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The Risks of Civilian-led Negotiations with JAS/ ISWAP

Despite government hardlines in the Lake Chad Basin against negotiating with non-state armed groups, civilians are negotiating hostage releases with JAS/ ISWAP insurgents. These deals seem harmless but in reality, they put border communities at risk of further violence. Openly acknowledging this risk is a crucial first step for national and international actors to help protect border communities from continued violence.

Key messages

1. Against government policy, locals are negotiating with JAS/ ISWAP insurgents

Local civilians, including security actors, are negotiating hostage exchanges and creating informal pacts with JAS/ ISWAP insurgents in Lake Chad Basin (LCB) border areas. Hostage or prisoner exchanges also take place between JAS/ ISWAP fighters and some security agents on the front lines outside of formal government agreements.

2. Negotiations by locals carry communal risks

Informal bargaining with the insurgents offers two benefits: first, safeguarding communities at risk temporarily and second, securing the release of relatives from JAS/ ISWAP camps without formal arrangements. However, these negotiations risk incentivising perpetrators of violence, may lead to retaliatory strikes from disgruntled armed factions and contribute to more arms circulation in the border areas.

3. Mitigating these risks begins with an open discussion

To effectively address the risks associated with uncoordinated, informal negotiations in LCB border communities, international partners and donor entities could establish a transparent, multilateral forum to openly acknowledge and discuss these risks, ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are included, especially national governments of the LCB, the LCB Commission and important sub-national entities.

Despite the strict policy, different types of negotiations involving cash payments, hostage exchanges and informal pacts with JAS/ ISWAP combatants are taking place in LCB border areas.³ This is particularly common in areas formerly held by JAS/ ISWAP, where military operations are still in progress, and in certain areas where the insurgents retain some control. While negotiations offer immediate advantages (such as the release of kidnapped family members, temporary safety and security in vulnerable communities, and alignment with government objectives concerning the defection of active combatants), they also carry significant long-term risks. This *bicc policy brief* examines the current situation and highlights the key risks that development partners, national policymakers and state governors in the LCB, the United Nations and donor governments in the LCB need to consider. It reveals that people are negotiating with JAS/ ISWAP insurgents—often spontaneously and without defined frameworks or guidelines. The long-term risks of these uncoordinated negotiation processes need to be addressed openly so that policymakers in the LCB area make informed political choices.

Background

Since 2013, various actors have made several efforts to engage in talks with senior Boko Haram figures in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) areas, including the Nigerian and Chadian government, which, in-tandem with state officials from Nigeria, took on negotiations during the initial stage of the violent conflicts. Similarly, family members of a prominent public official, who had been kidnapped by Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad—JAS (then called Boko Haram) in Kolofata, Far North Cameroon, were released by the jihadi group following negotiations between the Cameroonian government and the JAS group. These negotiations featured local leaders and the exchange of money.¹

The different efforts made by the Nigerian and Chadian governments to reach an agreement with JAS insurgents have failed to produce a general peace treaty partly due to a lack of trust, internal divisions (i.e. having many armed factions) and political interference. As a result, the governments in the LCB have recently taken a tough stance in negotiations with armed groups such as JAS and the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP).² For example, in March 2021, the then-President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, gave the armed groups a two-month deadline to disarm and capitulate. Later, the Nigerian government refrained from entering into negotiations with them to address the critical insecurity issues in the nation (Dahiru, 2021).

Why now?

Following the resurgence of attacks by JAS/ ISWAP insurgents in the LCB area⁴, there has been a growing debate among analysts and government representatives in the LCB about how to deal with these armed groups. For example, Nigerian national policymakers and government officials have proposed that negotiations with the insurgents could reduce the defence budget and allow for funds to be reallocated to development initiatives in conflict-affected regions (Vanguard, 2024; Punch, 2024). One senior security official even argued that comprehensive and organised negotiations could resolve the ongoing violence in Nigeria (Ismail, 2025). Some conflict-affected communities resist this idea (Vanguard, 2025; Adewale & Abogonye, 2025), and LCB governments show little sign of changing their official positions.

Meanwhile, uncoordinated, informal negotiations with JAS/ ISWAP are becoming increasingly risky. These individual, independent actions add up and result in more community insecurity, available weapons and illicit activities at a time when cross-border tensions in the LCB region are already high and regional stability is at stake.

1 Negotiating with insurgents

Negotiations with JAS/ ISWAP fighters in LCB border regions have so far been largely informal. In more than 20 border communities that our research⁵ covered, negotiations typically happen as follows: Local intermediaries (including vigilante groups, local or religious leaders, herders, farmers, cross-border traders, etc.) initiate informal bargaining discussions with active JAS/ ISWAP fighters.⁶ Topics of negotiations range from the release of kidnapped victims in return for financial payment to collective agreements at the community level. Military or police personnel present at the duty station may be notified about the exchanges if the initiators decide to do so and a consensus is formed, sometimes without informing the governments (see Figure 1).

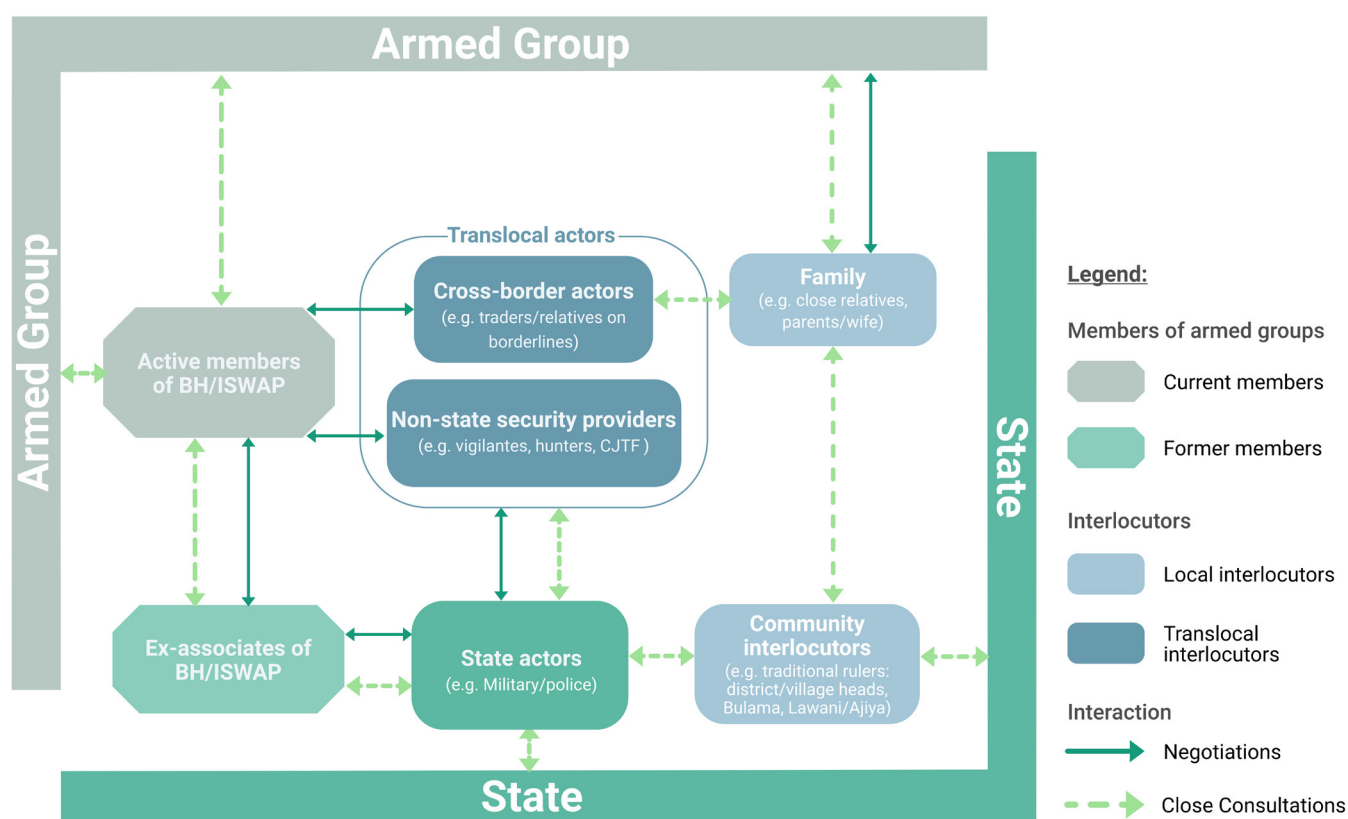
The identities of active JAS/ ISWAP fighters with whom locals make informal pacts range from unranked JAS/ ISWAP combatants to those in leadership positions, with gender dynamics at play. Women living in border areas tend to have more access to JAS/ ISWAP camps than men: they are more mobile because they are subject to fewer security checks. Women (especially mothers) play a major role in liaising between active combatants and

the locals (intermediaries), who usually are men. The locals make financial payments (averaging US \$36,000) to the active fighters on behalf of the abductees, who may be family members, former colleagues, neighbours, trade associates and individuals with similar ethnic or religious ties. In areas where JAS/ ISWAP fighters retain some control (e.g. some parts of Yunusari along the Nigeria–Niger border and Mandara Mountain areas), community members appease the fighters through collective agreements such as paying levies, sharing the proceeds from their harvests or cultivating for the insurgents. However, these agreements do not result in sustained security guarantees. In addition, hostage and prisoner exchanges take place between some state security forces and JAS/ ISWAP members on the frontlines, beyond official government agreements, according to a senior state security official:

We seized a Peugeot 504 carrying 4,000 rounds of ammunition. We captured the insurgents, detained and transported them to [...] for imprisonment. Regrettably, they were used in another swap of hostages. This creates unwarranted risks for our activities.

(Interview with a senior state security official in Cameroon)

FIGURE 1: PATTERN OF NEGOTIATIONS WITH JAS/ISWAP IN LCB BORDER COMMUNITIES



2 Civilian negotiations pose communal risks

Negotiations of civilians with JAS/ ISWAP may benefit some individuals immediately, but communities and community security suffer in the long term. The three main risks to communities are as follows:

Revenge attacks. Local intermediaries (including community leaders) negotiate with JAS/ ISWAP for the release of a fighter on behalf of a relative or loved one. But the released fighter has no guarantee of state protection. For example, a former ISWAP fighter in Madagali (northeast Nigeria) revealed that he left ISWAP after his mother and community leaders negotiated his release. He was swiftly reintegrated into his former community within a month, where he worked alongside military personnel on the front line. A state security official described his experience as follows:

On multiple occasions, military personnel do not transfer the fighters to the DDR centre⁷ in Maiduguri; the soldiers choose to engage them directly based on negotiated terms and conditions. Even at this moment, these ex-fighters are being targeted by active JAS fighters in my region, Ashigashia, Zama, etc. The fighters took the life of a former combatant.

(Interview with a senior security official)

There is a growing concern that local intermediaries, including ex-fighters, risk retaliation from JAS/ ISWAP for collaborating with the state military, particularly in

areas where military actions are still in progress and in certain areas where the insurgents retain some control. As illustrated in Figure 2, community members reported revenge attacks as a new and emerging issue in the border regions near the Mandara Mountains (i.e., the Cameroon and Nigeria borders). The violence in the mountains is spearheaded by Ali Ndulme, who grew up as a cross-border trader but was involved in illegal activities before becoming part of Bakura-led JAS camps. Ali's earlier cross-border criminal networks are essential for identifying former combatants who collaborate with the state military or offer intelligence data.

Flooding of border communities with weapons.

In border communities formerly controlled by JAS/ ISWAP and in areas where military activities are ongoing (e.g., Gamboru, Banki, Ashigashia, Kousseri areas etc.), some community members expressed concern about the growing stockpiles of weapons being hidden along the borders and sold to individuals. The lack of operational frameworks and governmental oversight of the actions of local intermediaries who make informal pacts with the insurgents allows JAS/ ISWAP fighters to live openly in their neighbourhoods. Some fighters who leave the insurgent camps due to informal pacts rarely surrender their weapons or hand them over to the state military. However, there are cases where some JAS/ ISWAP fighters who took the government's established exit pathways also buried their weapons before surrendering to the state military. As illustrated in Figure 3, approximately 25 to 50 per cent of participants in the Geidam region and nearby areas are concerned that ex-combatants are the main suppliers of weapons.

FIGURE 2: REVENGE ATTACKS IN LCB BORDER AREAS

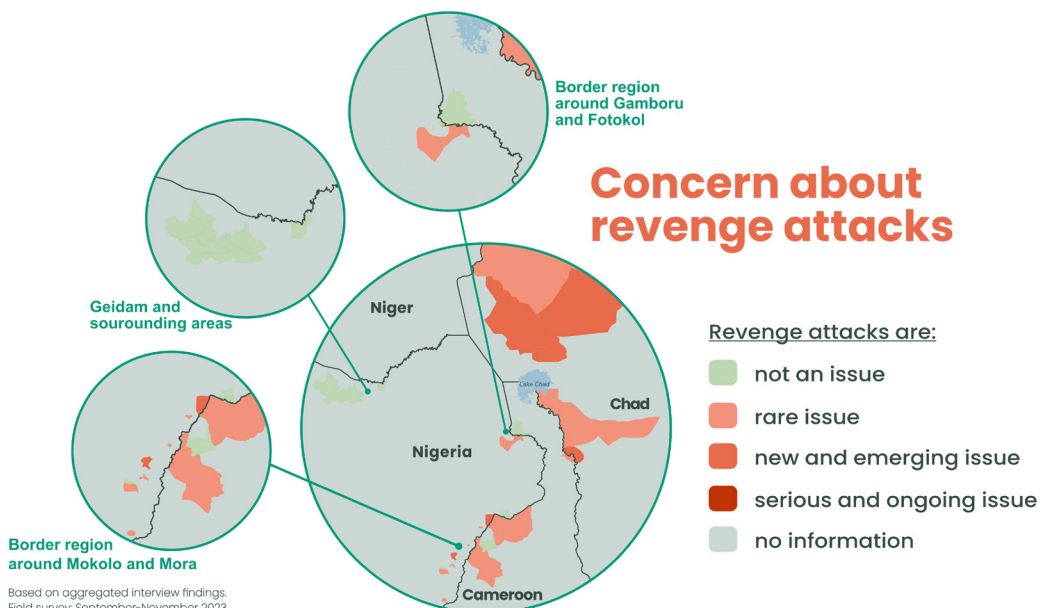
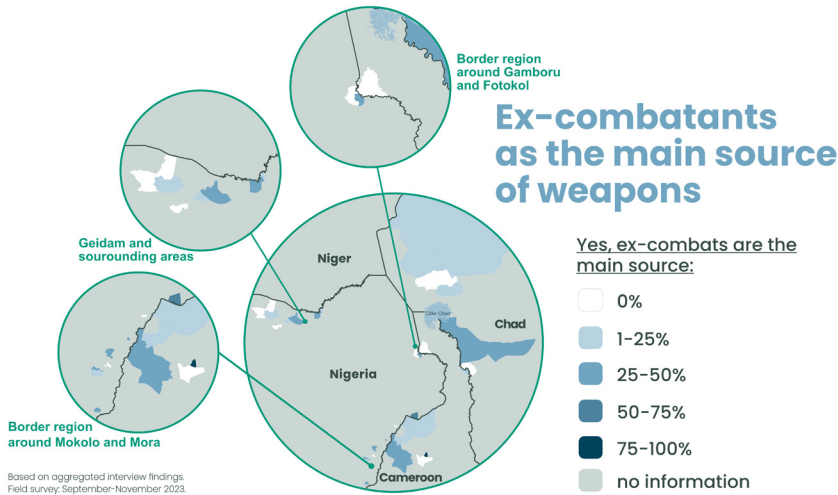


FIGURE 3: EX-FIGHTERS AS A SOURCE OF ILLICIT WEAPONS



The percentage is even higher in the border area near Mokolo and Mora (between 50 to 75 per cent) and in the border area near Gaboru and Fotokol (between 50 to 75 per cent). There is also a perception that increasingly sophisticated firearms are being used in banditry.

Benefiting the wrong people. The operating methods of JAS/ ISWAP insurgents and other organised criminal networks are becoming increasingly blurred due to changes in territorial control in areas occupied by JAS/ ISWAP insurgents and the recapture of certain areas by state military forces. Some study participants in Wuro Wandu and Kosa (northeastern Nigeria and the Far North of Cameroon respectively) reported that bandits take advantage of the psychological pressure exerted by JAS/ ISWAP insurgents to intimidate individuals and operate with impunity by claiming to be part of them [i.e. JAS camps]. Conversely, JAS insurgents adopt the tactics of bandits to reduce their risk in regions where they have suffered losses against the state military (Oginni, 2024).

The lack of clarity is a risk for local intermediaries who cannot be sure with whom they are negotiating. Some criminal networks may pose as JAS/ ISWAP insurgents and negotiate with local intermediaries to voluntarily surrender to the authorities without punishment. This means that organised criminal networks can benefit from defection programming intended for individuals radicalised by Islamist extremist organisations (i.e. JAS/ ISWAP). They benefit most from informal negotiations that have no operational framework or protocols. They get away with banditry or illicit activities and have little incentive to stop. All the while, border communities bear the brunt of insecurity and the lack of progress towards peace.

3 Mitigating these risks

Informal negotiations also influence the dynamics between the local population and the government, the course of security policy and cooperation on regional security. State actors, whether represented by security officials or community leaders, often engage in negotiations without a defined framework, which local populations in conflict-affected communities may perceive as a weakness or an inability to protect their people. In the end, this undermines the government's legitimacy. Conflict-affected communities feel abandoned or even betrayed when perpetrators evade punishment. As a result, armed groups frequently gain more benefits from uncoordinated negotiations, exploiting the existing mistrust and potentially gaining legitimacy and power. Rather than ending a cycle of violence, uncoordinated negotiations with JAS/ ISWAP could hinder the achievement of lasting peace.

To successfully address the risks of uncoordinated, informal negotiations in LCB border communities and contribute to improving the security situation, international partners and donor entities in LCB must first make them the subject of an open, strategic debate. Informal negotiations are a response to the intransigence of LCB governments towards formal negotiations. If this attitude continues, international actors can provide a multilateral platform where these risks can be openly discussed and strategies for managing them are developed in partnership with national governments. This kind of discussion is essential to ensure that future policy decisions on negotiations are based on a sound assessment of the risks faced by border communities.

Endnotes

1. Although the Cameroonian government denied any ransom payment to the insurgents, the local brokers involved suggest that payment was made before the release of the abducted family members.
2. ISWAP is a splinter group of Boko Haram that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015 and primarily operates in the Lake Chad Basin region.
3. Field research in Northeast Nigeria, Far North Cameroon and Lac region of Chad, covering 40 border communities (320 in-depth interviews and 4570 survey participants) between June and November 2023.
4. ISWAP fighters attacked a military base in Malam-Fatori in January 2025. The Nigerian military lost at least 20 personnel during the attacks. For a regional overview of the recent ISWAP/ JAS's attacks, see ACLED (12 December 2024). Regional Overview Africa November 2024, accessed 11/02/25 from <https://acleddata.com/2024/12/09/africa-overview-november-2024/#keytrends1>
5. Field research in Northeast Nigeria, Far North Cameroon and Lac region of Chad, covering 40 border communities (320 in-depth interviews and 4570 survey participants) between June and November 2023.
6. Active fighters are individuals who have connections with JAS/ ISWAP or are active participating members of the jihadi organisation.
7. The disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) centre in Maiduguri, which accommodates former fighters of JAS/ ISWAP, is operated by the Borno state government.

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