anchoring.

Thereafter, Boko Haram began to abduct women and girls for both political and pragmatic ends, including to protest the arrest of female members and relatives of some leaders. The seizure of more than 200 schoolgirls near Chibok in 2014 was a much publicised spike in a wider trend. The group took Christian and later Muslim females to hurt communities that opposed it, as a politically symbolic imposition of its will and as assets. By awarding "wives" to fighters, it attracted male recruits and incentivised combatants. Because women were not considered a threat, female followers and forced conscripts could initially circulate in government-controlled areas more easily, as spies, messengers, recruiters and smugglers. For the same reason, from mid-2014, Boko Haram turned to female suicide bombers. Increasingly pressed for manpower, it also trained women to fight.

As vigilante militia members, including with the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), hundreds of women help security forces, particularly to frisk females at checkpoints, gather information and identify suspects, and also sometimes to fight Boko Haram. Others work in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and women's associations or care privately for war victims. In some cases, the war has opened opportunities for women's activism, illustrated by the establishment of several new women-led NGOs in Maiduguri and the Nigerian involvement in the Bring Back Our Girls international campaign.

Boko Haram attacks, the military's persecution of suspects and its strategy of emptying contested areas have forced over a million women and girls to flee homes. Some suspected supporters are in detention. Hundreds of thousands of females are

in government camps where food is scarce and healthcare dismal; in unofficial camps, the situation can be even worse. Separated from husbands and sons conscripted or killed by Boko Haram or arrested by security forces, many women are now fully responsible for their families' protection and economic wellbeing.

Harsh treatment of IDPs in camps and detention centres could undermine military gains. If corruption in aid delivery and abuses persist, communities may harbour grievances that could lead them to reject state authority. Meanwhile, the stigma carried by women and girls known or suspected to have been Boko Haram members risks leaving them and their children isolated and alienated, generating new frustration and resistance of the kind that gave rise to Boko Haram.

How gender dynamics play a part in fuelling the Boko Haram insurgency should be a clear warning that women's integration into decision-making processes at all levels is critical to a durable peace. Countering the sect and rebuilding a peaceful society in the North East requires the government and its international partners to tackle gender discrimination, better protect women and girls affected by the violence and support women's economic and social reintegration, as well as enhance their role in building sustainable peace. In the short term, reunification of families should be a priority. In the longer term, improvements and gender balance in accessing education, in both state schools and upgraded Quranic schools, is vital.

## *Recommendations*

*To better protect women and girls affected by the violence and respond to immediate humanitarian needs*

### **To the Government of Nigeria:**

1. Screen the predominantly female adults from areas formerly controlled by Boko Haram with diverse teams that include protection officers provided by national civil society organisations and trained by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to ensure adequate treatment of both suspects and victims.
2. Implement urgently greater accountability in distribution of food and gender-sensitive assistance in IDP camps and host communities, including access to sexual and reproductive health information and services for women and girls; give local and international humanitarian organisations access to IDP camps and transfer their management to civilian organisations as soon as possible.
3. Develop urgently programs to increase women's recruitment in local police forces and deploy them in IDP camps as soon as possible.
4. Activate referral mechanisms for women and girls to report sexual and gender-based violence in IDP camps and host communities and ensure that authorities, including the judiciary and police, properly investigate allegations of abuses by security forces and/or the vigilantes that assist them.
5. Develop special support programs, in partnership with women's organisations, religious associations and health centres, for women victims of sexual abuse to ensure they and their children are free from discrimination, violence and stigmatisation.
6. Distinguish Boko Haram ideologues from those who joined for other motives and ensure transparent and fair investigation of both male and female Boko Haram suspects according to international law, including taking account of the level of involvement and seriousness of their crimes; hold all detainees, including women, in humane conditions monitored by humanitarian agencies; and ensure children are granted adequate care.

*To support women's economic and social reintegration, as well as enhance their role in building sustainable peace*

### **To the Government of Nigeria:**

7. Commit to greater representation of women in government-funded programs and support inclusive peacebuilding initiatives in the North East.
8. Ensure that public and private development and reconstruction plans are based on a gender-sensitive analysis of the insurgency and counter-insurgency.
9. Make reunification of families a priority, including by allocating more resources to the task and establishing a federal database to facilitate the search for missing persons.

10. Facilitate access to credit and land for women, recognising that single females and especially widow-headed households need particular support to restart productive activities, for example in traditional crafts, trade or agriculture.

**To the affected northern-state governments,  
especially Borno state:**

11. Engage community leaders, including religious groups, to facilitate reintegration and rehabilitation of all women released from Boko Haram and provide psycho-social support as possible.
12. Design programs to strengthen women's participation in politics and local governance.
13. Prioritise increasing girls' access to primary and secondary schools; and develop a program to upgrade Quranic education, ensuring equal access for girls.
14. Develop community-based approaches and sensitisation to address social stigma around former Boko Haram wives and slaves as well as children fathered by Boko Haram members, including by dramatically increasing investment in schools in the North East so as to allow the latter to attend school with other children in the region; and improve coherence and open a public debate by producing a blueprint for reintegration of these groups.

**To donors, UN agencies and international NGOs:**

15. Expand and improve gender-sensitive aspects of aid programs in all Boko Haram-affected areas.
16. Strengthen programs, in partnership with women-led NGOs, to tackle gender stereotypes and raise awareness about women's roles, including in relation to peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.

**Abuja/Dakar/Brussels, 5 December 2016**

# Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency

## I. Introduction

President Muhammadu Buhari, elected in 2015, has reached out to neighbouring Lake Chad basin countries, Cameroon, Chad and Niger, and, despite the army's structural weaknesses, mobilised a more powerful military campaign against Boko Haram, the jihadist insurgency that has destabilised Nigeria's North East since 2010.<sup>1</sup> The regional effort seems to have put the movement on the defensive, but it still holds some ground, launches deadly attacks on civilians and security forces and has deep roots in certain communities. Even as the fight continues, the government, at state and federal levels, and its international partners must think carefully about how to address the war's diverse effects on the region's heterogeneous population, lest Boko Haram or similar groups remain a long-term regional threat.

This report analyses experiences of women and girls in the North East in order to inform interventions to better alleviate their suffering, facilitate their contribution to lasting peace and mitigate the threat from female Boko Haram members. It examines patriarchal norms the sect exploited to attract recruits and tracks the diverse, changing female roles, as valuable abductees, combatants' wives and slaves, forced or willing fighters, heads of displaced families, community leaders, mothers, wives and daughters. It identifies policy priorities tailored to women's experiences, including immediate humanitarian aid and protection, longer-term reintegration into normal life of those stigmatised by Boko Haram association and women's roles in a peaceful North East.

The analysis is based on research in the North East, the federal capital, Abuja, and south-eastern Niger with Boko Haram victims, captives or supporters, as well as community leaders, government officials, humanitarian workers and academics.<sup>2</sup> Scores of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees were interviewed in formal and informal camps in Nigeria and Niger and a rehabilitation centre for ex-sect members in Maiduguri, as well as Boko Haram suspects held in Niger.

<sup>1</sup> For previous reporting on the North East and Boko Haram see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°s 168, *Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict*, 20 December 2010; 216, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, 3 April 2014; and Briefing N°120, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, 4 May 2016. For more on the army, see Africa Report N°237, *Nigeria: The Challenge of Military Reform*, 6 June 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Boko Haram has affected neighbouring parts of Cameroon, Chad and Niger, but this report focuses on women and girls in Nigeria's North East, where it was born and has been most active. The North East comprises Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Taraba, Bauchi and Gombe states. Boko Haram has most affected Borno, Adamawa's north and parts of Yobe, Bauchi and Gombe states.

## II. Women, Patriarchy and Islam in the North East

Boko Haram's appeal to some women and the significance of women and girls for the group should be understood in the context of the North East's heavily patriarchal societies, a widespread adherence to Islamic tenets and challenges to established beliefs and practices. The region's religious and cultural norms, codified in law, have defined women's status through marriage and childbearing and largely confined them to a domestic role. Their private and public places have been hotly contested by both the male-dominated political and religious elite and civil society, including female activists. What Islam says and what should be codified have been at the debate's centre.

### A. *Entrenched Patriarchy*

Male dominance has by and large been entrenched in law. Colonialism did little to challenge patriarchal structures in the mostly Muslim north, and independence altered little.<sup>3</sup> At the urging of religious conservatives, Borno and eleven other northern states enacted a stricter version of Sharia (Islamic law) in 2003, with elements of Islamic criminal law.<sup>4</sup> Other provisions reinforced male dominance and further restricted women's freedoms and rights, including access to education and jobs. As is the norm throughout Nigeria, Muslim women in the North East do not usually own land or homes.<sup>5</sup> While Nigeria does not recognise polygamous unions under federal civil law, the twelve northern states did so under state law at the beginning of the 2000s.

Northern Muslim women are politically marginalised. In 2007, only six of 360 state representatives in the twelve northern states were women, none in Borno. Wives of politicians and traditional rulers generally have no prominent public role, partly due to the practice of *purdah* (secluding women from society).<sup>6</sup> This power imbalance, combined with high poverty, has contributed to a disproportionately lower socio-economic status for women and girls. Marrying soon after puberty is a main reason the North East has Nigeria's lowest school attendance ratio and very high female illiteracy.<sup>7</sup> This correlates with large age gaps between husbands and wives,

<sup>3</sup> The colonial administration relied on "indirect rule" through the northern emirates and did little to promote girls' education. Christian missionaries provided most Western education. The 1960 northern penal code, inspired by the Sudanese model, includes the right for a husband to act "for the purpose of correcting his wife". Jamila M. Nasir, "Sharia Implementation and Female Muslims in Nigeria's Sharia States", in Philip Ostien (ed.), *Sharia Implementation in Northern Nigeria 1999-2006: A Sourcebook*, vol. 3 (Ibadan, 2007), p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> On Sharia, see Crisis Group Report, *Northern Nigeria*, op. cit.; Johannes Harnischfeger, *Democratization & Islamic Law. The Sharia Conflict in Nigeria* (Frankfurt, 2008). That Sharia criminal law is implemented only in Bauchi state has been a main Boko Haram grievance.

<sup>5</sup> Of the 56.2 per cent of the North East population who own land, 4 per cent are women, the lowest rate in Nigeria. "Gender in Nigeria Report", British Council, 2012. Women own some household property, have access to farmland and are involved in the pastoral economy, but titles to individual and communal or family land are usually held by men or community leaders.

<sup>6</sup> Nasir, "Sharia implementation", op. cit., p. 83. Only 53 of Nigeria's 990 state representatives are women.

<sup>7</sup> In 2013, 49 per cent of North East men and 72 per cent of women were illiterate, compared to 15 per cent in the South East. Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2013 (DHS), National Population Commission, June 2014, p. 37. A 1990s study found many Kanuri marriages were between ages



reinforced male dominance and some of the world's highest fertility rates. The average marriage age has increased slightly in cities and other places with girls' access to education.<sup>8</sup>

Many women and girls in the North East have long experienced oppression and gender-based violence, but stereotyped views need qualification. Despite a cultural, religious and legal setting that disproportionately restricts them, many women are economic providers in their own right; some sell goods in the market or from home, or perform farming activities, while others work in offices.<sup>9</sup>

## B. *Contested Womanhood*

Womanhood has become a central theme in male-dominated political debate, especially with the rise of revivalist Islam and its increasing influence on northern politics. Religious revivalists perceive the female body as a battleground in a global conflict between Islam and "the West". All North East states thus refused to sign the 2003 Child Rights Act (CRA), which set eighteen as the minimum marrying age for men and women, thus preventing its implementation on their territory. Some Islamic revivalist groups also push for full *purdah*, long limited to religious and political elites.<sup>10</sup>

In what may seem to foreign observers a paradox, many women engage with non-violent Islamic movements such as Izala, Nigeria's largest Salafi group.<sup>11</sup> Salafi Islam embraces conservative interpretations, including on women's public roles and relations with established Sufi Islam and non-Muslims. But it promotes women's education, Islamic and Western, and allows believers to free themselves from an Islam mediated by established Sufi clerics. Many women find it useful for advancing in their

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twelve and fifteen for girls, and eighteen and twenty for men. Editha Platte, *Kanuri Women of Borno (Nigeria): Perspectives from the little kingdom of Musune* (Maiduguri, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> The North East's fertility rate of 6.3 births per woman compares to 5.5 (nationally) and 4.3 (the South) and about a third of North East girls begin to have children between fifteen and nineteen. DHS, op. cit., p. 68. Illiteracy, poverty, young pregnancies and limited clinic access explain high maternal mortality, 1,549 per 100,000 live births, five times the global average. "Gender in Nigeria Report 2012: Improving the Lives of Girls and Women in Nigeria: Issues, Policies, Action", British Council Nigeria, p. 39. In 2013, the median age at first marriage was 16.4 for North East women now between twenty and 49 and 25.5 for North East men now 30 to 49. DHS, op. cit., pp. 57-58. Marriage practices vary according to ethnicity, religion, education and urbanisation.

<sup>9</sup> Women who do domestic work or are secluded often sell food or other goods from home or send children to hawk on the streets or markets. This is a substantial source of female income in the North. Polly Hill, "Hidden Trade among the Hausa", *Man: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, no. 4 (1969), pp. 392-409; Yakubu Zakaria, "Entrepreneurs at Home: Secluded Muslim Women and Hidden Economic Activities in Northern Nigeria", *Nordic Journal of African Studies* vol. 10, no. 1 (2001), pp. 107-123.

<sup>10</sup> Salafist groups have surged in the North East since the 1970s and broadly share goals of promoting a purist vision of Islam based on Sharia, eradicating "heretical" innovations and, for many, establishing an Islamic state. Crisis Group Report, *Northern Nigeria*, op. cit., pp. 13-20, 57. Some northern politicians have argued that the CRA was "a ploy to introduce Western standards with the ultimate aim of reducing the Muslim population". The quote is a summary by a critic of that position, then Federal Women's Affairs Minister Hajiya Miriam Inna Ciroma, a Borno Muslim. "Islam is No Hindrance to Women's Child's Rights – Gov", *This Day*, 29 August 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Izala was established in the northern city of Kaduna in 1978 by Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, the former Grand Qadi of the region, heavily influenced by Wahhabi doctrine.

lives on an Islamic basis on their own terms.<sup>12</sup> In a context of endemic corruption, widespread poverty and social anomie, many value the moral order Islam provides.<sup>13</sup> Civil society groups in the North East occasionally invoke Islam to challenge patriarchal structures and gender inequalities.<sup>14</sup>

While men have dominated the political and religious debate on the place of women in society, some women have also raised their voices. In Borno state, women in a number of civil society organisations and professions such as law, academia and health, and some female civil servants (including the few directors in state ministries) have advocated greater women's rights and freedom.<sup>15</sup>

Boko Haram leaders made use of the opening created by patriarchy, constraints on women and girls (particularly by patriarchal family members) and grinding socio-economic hardship in the North East to attract followers. Similarly, the debate over a female's place and role offered opportunity to invoke religious authority to back up the movement's claims and made women and girls significant for its rhetoric and actions.

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<sup>12</sup> Elisha Renne, "Educating Muslim Women and the Izala Movement in Zaria City, Nigeria", *Islamic Africa*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2012), pp. 55-86; Adeline Masquelier, *Women and Islamic Revival in a West African Town* (Bloomington, 2009); Roman Loimeier, "Boko Haram: The Development of a Militant Religious Movement in Nigeria", *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 47, nos. 2-3 (2012), p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> This is why many women and most Muslim groups, including opposing ones such as Izala and the Sufi Tijaniyya, supported implementation of Sharia.

<sup>14</sup> Ibrahim N. Sada, Fatima L. Adamu, Ali Ahmad. "Promoting Women's Rights through Sharia in Northern Nigeria", British Council and Department for International Development, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Women-led NGOs complain about lack of support from donors and international NGOs (INGOs), who were said to hardly work with female civil society activists or use their local knowledge. Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, August 2016. The difficulties faced by Muslim women's NGOs are not new. See Fatima L. Adamu, "A double-edged sword: challenging women's oppression within Muslim society in Northern Nigeria", *Gender and Development*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1999), pp. 56-61.

### III. Boko Haram and Women's Changing Roles

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Boko Haram and the subsequent insurgency and counter-insurgency have dramatically changed the lives of thousands of women and girls, casting them voluntarily, by force or for lack of other options into new, evolving roles outside the domestic sphere. Some joined the movement, first as members of a religious community, later as insurgents, while many are targets of its violence. Some fight against it within local vigilante units; others play critical roles in relief and reconciliation, while many displaced by fighting find themselves with new responsibilities. How roles evolve and relate to discrimination or empowerment have significant implications for North East recovery and stability.

#### A. *Mohammed Yusuf's Female Supporters*

Well before Boko Haram turned to mass violence, when it was essentially one of a variety of revivalist Islamic movements in the Nigerian North, its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, attracted female followers.<sup>16</sup> A reason Boko Haram, not unlike Izala, appealed to many, especially young women, was the opportunity to study the Quran and learn Arabic. Some had received Western education in government schools and, like men, tore up their certificates to show their new allegiance and rejection of the Nigerian state, which they deemed immoral and disappointing.<sup>17</sup> Other factors were Yusuf's encouragement of marriage within the sect and alleviation of traditional financial demands and social obligations, which gave young women some relief from family pressures. For women involved in hard labour such as farming or fetching water, *purdah* as promoted by the group may have been an attractive alternative.<sup>18</sup>

Like many other Islamic Salafi leaders worldwide, Yusuf put special emphasis on treatment of the female body to show adherence to correct Islam. He encouraged wearing the *niqab*, a Saudi-style dress introduced in Nigeria in the 1970s that fully covers face and body.<sup>19</sup> Initially, women could hear him preach at the mosque, where they sat apart from the men. Subsequent debate among Boko Haram clerics over whether to allow women in public led to the decision they should be taught at home and not allowed in mosques. Yusuf considered mixing of sexes a proof of unbelief.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> At the time, his group was a vocal member of a galaxy of movements calling for Quranic study and purified Islamic practice as the answer to societal ills. Yusuf (1970-2009) led Boko Haram from about 2002 until he was extra-judicially executed by police. The following year Abubakar Shekau emerged as leader and, according to sources in Maiduguri, took a Yusuf widow as one of his four wives. See Crisis Group Report, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II)*, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interviews, female Boko Haram members, government safe house, Maiduguri, June 2016; Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN) representatives, Maiduguri, 13 August 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, June, August 2016. A 55-year-old woman from Damasak, Borno state, stressed that the situation in her region changed under Yusuf's influence, as he promoted quick, simple weddings and ordered the dowry to go to the bride, not her family. Crisis Group interview, refugee who escaped from Boko Haram, Chettimari, Niger, May 2016.

<sup>19</sup> For men, Yusuf recommended the Wahabbi style, typically long beards, turbans and trousers worn above the ankles.

<sup>20</sup> Zainab Usman, Sherine El-Taraboulsi, Khadija Gambo Hawaja, "Gender Norms and Female Participation in Radical Movements in Northern Nigeria", Nigeria Stabilisation and Reconciliation Programme, British Council, Department for International Development, 2014, p. 24. Muhammad

A mixed Western style was a major reason to consider a school impure (*haram*). Unlike in Izala, *purdah* was required for female followers.

## B. *The Insurgency*

A government crackdown after violent confrontations in June and July 2009 in Maiduguri and several other cities led to the extrajudicial execution of Yusuf by the Nigerian police, as well as the killing of a number of other sect leaders and at least 1,000 supporters.<sup>21</sup> Many members fled to rural areas and neighbouring counties, where they reorganised and began to engage in revenge terror and guerrilla attacks, led by Abubakar Shekau, a Yusuf deputy. Boko Haram recruited women and men, primarily from Maiduguri and other urban areas, with a mixture of coercion and incentives. In 2013, the security forces and civilian vigilantes (the Civilian Joint Task Force, CJTF) forced it out of Maiduguri, but as its insurgency spread to rural areas, more women were recruited or forced to join from villages, cutting across classes. Many married Boko Haram members.

### 1. Women in Boko Haram's insurgency

Women's and girls' importance for Boko Haram stems from their roles and how they are perceived in society – both in the North East and in Nigeria as a whole. As wives, they enhance social status and provide sexual or domestic services (sometimes forced), thereby becoming valuable incentives for potential male recruits. Their adherence, willing or forced, to the movement's version of Islam can also contribute to the spreading of its ideology among other women, but possibly also young men. Women can perform roles very different from traditional stereotypes. As the war evolved, women have become recruiters, spies, domestic labour, fighters and forced or willing suicide bombers.

Targeting of women and girls in certain communities helped to attract supporters, establish a political ideology in opposition to the state and sometimes attack Nigerian institutions in areas where it was perceived it would hurt the most. During the insurgency's early phase, from late 2010, militants targeted individuals, mostly men, suspected of assisting the security forces in their initial crackdown on the sect. Boko Haram began kidnapping women and children in mid-2013, initially Christians in the Gwoza area of south east Borno. Shekau publicised the captures, demanding the government release the wives and children of several Boko Haram leaders, including his own spouses, arrested in 2012, an issue he had repeatedly raised.<sup>22</sup> A deal was negotiated between the authorities and Boko Haram and an exchange was organised, but abductions of women became a core tactic.

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Yusuf, *This is Our Doctrine and Our Method in Proselytization* (Ibadan, forthcoming), English translation of *Hādhihi 'Aqīdatunā wa-Manhaj Da'wa tinā* (Maiduguri, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Female supporters did not play a direct part in the 2009 violence. "Although there were women among the followers of Muhammad Yusuf, none was arrested or found among the dead. This might be because the sect leader evacuated them to safety when the invasion of his enclave became imminent". Usman Gaji Galtimari, "Report of the Administrative Committee of Inquiry into the Boko Haram Insurgency in Borno State" (Maiduguri, 2009), vol. 2, chapter 2.

<sup>22</sup> Video of Abubakar Shekau, 30 September 2012, extract translated by Elodie Apard, "Le jihad en vidéo", *Politique africaine*, no. 138 (2015), p. 146. In a January 2012 message to President Jonathan, Shekau said, "you took over our women and made of them whatever you wanted". Ibid., p. 59 (Crisis Group translation).

On 14 April 2014, Boko Haram seized more than 200 schoolgirls in the town of Chibok, southern Borno state. This became a global affair, with leading female civil society activists throughout Nigeria joining in the Bring Back Our Girls international campaign. The state's response was apathetic. It took three weeks for President Goodluck Jonathan to make a statement, and his wife, Patience, speculated that the abduction never happened.<sup>23</sup> This so fed into a mounting debate on Jonathan's performance that some of his allies claimed, without basis, that the abduction was a ploy by northern elites to weaken his government. Boko Haram said it would force the mostly Christian schoolgirls to convert, while trying to use them as bargaining chips.<sup>24</sup> They remain a major symbolic issue. Shekau's release of 21 Chibok girls in October 2016 after negotiations has been good news for President Buhari.

There have been many more kidnappings. In April 2015, a well-documented report estimated Boko Haram had taken more than 2,000 girls and young women, most unmarried, over the previous twelve months alone. But that figure is a mere indication. Boko Haram probably controlled a few hundred thousand women at the height of its insurgency, and abductions were many. The practice remained extensive well into the second half of 2015, when the movement further expanded its territorial control in Borno state.<sup>25</sup> Reports show that militants mostly killed men (civilian and military), but generally abducted women. In a video, Shekau told followers to kill men but "spare the old, women, the lunatic, and the repentant".<sup>26</sup>

Beyond trying to free its own female detainees, Boko Haram's reasons for abducting women and girls are probably mixed. In some local contexts, its actions have ethnic underpinnings; since it recruits more in certain communities than others, the history of hostility between communities has occasionally become part of its jihadist struggle. That it first abducted women in mainly Christian communities and pressured them to convert suggests it sought to spread its version of Islam as well as punish local adversaries.<sup>27</sup> There are early reports of gang rape of Christian women, while Muslims were spared.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> "First Lady Labels Women Activists Terrorists, Orders Arrest", International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 5 May 2014.

<sup>24</sup> The Chibok girls were reportedly not forced to convert, but conversion under heavy pressure has been mentioned by other former captives. "Boko Haram did not rape, abuse freed Chibok girls – Source", Reuters, 9 November 2016.

<sup>25</sup> "Our Job is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill": Boko Haram's Reign of Terror in North-East Nigeria", Amnesty International, April 2015. On more recent developments, see "'Beyond Chibok': over 1.3 million children uprooted by Boko Haram", UNICEF, April 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, women have been killed in attacks in large numbers. For instance, 59 Shuwa women trying to escape from Kirenowa in June 2014 were pursued and shot dead at the mosque in the next village, Ngalori. Crisis Group interview, Shuwa Arab women, Maiduguri, 14 August 2016. But the bulk of available narratives indicate the insurgents kill many more men. For instance, a survivor said there were only three women among the 43 killed during a February 2016 attack on Kache, a Shuwa Arab settlement in Marte LGA, Borno state. Most women but only five men escaped. Crisis Group interview, Maiduguri, 18 June 2016. See also the incidents detailed in "Our Job is to Shoot ...", op. cit., pp 37, 40-41, 43, 48. Available data on Boko Haram deaths (eg, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org) and [www.crisis.acleddata.com](http://www.crisis.acleddata.com)) do not distinguish between male and female victims. "Boko Haram: Shekau claims responsibility for attack on Giwa Barracks, threatens to attack universities, Civilian-JTF", *Premium Times*, 24 March 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interviews, IDPs, Maiduguri, Yola and Jalingo, 14 June 2016. During the July 2009 uprising, Yusuf and his followers held Christians, including women, captive in their Markas (base) in Maiduguri and reportedly killed those who refused to convert. Galtimari, "Report", op. cit.; Crisis

There is much ex-captive testimony about insurgents trying to obtain allegiance through a mix of threats, preaching and enticements.<sup>29</sup> In so doing, Boko Haram seems to follow a pre-colonial Lake Chad-area pattern of raiding and enslavement, whereby women and children are captured and integrated into the victorious group.

With the state-sponsored emergence from 2013 of civilian vigilante groups to fight Boko Haram in all communities, the jihadists turned on both Christian and Muslim communities, killing men and capturing women, including Muslim women. For instance, when they captured Kareto, Borno state, in 2015, they treated Muslim women harshly because they had taken part, under military pressure, in desecrating the bodies of killed comrades.<sup>30</sup>

Economic motives may also explain the increase in abductions. As in the nineteenth century wars in the Lake Chad area, Boko Haram used women and girls as rewards to fighters, a significant enticement since raising the resources for marriage is not easy.<sup>31</sup> A former captive reported overhearing lengthy conversations between fighters over marriage prospects. That Boko Haram has occasionally released older women, for instance when food stocks were low or the war moved on, but not younger women demonstrates the latter's value.<sup>32</sup>

Management of marriageable women and girls, including widows, appears to have been a prerogative of leaders and a contentious issue within the sect. In a 2016 recording, Mamman Nur, a Boko Haram splinter faction leader, criticised Shekau for betraying his promise to marry the Chibok girls to sect members. Boko Haram seems to have distinguished between slaves and wives based on religion, protecting the latter more from abuse.<sup>33</sup> But even that has been controversial, with Nur criticising Shekau for enslaving Muslim women he deemed unfaithful to his version of Islam.<sup>34</sup>

Captured women have generally been kept under surveillance, required to wear the *niqab* and often compelled to listen to sermons and Quranic education.<sup>35</sup> Eventually,

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Group interview, Borno state representative, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Maiduguri, May 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Atta Barkindo, Benjamin Tyavkase Gudaku, Caroline Katgurum Wesley, "Our Bodies, Their Battle Ground. Boko Haram and Gender-Based Violence against Christian Women and Children in North-Eastern Nigeria since 1999", Nigeria's Political Violence Research Network, working paper no. 1, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former captives and IDPs, Abuja, 3 June 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interview, refugee, Chettimari, Niger, May 2016.

<sup>31</sup> "In the absence of lucrative trafficking and foreign financial support, Boko Haram compensates ... by a stream of plunder. Human beings turn into wealth". Christian Seignobos, "Boko Haram et le lac Tchad", *Afrique contemporaine*, no. 255 (2016), p. 99. On the history of capture in sub-Saharan Africa, see Jane Guyer, "Wealth in people and self-realization in Equatorial Africa", *Man*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1993), p. 243-265.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interviews, academic who interviewed former captive, Paris, 29 March 2016; former female captive, Chettimari, Niger, 19 May 2016.

<sup>33</sup> "In Islam, it is allowed to take infidel women as slaves, and in due course we will start taking women away and sell them in the market". "Boko Haram: Shekau claims responsibility of attack on Giwa barracks, threatens to attack universities, Civilian-JTF", *Premium Times*, 24 March 2014.

<sup>34</sup> "Since those [Muslim who are not followers of Boko Haram] are the apostates, then what they should do is to repent but not to be held as slaves". David Otto, "Boko Haram 'Exposed' – The Greatest Betrayal Ever – How Shakau Was Forced to Pledge Allegiance to ISIL", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/boko-haram-exposed-greatest-betrayal-ever-how-shakau-david-otto>, 9 August 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Lectures emphasised "looking after your husband, having good morals and learning Arabic". Crisis Group interview, female ex-captive, safe house, Maiduguri, 16 June 2016.



they could be put to work, for instance as carriers, including in attacks, or cooks. While the sect's claims to moral rigour may have given captive women some protection from sexual violence, as seems to have been the case for several Chibok girls, there have been reports of clandestine, extra-marital rapes in Boko Haram camps. Rape seemed more frequent after captives, sometimes quite young by local standards, were pressured to marry fighters.<sup>36</sup>

After the 2009 crackdown, some women already loyal to Boko Haram left Maiduguri, following their husbands to other towns or the Sambisa forest, a large savanna area south of Maiduguri where Boko Haram has bases. Others stayed behind to care for families or clandestinely support husbands. Yet others continued to join Boko Haram willingly.<sup>37</sup>

In Boko Haram-controlled areas, marriage could bring a measure of security and well-being for women and their extended family. In a village near Kerenowa in the Local Government Area (LGA) of Marte, Borno state, insurgents married 80 girls, offering dowries of 15,000 naira (about \$70 in 2014), a considerable sum in a war-torn rural area.<sup>38</sup> Some fathers gave their daughters to fighters under pressure from Boko Haram, and at times women chose such marriages against family wishes. A woman from Walasa, a Kanuri village near Banki, Bama LGA, divorced her husband and married the Boko Haram *naqib* of Banki. She said her new husband looked after her better and gave her a higher stipend than her first husband. She lamented losing the money she had saved when the military took back her village, burned their house and arrested her.<sup>39</sup> In 2014, Kanuri elders and officials in Niger became increasingly worried about a small but increasing number of single women leaving the Diffa region for Boko Haram-controlled areas in search of business opportunities or a "lucrative" marriage.<sup>40</sup>

Some may have become Boko Haram wives more inadvertently. A nineteen-year-old from Banki said that when she married, in 2013, she did not know that her husband, a trader selling suitcases who would leave for weeks at a time, was in Boko Haram. She never saw him with a weapon until there was fighting nearby with the military, and they had to leave for the Sambisa forest. Her parents told her to go with him, possibly fearing violence from Boko Haram if they prevented her from accompanying her husband.<sup>41</sup>

The sect values Quranic education for women so they can take part in the religious community and obey its rules. Some women joined because they found this attractive and were eager to "acquire knowledge, to memorise the Quran and to learn about Islam more deeply ... [all] unique opportunities".<sup>42</sup> As they grew in militancy, they

<sup>36</sup> On the Chibok girls, see Abubakar Yahaya, "The ongoing violations of women's rights in the context of insurgency in Borno State, Nigeria", in Habu Galadima & Moses T. Aluaigba (eds.), *Insurgency and Human Rights in Northern Nigeria* (Kano, 2015), p. 44. More generally, see "'Those terrible weeks in their camp'. Boko Haram violence against women and girls in Northeast Nigeria", Human Rights Watch, October 2014, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, community leader, Maiduguri, 14 August 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, project manager of local NGO, Maiduguri, 11 August 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, government safe house, Maiduguri, 15 June 2016. A *naqib* (Arabic for "he who investigates, verifies") is above an *amir* (village head) in the Boko Haram hierarchy.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Kanuri elder, Niamey, December 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, female ex-captive, government safe house, Maiduguri, 16 June 2016.

<sup>42</sup> "Motivations and Empty promises: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth", Mercy Corps, April 2016, p. 15.

considered any non-supporter an apostate or non-Muslim and an enemy to be fought. Many were involved as domestic labour, but also recruiters of other women, their husbands or young men, as spies, messengers and smugglers (including of food).<sup>43</sup> For a time, as the army and CJTF focused on male suspects, women were well suited for these roles, as their supposed innocuousness allowed them to circulate more easily than male militants in government areas.

Unlike other West African insurgent groups, such as those in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Boko Haram has nothing like a women's brigade. Yet, under manpower pressure, particularly from 2014, some women and girls were trained and joined in attacks.<sup>44</sup> The wife of a Boko Haram leader in the Gwoza Hills reportedly carried a gun and killed a vigilante.<sup>45</sup> Armed female militants were sighted in the Sambisa forest, riding their own motorcycles. Women were said to be involved in a 2016 ambush on the military. On 10 July 2014, armed females between fourteen and 21 and fighting "like professionals" attacked Kirenowa in Marte LGA, Borno state.<sup>46</sup>

Use of young females as suicide bombers, the first instance of the tactic in Nigeria's history, has attracted much publicity. The attacks, which have killed hundreds, have become symbolic of the insurgency's brutality. The first suicide bombing was in 2011, but women bombers, usually with improvised explosives strapped to their bodies, became prominent only in the second half of 2014. Attacks grew in frequency and severity, but declined from mid-2015, mainly due to the army's cutting of Boko Haram's supply lines and improved prevention measures, including at checkpoints.

The youngest female bomb-carriers are often victims themselves, with little awareness, duped by relatives and possibly drugged.<sup>47</sup> But the older bombers seem to have volunteered. A woman who spent two years as a captive in Gwoza LGA said she saw seven such women who were recruited as suicide bombers and deployed to Maiduguri around March-April 2015. They reportedly were moved by commitment to jihad and apparently indoctrinated over a long period, including with promise of direct

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid; Crisis Group interviews, IDPs, Yola, June 2016; Jacob Zenn and Elizabeth Pearson, "Women, Gender and the evolving tactics of Boko Haram", *Journal of Terrorism Research*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014), p. 46-57.

<sup>44</sup> "Our Job is to Shoot ...", op. cit., p. 72; "Getting behind the profiles of Boko Haram members and factors contributing to radicalisation versus working towards peace", Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, Finn Church Aid and Kaiciid Dialogue Centre, October 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group researcher interview in another capacity, former captive, Abuja, September 2013; Crisis Group interview, CJTF chairman for Gwoza, Maiduguri, 22 June 2016; Adam Higazi, "A Conflict Analysis of Borno and Adamawa States", unpublished report for the Danish Refugee Council, Yola, February 2016. The testimony of the former captive is partially recounted in "Those terrible weeks ...", op. cit. p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group researcher interview in another capacity, women's leader in IDP camp, Yola, 18 October 2015; Crisis Group interview, civil society leader and conflict analyst, Maiduguri, 12 August 2016; account recorded by the Nigeria Stabilisation and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP), seen by Crisis Group in Maiduguri, 12 August 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, former official involved in debriefing surviving perpetrators of suicide attacks, Abuja, February 2016; The first female suicide attack seems to have been in Maiduguri in June 2013, not in Gombe in July 2014 as has often been claimed. See Hamza Idris and Ibrahim Sawab, "Women as Boko Haram's new face", *Daily Trust*, 6 July 2013. For further analysis on suicide attacks, see Mia Bloom and Hilary Matfess, "Women as Symbols and Swords in Boko Haram's Terror", *Prism*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2016), pp. 1-8; and Patricia Taft and Kendall Lawrence, "Confronting the Unthinkable: Suicide Bombers in Nigeria", The Fund for Peace, 2016.



admission to *al-jannah* (paradise). Some were widows of fighters. Overall, there was supposedly no shortage of volunteers.<sup>48</sup>

## 2. Fighting back

Some women have fought Boko Haram as part of the vigilante groups that emerged throughout the Lake Chad basin under various forms, notably the Borno state-based Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).<sup>49</sup> This seems to have been a late development, partly related to the fact women were increasingly active in the insurgency. At the onset, there were none, but as time went on, females started joining for various reasons. Some joined out of outrage and bitterness, seeking vengeance after they had seen Boko Haram slaughter their loved ones. Other volunteered to help the CJTF at checkpoints following protests against men touching women's bodies. Some offered the CJTF information discreetly on Boko Haram members and their activities within Maiduguri but did not join the group.<sup>50</sup>

There are presently 122 registered female CJTF members in Borno state, though more may work with the CJTF informally.<sup>51</sup> Some have received military training, are armed with shotguns and other weapons and fight alongside men, at times in operations with the military. Female vigilantes also guard IDP camps and help identify Boko Haram suspects, for example by examining women and girls at checkpoints to prevent suicide attacks.

## 3. Working for peace

Though they may have been obscured by the violent shock between Boko Haram and the state, there has been non-violent female engagement for conflict resolution in the North East. Some women, often from prominent families which valued and could offer daughters an education, have long been active on the place of women in public and private life. They have usually been so from within Islam, rather than via external critique. That has been so for the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), which has combined propagation of Islam with attempts to improve the socio-economic status of women, youths and children through training, education, health and humanitarian services, micro-enterprise and advocacy.<sup>52</sup> Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) has been active against domestic abuse, female genital mutilation and child marriage and played a major part in the successful defence of two young women condemned to death under Sharia in the early 2000s. More recently, it has sought to engage imams over preaching on the rights of women.<sup>53</sup>

As the Boko Haram conflict grew, these organisations have been involved in advocacy, notably over the Chibok abductions. They have found powerful allies in other

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Boko Haram captive, Jalingo, Taraba state, 14 June 2016.

<sup>49</sup> The emergence and impact of the vigilantes in the Lake Chad Basin will be the topic of a forthcoming Crisis Group report.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society leader, Maiduguri, 22 October 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group, CJTF commander, Maiduguri, October 2016. On female vigilantes, see for instance "Stories of Borno's fierce, female Civilian JTF personnel", *Daily Trust*, 8 October 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN) representatives, Maiduguri, 13 August 2016.

<sup>53</sup> "Women's rights: WRAPA 'khutba' to the rescue", *Daily Trust*, 27 May 2016.

international and nationwide campaigns, such as Bring Back Our Girls, a gathering of female activists (and some men) with particular anchoring in the political and economic capitals, Abuja and Lagos, that has kept the issue alive.

#### 4. Forced to flee

Together, the insurgency and counter-insurgency have forced nearly two million people in the North East, more than half women and girls, to leave their homes.<sup>54</sup> Wide-spread killing of civilians, the destruction of towns and villages by Boko Haram and the military, loss of livelihoods and lack of food in an increasingly ruptured economy are the main factors driving this displacement. Initially, people fled to urban centres, where they thought the government would protect them, or to neighbouring states or countries. As the insurgency gained ground, some have been forced to move several times. Maiduguri, repeatedly attacked but never captured by Boko Haram, hosts about a million IDPs. The counter-attack by the army, the vigilantes and Nigeria's regional allies, which gained steam in 2015, created hundreds of thousands more IDPs, the civilians who had hitherto survived in Boko Haram-controlled areas and then fled for safety or were relocated by the army.<sup>55</sup>

In many areas, women and children were the only ones left after Boko Haram either forcibly recruited or killed the men and older boys or the military arrested them.<sup>56</sup> The security forces and state have had difficulty deciding what to do with thousands of survivors. The need to survive in Boko Haram areas and the blurred lines between victims and perpetrators have fed suspicion of IDPs. That suspicion, and the poor performance and abuses of Nigerian officials – and of some of their international partners – who are meant to assist the IDPs have combined to create a humanitarian crisis with serious long-term risks.

People found in areas “liberated” by the military are screened to pick out Boko Haram members. In Borno state, soldiers and the CJTF lead the process locally, often in consultation with community leaders, leaders of wards in towns and village heads. While Boko Haram suspects are transferred to detention centres in military barracks or elsewhere, others caught up in the conflict are sent to official IDP camps, where further screening can take place. Most IDPs then move into host communities or informal camps. Others are transferred to experimental deradicalisation programs. Only one such site caters for women at present, a “safe house” in Maiduguri, dis-

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<sup>54</sup> Some 1.8 million people have been displaced in Adamawa, Borno, Gombe and Yobe states. “Nigeria: Humanitarian Dashboard”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 13 October 2016. “Nigeria Regional Refugee Response Plan January-December 2016”, UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), December 2016. “Stories of Borno’s fierce, female Civilian JTF personnel”, op. cit. 53 per cent of IDPs are reported to be female. Some large IDP camps have more than twice as many adult women as men. Displacement Tracking Matrix, Round XI Report, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), August 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°120, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, 4 May 2016.

<sup>56</sup> The lower number of male IDPs than female probably has several causes, but able-bodied men found in areas formerly held by Boko Haram come under strong suspicion by the security forces. Mass disappearances of adult men have been reported. Amnesty International released a video claiming to show the mass killing of prisoners in the North East. “Nigeria: Gruesome footage implicates military in war crimes”, 5 August 2014. Women brought to the Bama IDP camp staged a protest in 2016, asking the authorities to clarify the fate of “their” men, who had been separated from them and taken to an unknown location after the “liberation” of their area. Crisis Group electronic communication, humanitarian expert, October 2016.

cussed below. There is also a rehabilitation centre in Maiduguri which functions as a transit point. In September 2016, 500 women and children held in military detention were sent there for social support, accommodation and food before release to families in November.<sup>57</sup> The basis for the distinction is unclear.<sup>58</sup>

Screening is difficult, because in areas Boko Haram controls most people are compelled for their safety to have some association with the insurgents. Determining who is an active member is prone to error. The military can, therefore, end up incarcerating vulnerable women who were abducted, captured or prevented from leaving their communities by Boko Haram, along with women who actively supported the insurgency.

Detention of suspected insurgents occurs extra-judicially, with hardly any external scrutiny. Suspects, including some women and children in a separate section, are reportedly still held in Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri.<sup>59</sup> Amnesty International in June 2015 reported extensive allegations of torture, starvation and thousands of deaths at the site between 2011 and 2015. In May 2016, it insisted conditions remained terribly poor, noting a high mortality rate among detainees and the children and babies confined with them.<sup>60</sup> International agency access to and monitoring of conditions has improved slightly since, but each entry is “a new negotiation” with the military.<sup>61</sup>

For those who make it through screening, conditions as an IDP depend on the security situation and type of settlement. More than 80 per cent are in host communities, the rest in government-run and informal camps throughout Borno state and in neighbouring states and countries. The camp in Bama, a deserted city surrounded by Boko Haram to the south east of Maiduguri, looks almost like an open-air jail, while IDPs in Monguno, north east of Maiduguri, are free to move around and have brought the market back to life. IDPs are generally guarded by the military, often in collaboration with police and CJTF. Movement in and out of the camps is monitored in locations like Bama, Banki or Maiduguri. Mobility restrictions are ostensibly for security reasons, to prevent attacks on IDPs outside the camps and stop Boko Haram infiltration.<sup>62</sup>

In parts of central Borno, some women have been returned to their LGAs from camps in Maiduguri and elsewhere, but they are usually held in camps because their houses have been destroyed, and there is still a high security risk in more remote

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<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group communication, Maiduguri-based international official, 24 November 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security officials and international agencies, Maiduguri, June 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, international official, Maiduguri, June 2016, and communication, November 2016.

<sup>60</sup> See “Stars on their shoulders, blood on their hands. War crimes committed by the Nigerian military”, June 2015, and “If you see it, you will cry: Life and death in Giwa barracks”, 10 May 2016, both Amnesty International. The military said in August 2015 that it was pursuing some investigations; it called the 2016 report “baseless”. See “Nigerian military react to Amnesty International report of human rights abuse”, 6 August 2015, “Military debunks Amnesty report”, 12 May 2016, both defenceinfo.mil.ng. President Buhari has said there should be an official government investigation. “Nigeria’s Giwa barracks ‘place of death,’ rights group says”, CNN, 14 May 2016.

<sup>61</sup> In 2016, the Nigerian authorities allowed UN personnel to visit women and children detained in Giwa Barracks. Crisis Group interview, Maiduguri, 22 June 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, INGO worker returning from Borno, Dakar, July 2016. On 30 January 2016, Boko Haram killed more than 80 in Dalori village, close to Dalori IDP camp, one of the largest in Maiduguri. Bombs were planted at Malkohi camp in Yola, Adamawa state, killing seven IDPs on 11 September 2015, and at Dikwa camp, Borno state, killing 60 on 10 February 2016.

areas. Elsewhere, as in much of southern Borno, Yobe and northern Adamawa, the rural areas are becoming more accessible, and IDPs are beginning to return to their villages.

The humanitarian situation for IDPs is harsh, though varied by area. Massive food shortages and serious health issues have been reported. A blame game is being played by state agencies, federal government agencies, donors and international NGOs (INGOs).<sup>63</sup> Some government officials hold Boko Haram responsible, and certainly violence has ravaged agricultural production and health structures. But counter-insurgency has also deliberately stifled economic activity to deprive Boko Haram of supplies, trade and protection rackets. Other officials play down the humanitarian situation or accuse international organisations and IDPs of exaggeration. Corruption and diversion of food aid and relief funds by officials, as well as a shortfall in assistance, have certainly been part of the problem. IDPs have denounced mismanagement and corruption a number of times.<sup>64</sup>

IDPs outside government-run camps have generally received even less food and medical help, but several government-run camps have very high rates of mortality and children's malnutrition and low rates of vaccination. This is true not only of camps close to remaining Boko Haram areas, where understandable movement restrictions constrain economic activity and access to health services, but also of those supposedly safe from Boko Haram, around Maiduguri city.<sup>65</sup>

Women and girls in the camps face specific problems. Locked up in compounds where most guards and much of the staff are men, many have experienced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) or resorted to "survival sex" with camp officials and security personnel in exchange for food, money or permission to leave the camp. In several sites, sexual exploitation was said to be so frequent that parents preferred to marry their daughters at an early age.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Compare for instance "IDPs protest caused by break down of agreement with NEMA – Borno govt", *Vanguard*, 27 August 2016; "IDPs' protest: NEMA denies breach of MoU with Borno Govt", TG News, 28 August 2016; and "NSCDC alerts public on syndicates sponsoring protests in Borno IDPs camps", Daily Post, 28 August 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers involved in assistance in Borno state, Dakar, June 2016. "Humanitarian groups using Boko Haram crisis to make money, says Borno govt", *The News*, 16 October 2016. "Borno IDPs protest inadequate food supply", *Vanguard*, 26 July 2016; "Borno IDPs Protest Poor Feeding", *The New Telegraph*, 26 August 2016; "Again, Borno IDPs protest poor method of feeding in camps", *Vanguard*, 30 August 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group Commentary, "North-eastern Nigeria and Conflict's Humanitarian Fallout", 4 August 2016. Crisis Group electronic communication, humanitarian officials, October 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interviews, protection officers from international agencies and local NGOs, Maiduguri, August 2016. "Nigeria: Officials Abusing Displaced Women. Girls Displaced by Boko Haram and Victims Twice Over", Human Rights Watch, 31 October 2016; "Rapid Protection Assessment Report, Borno State, Nigeria", protection sector working group, May 2016.

#### IV. Stigmatisation and the Dilemmas of Reintegration

The blurred lines between Boko Haram member, abductee, slave, wife, supporter, victim and sympathiser have left many women and girls with the stigma of association. That stigma – heightened if they have children born to Boko Haram fathers, even if the pregnancy was against their will – is a major obstacle to reintegration into community life. Children born to women who were raped or married (by force or choice) to Boko Haram fighters are seen in IDP camps and host communities in Maiduguri and elsewhere in the North East as having “bad blood” from their fathers and potential future security risks. President Buhari publicly sought to counter this attitude by holding a Boko Haram child in his arms. The consequences of exclusion from mainstream society are significant for both the individual’s social, political and economic prospects and north-eastern society’s cohesion and stability. Isolation and alienation risk generating new frustration and resistance of the kind that gave rise to Boko Haram. Children of stigmatised females may in time reject state institutions.

There is no evidence to confirm the suspicion of some observers that the harsh camp conditions are a deliberate attempt by some authorities to punish women and their children recently retrieved from Boko Haram areas.<sup>67</sup> Yet, even women captured, abused or forced into “marriage” by the sect bear the stigma of association. Fear of “contagion” and, more concretely, suicide attacks, is part of the problem. As a result, there are restrictions in some areas on new influxes of IDPs into Maiduguri. In Bama camp, only children needing sustained medical support are allowed to go, sometimes without their caretakers. However understandable, this fear must be balanced against its cost. Restricting movement encourages official neglect, offers opportunities for abuse and extortion and can feed resentment.

Stigmatisation can also inhibit reintegration into normal community life. In Maiduguri’s IDP camps even women who were abducted and raped or enslaved are often socially isolated, labelled “Boko Haram wives” and “Sambisa women”. Given the prevailing norms, with sex outside marriage socially unacceptable, they may be rejected by their family, and their lot is likely to be worse if they have had children outside marriage, as they have no way to hide the situation. One should, however, beware of generalisation: social judgments can take into account the degree of support the individual gave Boko Haram. Those perceived to have been coerced are not necessarily seen in the same way as women believed to have stayed more willingly.

An ex-captive recounted how soldiers welcomed her at their outpost after she escaped Boko Haram. Muslim and Christian women interviewed for this study in host communities and IDP camps who had escaped after being held for months or even years by Boko Haram, or who had been liberated by the military, were socially integrated with other IDPs and recounted their experiences as victims of the insurgency. It helped that many had been through similar experiences and sometimes were freed or escaped together. Thus while many cases of stigmatisation have been recorded, some women are traumatised, not stigmatised. The problem of stigmatisation and trauma varies between families, individuals and communities.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers involved in assistance in Borno state, Dakar, June 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abuja, 3 June 2016; Fufore, 8-9 June 2016; Jalingo, 12-14 June 2016; “‘Bad Blood’: Perceptions of children born of conflict-related sexual violence and women and girls associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria”, UNICEF and International Alert, February 2016.

A few of the wives and children of Boko Haram members have been placed in a centre for “deradicalisation”, a “safe house” established in Maiduguri for that purpose by Borno state authorities in May 2016. From the outset, it accommodated 62 women and adolescents from two villages in Bama and Dikwa LGAs, Borno state, most of whom, as wives of insurgents, are regarded as security risks, and their 26 children. They are under the responsibility of female social workers and are prohibited from leaving the premises, which are under armed guard.

This pilot project exemplifies the dilemmas of reintegration and deradicalisation. The challenge lies in defining what aspect of “radicalism” the programs seek to counter: use of violence, certain violence, the ideology or an aspect of an ideology? Only some Boko Haram women handled guns and fought. Most seem to have had a more domestic role and were not necessarily involved in or exposed to mass violence. They were indoctrinated to differing degrees, with some still holding to the creed, while others had discarded it. It seems some could be more easily reintegrated into society than others, but there could be resistance from local populations. They still showed some reluctance to acknowledge atrocities, which they often saw as part of a two-sided conflict. Some “deradicalisation” work in the safe house is meant to educate on the effects of violence, notably suicide attacks.<sup>69</sup> Islamic preachers visit to teach counter-narratives to sect doctrine, and female social workers interact with them daily. Some expressed a wish to go to school to supplement their Islamic education; and some were attending classes in the safe house.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> A female staffer explained that a Maiduguri NGO plays videos to expose the women and girls to the reality that, unlike what Boko Haram told some, suicide bombers and others are killed in the explosion. Some women were reportedly shocked because they knew the bombers and had not realised what attacks actually involved. Crisis Group interview, Maiduguri, 10 August 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, 15-17 June 2016. “Nigeria: The Women Who Love Boko Haram”, Al Jazeera, 22 September 2016.



## V. Taking Women into Account: A Policy Agenda

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Given the situation of women in the North East, the state and its international partners should quickly address the full spectrum of challenges. Action is needed to tackle the immediate protection and humanitarian issues, as well as the longer-term subject of reintegration. All this is required in the context of a larger drive to improve the condition of all women in the North East. Like many wars, that against Boko Haram has worsened the economic situation. Disruption of established patterns gives some women opportunity to find more fulfilling roles, but the effect for most is more disempowerment. Violence has scattered families. Many women are isolated in camps or urban centres, without news of husbands, parents or children. Their homes are too dangerous for return, and in most areas their property has been destroyed or looted by Boko Haram or the army. Single female-headed households are a majority in some IDP camps.<sup>71</sup> The tragedy of war and challenges of recovery and reconstruction are strong arguments for efforts to meet women's immediate needs, but also to empower them as agents of change.

### A. *Upgrade Screening*

In a war in which one side has relied massively on forced recruitment, the distinction between victim and perpetrator is not easy. The authorities should ensure that the army does not systematically detain all women found in areas newly recovered from Boko Haram. The ambiguous tactics some women have had to adopt to survive should not be held against them indiscriminately. Necessary security screening should also make use of protection officers of both genders who are provided by national civil society organisations and trained by UNHCR. Those in charge should be sensitive to the difficult situation many women faced.

### B. *Provide Appropriate Care and Protection for Female Victims*

Camps may seem an appropriate solution for people found in areas newly seized from Boko Haram, if only to protect them from retaliation and community suspicion until reintegration is worked out. It is essential, however, to give appropriate assistance to these new IDPs, as well as to the ones long settled in safer areas, and their host communities. There should be greater accountability in distribution of food and aid and to facilitate the access of local and international humanitarian organisations. The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), which runs the official camps, should ensure IDP protection, notably from SGBV. The management of access to the camps, currently controlled by the military, should be transferred to civilian organisations as soon as possible.

Addressing the particular vulnerability of the predominantly female IDP population requires special attention to sexual and gender-based violence and ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. The authorities should activate referral mechanisms for women and girls in IDP camps and host communities. Allegations of abuses committed by security forces and/or CJTF should be

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<sup>71</sup> IOM recorded 1,200 single-female households in the General Hospital IDP camp, Bama, meaning female heads-of-household are 12.8 per cent of its population. Displacement Tracking Matrix, op. cit.

properly investigated, with attention to ensuring proper judicial procedures and publicising appropriate cases.

The predominantly male composition of organisations involved in protecting and managing mostly female IDP camps is a weak point.<sup>72</sup> Federal and state governments and international partners should cooperate urgently to develop programs to increase women's recruitment in local police forces and other bodies involved in operating IDP camps.<sup>73</sup> International experts should also provide gender-sensitive civilian-protection training to soldiers, police and NEMA officials and the Borno state Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) deployed to the camps.

C. *Treat Suspected Female Perpetrators of Violence Fairly*

While not ignoring accountability for suspected female perpetrators, the government should ensure a fair and transparent process in handling all Boko Haram cases; distinguishing Boko Haram ideologues from those who joined from other motives will be vital. Detention of those who, after screening, are held before they appear in court should be civilian, not military, and in acceptable conditions, with access to humanitarian agencies. Children should be granted adequate care. Given the scope of the violence, involvement in abuses by both the insurgents and security force elements and judicial system weaknesses, a proper adjudication procedure must be devised for all suspects, who cannot be left in legal limbo indefinitely. That procedure should include participation of women, particularly from the North East.

D. *Reintegrate Female Victims into Community Life*

The reunification of families, the only safety net for many, should be a priority. A federal database should be established to facilitate the search for missing persons and more resources made available to reunite families. Likewise, an effort is needed to combat stigmatisation. To help with reintegration and rehabilitation of women and girls released from Boko Haram, a community-based reconciliation process with significant female participation should be encouraged, notably by inviting women's groups from different parts of Borno to participate in dialogue.

All development and reconstruction plans, public and private, should be based on gender-sensitive analysis of the insurgency and counter-insurgency. Programming should acknowledge that in the North East religion can facilitate assistance and be a driving force for promoting positive change for women generally. Muslims and Christians should be involved together, to help bridge the divisions that have increased with the insurgency. Programs are needed to ease women's access to credit and land. Single female-headed households require particular support to restart productive activities, for example in crafts, trade or agriculture.

Widows should receive special attention, because isolated women are more susceptible to manipulation by jihadists. As in Rwanda, plans should be made to provide a monthly allocation to war widows for a number of years, and local NGOs should be

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers involved in assistance in Borno state, Dakar, June 2016.

<sup>73</sup> It was recently announced that 100 female police officers would be deployed to IDP camps following allegations of sexual abuse. "Northern Nigeria Internal Security Sitrep Week Ending 12 November 2016", peccaviconsulting.wordpress.com, 15 November 2016.



supported to give free legal assistance for inheritance and property matters.<sup>74</sup> That the families of soldiers killed in the conflict often receive little support has the potential to damage military morale. The widows of soldiers should receive a stipend from the federal government, eventually covering accommodation if they are made to leave the barracks.

Children fathered by Boko Haram members and their mothers must not be allowed to become outcasts. Community-based approaches and sensitivity training are needed, as is a significant increase in educational investment overall and prioritisation of the integrated education of these children with other children in the region.

#### *E. Step Up Efforts to Empower Women in the North East*

With a view to more structural changes in gender imbalances, effort is needed in three main directions. Attention should be paid to programs to strengthen women's participation in politics and local governance, including consideration of an affirmative action policy with quotas, as in many other West African countries. Increasing girls' access to primary and secondary schools should be a priority, but given the interest in and legitimacy of Quranic education in the North East, it should also be upgraded by introducing a dual curriculum (as in Kano state) and paying teachers' salaries so pupils do not need to beg for upkeep. Strict provisions should apply to the intake of supported schools in order to encourage gender balance.

Mainstream Islamic groups should empower female members to do their part to help alleviate the humanitarian crisis. They could also play an important role in countering violent religious ideologies and building support for women's education and civic participation. Lastly, the state should take steps to combat gender discrimination and stereotypes rooted in law and practice, to ensure women and girls have more control over their lives.

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<sup>74</sup> Under Sharia, widows can inherit a husband's assets if they have supporting witnesses or records from village or district heads, but that may prove more difficult for some.

## **VI. Conclusion**

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Women in the North East suffer from appalling violence and abuse that add to the burdens of stifling patriarchy. Boko Haram's exploitation of them, including sexual and gender-based violence, markedly deviates from modern mainstream Islamic social norms and is closer to nineteenth century and earlier patterns of enslavement and raiding. Nevertheless, the view of women as Boko Haram's passive victims that became widely accepted after the Chibok girls' abduction is misleading and needs substantial revision. Violence against women should not obscure the fact that many are also actors in the conflict and at times perpetrators. Many have been exploited, abused and displaced, while others have played active roles in the insurgency and the counter-insurgency.

Conversely, Nigeria's recovery of Boko Haram-controlled territory does not necessarily alleviate women's suffering. In a deeply divided, traumatised society, it also fuels new forms of violence, exclusion and coercion against those suspected of complicity with the insurgents. Recognising the military's improved efforts to tackle Boko Haram under President Buhari should not mean turning a blind eye to official abuses that could sow the seeds for renewed rebellion.

The multiple ways women experience and engage with the conflict need to be fully understood and directly inform policies for alleviating their suffering and paving the way for reconciliation and rebuilding society. Women need help from the authorities and their international partners, but careful thought and planning is required to ensure its effective delivery. All should take into consideration the historical context of gender discrimination rooted in law and cultural practice, and how the insurgency has further affected women in various ways, from sexual abuse to lost economic opportunities, and diversify programs accordingly. They should also make sure that development and reconstruction plans are based on a gendered analysis of the conflict. Finally, women need support not only to gain more control over their lives, but also to become actors and decision-makers in reconstructing the North East. Federal authorities and their partners should recognise that although the state has a central role to play, religion too can be a resource for facilitating this process and for promoting positive change for women more generally.

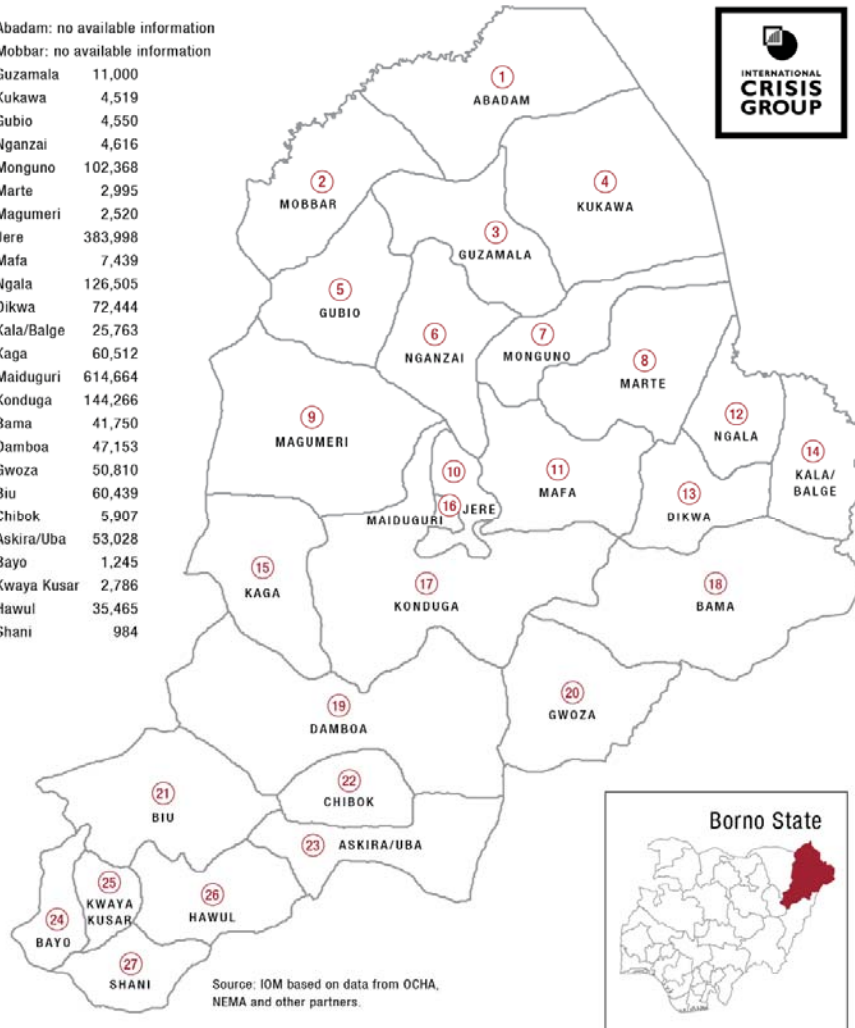
**Abuja/Dakar/Brussels, 5 December 2016**

Appendix A: Map of Nigeria



## Appendix B: Borno State: Estimated Number of IDPs Per LGA

|                                     |         |
|-------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Abadam: no available information |         |
| 2. Mobbar: no available information |         |
| 3. Guzamala                         | 11,000  |
| 4. Kukawa                           | 4,519   |
| 5. Gubio                            | 4,550   |
| 6. Nganzai                          | 4,616   |
| 7. Monguno                          | 102,368 |
| 8. Marte                            | 2,995   |
| 9. Magumeri                         | 2,520   |
| 10. Jere                            | 383,998 |
| 11. Mafa                            | 7,439   |
| 12. Ngala                           | 126,505 |
| 13. Dikwa                           | 72,444  |
| 14. Kala/Balge                      | 25,763  |
| 15. Kaga                            | 60,512  |
| 16. Maiduguri                       | 614,664 |
| 17. Konduga                         | 144,266 |
| 18. Bama                            | 41,750  |
| 19. Damboa                          | 47,153  |
| 20. Gwoza                           | 50,810  |
| 21. Biu                             | 60,439  |
| 22. Chibok                          | 5,907   |
| 23. Askira/Uba                      | 53,028  |
| 24. Bayo                            | 1,245   |
| 25. Kwaya Kusar                     | 2,786   |
| 26. Hawul                           | 35,465  |
| 27. Shani                           | 984     |



## Appendix C: Glossary of Terms

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|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <i>amir</i>   | Arabic for chief, village head in the Boko Haram hierarchy.  |
| CAN           | Christian Association of Nigeria, Nigeria's largest Christian ecumenical body.   |
| CJTF          | Civilian Joint Task Force, a vigilante force which developed in Borno state in 2013 to fight Boko Haram.   |
| CRA           | Child Rights Act, a federal law designed to improve the protection of children's rights.   |
| DHS           | Demographic and Health Survey, a global program to provide accurate data on demography and health.   |
| FOMWAN        | Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria.  |
| <i>Haram</i>  | Arabic epithet to designate all things impure and forbidden according to the Quran.  |
| IDP           | Internally Displaced Person.   |
| INGO          | International Non-Governmental Organisation.   |
| IOM           | International Organisation for Migration, the UN migration agency, involved notably in assisting IDPs and refugees.  |
| Izala         | Arabic for "removal", short designation for the Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Re-establishment of the Sunna, a Salafi Islamic movement born in northern Nigeria. |
| LGA           | Local Government Agency, the intermediary administrative level between the village and the state in Nigeria.   |
| NEMA          | National Emergency Management Agency.  |
| NGO           | Non-Governmental Organisation.   |
| <i>Naqib</i>  | Arabic for controller, a local official in Boko Haram's hierarchy.   |
| <i>Niqab</i>  | Full veil covering all the body but the eyes typical of Salafi Islam.  |
| <i>Purdah</i> | A form of seclusion of women practiced in certain Islamic cultures.  |
| SEMA          | State Emergency Management Agency.   |
| SGBV          | Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.  |
| UNHCR         | UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN refugee agency.  |
| WRAPA         | Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative, Nigerian advocacy organisation involved in the promotion of the rights of women and girls.                                |

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## Appendix D: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000-2008, and in 2012, as Deputy Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on Syria. He left his post as Deputy Joint Special Envoy to chair the commission that prepared the white paper on French defence and national security in 2013. Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in nine other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington DC. It also has staff representation in the following locations: Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Caracas, Delhi, Dubai, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Kabul, Kiev, Mexico City, Rabat, Sydney, Tunis, and Yangon.

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*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

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*Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*, Africa Report N°203, 11 June 2013 (also available in French).

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*Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*, Africa Report N°241, 16 November 2016 (only available in French).

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*Eritrea: Scenarios for Future Transition*, Africa Report N°200, 28 March 2013.

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**Christina Bache Fidan**

**Beatriz Garcia**  
**Lynda Hammes**  
**Matthew Magenheimer**  
**Madison Malloch-Brown**  
**Peter Martin**  
**Megan McGill**

**Rahul Sen Sharma**  
**Leeanne Su**  
**AJ Twombly**  
**Dillon Twombly**  
**Grant Webster**

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#### SENIOR ADVISERS

Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

**Martti Ahtisaari**  
Chairman Emeritus

**George Mitchell**  
Chairman Emeritus

**Gareth Evans**  
President Emeritus

**Kenneth Adelman**  
**Adnan Abu-Odeh**  
**HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal**  
**Óscar Arias**  
**Ersin Arıoğlu**  
**Richard Armitage**  
**Diego Arria**  
**Zainab Bangura**  
**Shlomo Ben-Ami**  
**Christoph Bertram**  
**Alan Blinken**  
**Lakhdar Brahimi**  
**Zbigniew Brzezinski**  
**Kim Campbell**  
**Jorge Castañeda**  
**Naresh Chandra**

**Eugene Chien**  
**Joaquim Alberto Chissano**  
**Victor Chu**  
**Mong Joon Chung**  
**Pat Cox**  
**Gianfranco Dell'Alba**  
**Jacques Delors**  
**Alain Destexhe**  
**Mou-Shih Ding**  
**Uffe Ellemann-Jensen**  
**Gernot Erler**  
**Marika Fahlén**  
**Stanley Fischer**  
**Carla Hills**  
**Swanee Hunt**  
**James V. Kimsey**  
**Aleksander Kwasniewski**  
**Todung Mulya Lubis**  
**Allan J. MacEachen**  
**Graça Machel**  
**Jessica T. Mathews**  
**Barbara McDougall**  
**Matthew McHugh**

**Miklós Németh**  
**Christine Ockrent**  
**Timothy Ong**  
**Olara Otunnu**  
**Lord (Christopher) Patten**  
**Victor Pinchuk**  
**Surin Pitsuwan**  
**Fidel V. Ramos**