bicc report

Adapting Border Controls in the Lake Chad Basin

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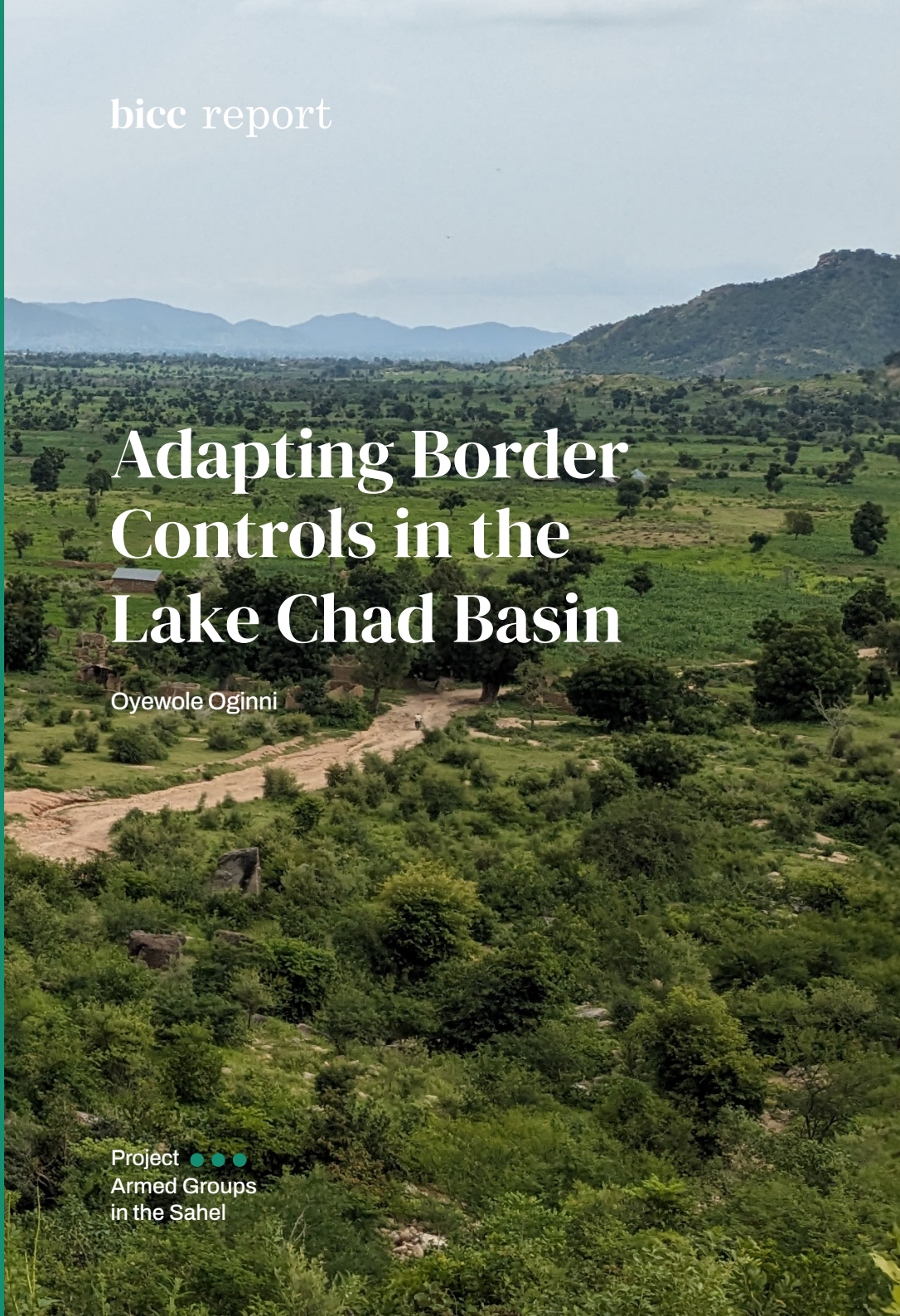

Project
Armed Groups
in the Sahel

To secure border communities from violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups (NSAGs), it is necessary that sustained, adaptive efforts are made rather than reliance placed on a single, comprehensive policy. It is important to evaluate what works and respond to changing strategy patterns by NSAGs, adjusting to new security challenges when developing and implementing control measures in borderlands with limited state presence. However, these cannot be achieved without input from border inhabitants.

To tailor military operations to changing NSAG tactics, control policies must evolve in step with the security landscape. Without contextual sensitivity and flexibility, border controls risk losing touch with the realities on the ground, weakening their effectiveness and creating gaps for NSAGs to exploit.

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Summary

States grappling with armed insurgencies in the Sahel region have primarily used border controls as tools of political manoeuvring and containment. In this framework, non-state armed groups (NSAGs), such as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), are cast as active threats, while civilians are treated as passive bystanders. This approach overlooks the potential role of civilian communities in shaping border policy at a time when their involvement is vital for building adaptive capacity against the evolving asymmetrical and guerrilla tactics of NSAGs. Such top-down control strategies weaken local resilience and open spaces that NSAGs are quick to exploit.

This *bicc report* offers insights into how border controls can be implemented more effectively to limit NSAG influence in borderlands where state presence is weak. It introduces a new framework for assessing the impact of border controls in conflict settings—one that recognises how these controls interact with civilian behaviour and NSAG strategies. The framework provides a useful tool for governments, non-governmental actors, policy analysts and security actors, offering a critical and forward-looking lens for evaluating the consequences of border control measures on civilian communities beyond the direct effects of NSAG violence. As such, the report contributes to strengthening the adaptive capacity of border control strategies across the volatile security landscape of the Sahelian borderlands, particularly in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB).

Our research in the LCB shows that border controls are most effective when they are context-sensitive, inclusive and responsive to the lived

realities of border communities, as well as to the changing tactics of NSAGs. When aligned with local conflict dynamics and civilian mobility patterns, such controls can disrupt insurgent operations while preserving the economic and social networks critical to civilian resilience. By contrast, overly militarised or rigid border regimes risk alienating local communities and inadvertently empowering NSAGs by pushing civilians towards alternative, insurgent-controlled routes.

Improving civil–military relations is central to securing borderlands. Building trust through regular engagement, community feedback and joint sensitisation campaigns helps reduce misunderstandings and lowers the risk of recruitment by insurgents. Conversely, corruption within the security sector is corrosive to border security. Tackling corruption is essential for restoring public trust and strengthening the integrity of border control efforts. This requires both immediate operational reforms, such as improved oversight and better support for security personnel, as well as longer-term institutional changes to address the root causes of informal taxation and illicit payments.

Infrastructure serves as a force multiplier in insecure borderlands. Our findings confirm the link between delayed military response times and inadequate infrastructure in the LCB. Targeted investment in remote and underserved areas is crucial, as improved road networks directly impact the speed and coordination of military and humanitarian operations, reducing response times while offering greater protection to vulnerable populations. Yet, these gains depend on long-term and reliable financing. Short-term funding cycles, such as those supporting the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), have undermined the sustainability of past regional security efforts, allowing insurgents to regroup and escalate attacks during operational gaps.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CIVILIANS AND STATE AUTHORITIES DETERIORATE WHEN BORDER CONTROLS FAIL TO PREVENT PERSISTENT ATTACKS BY NSAGS.

Finally, broader regional security cooperation is essential to ensure long-term stability. The security of the LCB is closely tied to security dynamics in neighbouring and distant borderlands, including the Central

Sahel, Libya and Sudan. Regional cooperation must extend beyond the LCB to reflect and address the transnational nature of the NSAG threats. Wider strategic partnerships, particularly those focused on counter-drone technologies and compliance with international arms control frameworks, are vital for curbing NSAGs' operational capabilities and enhancing long-term stability across the wider region.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CIVILIANS AND STATE AUTHORITIES DETERIORATE WHEN RIGID BORDER CONTROLS FAIL TO PREVENT PERSISTENT ATTACKS BY NSAGS.

Introduction

The resurgence of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) such as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'adati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) region necessitates a closer examination of the effectiveness of border controls as a counterinsurgency strategy employed by states. Over the past decade, the governments of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger have implemented various border control strategies[1] in response to ongoing attacks on civilians by JAS and ISWAP in the LCB. These strategies include border closures, checkpoint controls and other state-imposed restrictions on the movement of goods, people and animals across borders and within border communities at risk of violent conflict in the LCB borderlands.[2]

State-imposed mobility restrictions and checkpoint controls during military operations against JAS and ISWAP have impacted civilian lives in border communities both intentionally and unintentionally. However, the widely celebrated success of recent military operations against JAS and ISWAP, especially in reclaiming some of the territories previously held by these groups (Multinational Joint Task Force, 2024), seems to have obscured the negative consequences of these restrictions and

1 Throughout this *report*, we refer to borders as defined lines that differentiate political and geographical areas, such as between Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. State military operations against JAS and ISWAP insurgents occur along these borders and within borderlands, where there are also many checkpoints controlled by the state military. For this reason, we use the term 'border controls' to refer to the measures implemented by the LCB governments to monitor and regulate mobility along borders and within LCB borderlands.

2 While we are aware of scholarly debates on borders, borderlands and frontiers, this *report* uses the term 'borderlands' in the plural to refer to the areas surrounding and straddling borders such as Nigeria's North East, Lac Province in Chad and the Far North region of Cameroon.

checkpoint controls in border communities at risk. Against this backdrop, this report examines the impact of border controls implemented as part of counterinsurgency efforts on civilians' daily lives and their interactions with state authorities and JAS/ISWAP insurgents in the LCB borderlands. Moreover, it offers insight into how border controls can be adapted to local dynamics to disempower NSAGs in border communities at risk of violence.

Relationships between civilians and state authorities deteriorate when border controls fail to prevent persistent attacks by NSAGs and when mobility restrictions in borderlands hinder civilians from pursuing socio-economic opportunities. If not managed properly, strained relationships between civilians and state authorities can undermine the gains achieved through military operations on the frontlines. This creates opportunities for NSAGs to exploit to their advantage. We argue that border closures and checkpoint controls established to combat armed insurgencies in the LCB borderlands produce a paradox of dual outcomes. While these measures largely disrupt insurgent mobility on the frontlines, they also undermine civilian livelihoods and erode local trust in state authorities. These dynamics create openings for JAS and ISWAP to exploit and increase their influence among civilian communities.

STATE-IMPOSED MOBILITY RESTRICTIONS AND CHECKPOINT CONTROLS HAVE IMPACTED ON CIVILIAN LIVES (UN)INTENTIONALLY.

The LCB Territorial Action Plans (LCB-TAP) recognise the crucial role of community perceptions of security in enhancing civil–military relations within the LCB borderlands (LCBC & African Union, 2018). However, in their approaches to border control (i.e., border closures, mobility restrictions and checkpoint controls) states have generally assumed that civilians will invariably align their interests with any measures enforced by the state military against NSAGs. These approaches overlook the local dynamics of violent conflicts. As border control practices evolve, acquiring new meanings in the process, civilians' interests and priorities also shift, leading to changes in their attitudes towards state authorities and NSAGs. These changes in civilian lives have an effect on how JAS and ISWAP exert their influence within the LCB borderlands.

Who are JAS and ISWAP

JAS and ISWAP are jihadist insurgents[3] whose violent actions have caused large-scale forced displacement, civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis in the LCB borderlands (UNOCHA, 2024). Both armed factions emerged from Boko Haram, under whose umbrella name jihadists have operated since 2009. While JAS adopts an aggressive, often indiscriminate and brutal stance, such as using women and children as suicide bombers and targeting civilians, ISWAP appears more coordinated and intentional in its attacks, usually targeting military and government assets rather than civilians. ISWAP may also offer services to vulnerable border communities to earn their loyalty (Takano, 2024).

Power struggles within the Boko Haram leadership led to the group's split in August 2016 (International Crisis Group, 2023).[4] ISWAP subsequently pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), thereby aligning its leadership structure with that of IS. In exchange, IS provides logistical and financial support to ISWAP (distributing US $700,000 annually among the provinces in LCB borderlands).[5] ISWAP generates funds internally through ransom payments from kidnappings, as well as through taxes and levies on individuals in vulnerable border communities. They generate additional revenue through alms (known as *zakat*), which are donated by individuals living in these border communities, as well as by those living outside communities controlled by ISWAP. JAS continues to operate within the existing Boko Haram structure, led by Shekau, who died in

3 Jihadist insurgents are a group of individuals motivated by a particular interpretation of Islamic ideology known as 'jihad'. They engage in violent struggle ('holy war') and use violent threats against perceived enemies, including governments or individuals with differing views on Islamic interpretations. Both JAS and ISWAP have been designated as terrorist organisations by the United Nations.

4 Some former members of Boko Haram cited the preferential treatment of a particular ethnic affiliation as one of the reasons they left JAS to join ISWAP. Others mentioned that the Boko Haram leader at the time wielded too much power and hardly listened to his subordinates (field research, 2023).

5 Field research in the LCB region (June–November 2023).

infighting with ISWAP in 2021. JAS also funds its activities through kidnapping, taxes, levies, looting and, more recently, banditry due to diminished capacity (Oginni, 2024).

The infighting between JAS and ISWAP, in addition to continuous military operations,[6] has weakened the jihadists' capabilities to conduct large-scale attacks compared to 2020, when fatalities from attacks against civilians and infighting between the armed factions peaked (see Annexes 1a and 1b). Nevertheless, these insurgents continue to pose a security threat: In 2024 alone, 25 per cent of the reported attacks by NSAGs in Africa were attributed to JAS and ISWAP (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). Since 2023, there has been a sharp increase in fatalities resulting from violence against civilians, factional fighting and clashes with state forces. Similar trends are observed in fatalities caused by remote explosives, landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombs, which fell sharply between 2021 and 2023 but have risen steeply since 2024 (see Annexes 1a and 1b).

At the time of writing, ISWAP is gaining ground in Cameroon's Far North region, including areas in the Logone et Cheri, Mayo-Tsanaga and Mayo-Sava departments. Meanwhile, JAS is exploiting border communities that were previously lost to state military operations. This has led to a sharp increase in fatalities in 2024. These armed groups have increased their attacks on civilians and military assets in the first quarter of 2025, particularly in Buni Yadi (Yobe), Gwoza (Borno) and Kopre (Hong Local Government, Adamawa) as well as along Cameroon's border areas in the Far North region. ISWAP is increasingly using aerial technology to improve its operations in the LCB borderlands. Recently, the jihadists attempted to overrun a military base by dropping explosives and locally made grenades from drones (see Chapter 5, where we examine two distinct scenarios on ISWAP's access to combat drones).

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6 Military operations include the counterinsurgency operations by the national military as well as by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) established to combat the territorial expansion of JAS and ISWAP. The MNJTF was established by the African Union and comprises military personnel from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Benin. It operates four sectoral divisions and is managed by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC).

This development marks a turning point for counterinsurgency efforts and highlights the need for border controls to adapt to local dynamics to disempower JAS and ISWAP insurgents in the LCB borderlands.

Thus, this *report* analyses the impact of border controls (i.e. border closures, mobility restrictions and checkpoint controls) on border communities at risk of violent conflict in North East Nigeria, Cameroon's Far North region and Chad's Lac Province. Our research reveals two key findings: First, NSAGs benefit from rigid, top-down border controls that overlook diverse local needs and changing perceptions of security and safety, especially given the changing interactions between armed actors and civilian communities in the LCB borderlands. Civilian communities, however, suffer disproportionately from such controls.

SINCE 2023, THERE HAS BEEN A SHARP INCREASE IN FATALITIES FROM VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS.

NSAGs either boost their internal revenues by creating alternative routes or allow free passage to gain civilian loyalty and sympathy. Civilians pay levies to access less restrictive routes controlled by NSAGs and secure temporary protection against attacks (i.e., protection payments). Additionally, some state security actors benefit from these trade-offs by illegally taxing civilians when they cross borders or pass through checkpoints within their communities—a practice we refer to as security payments (see Chapter 5, which details four scenarios on security and protection payments in LCB borderlands).

Second, border control implementation[7] should not only focus on containing NSAG territorial ambitions (i.e. hard security) but also aim to enhance the relationship between state authorities and civilians (i.e. soft security). This would strengthen state legitimacy in vulnerable border communities.

7 By 'border control implementation', we refer to the process of executing border control measures, involving the execution of policies, procedures and technologies designed to monitor and regulate the movement of goods, people, animals, etc. across the borders and within borderlands affected by ISWAP and JAS attacks.

This *report* is organised as follows: Chapter 1 elucidates the analytical framework for assessing the impact of border controls in insecure environments. Chapter 2 covers the methodology, detailing the study area, data collection methods and analysis. Chapter 3 presents empirical evidence on the impact of border controls in LCB borderlands, while Chapter 4 explores four scenarios that illustrate the influence of security and protection payments on civilians' relationships with states and NSAGs. Chapter 5 examines the capacity to secure LCB borders, including two scenarios that highlight ISWAP's access to (combat) drones. Chapter 6 offers insights into adapting border controls to the local context in light of recent changes in ISWAP's and JAS' tactics.

THE SUCCESS OF BORDER CONTROLS DEPENDS ON THEIR SUITABILITY AND ADAPTABILITY WITHIN A GIVEN CONFLICT CONTEXT.

CHAPTER 1

Border Controls in Insecure Environments

Ongoing efforts to secure the Sahel's borders from non-state armed group (NSAG) violence continue to fuel debate (Awosusi & Valery, 2024; Ojo, 2020). The central issue is how to balance national and local interests[8] regarding state-imposed mobility restrictions and border closures, among other border control measures, during military operations against NSAG violence. Centralised, top-down border controls often overlook the diverse local interests, actors, networks and institutions and, most importantly, the lived experiences of civilian communities at risk of violence (Clarke et al., 2022). This creates tensions between

8 By 'local interest', we refer to borderland livelihoods and cross-border relations which are affected by ongoing violence from NSAGs and the backlash from state-imposed control measures. These have impacts on civilian positioning and positionality on the frontlines.

state authorities and the locals, as their needs and perceptions of safety and security may differ or even change during the implementation of a specific control policy. If not properly managed, these varied interests, contexts and time pressures can render border control measures in insecure spaces counterproductive or ineffective.

NSAGs employ irregular warfare tactics to undermine traditional state-centric approaches, which prioritise the state as the primary actor in border management and security.[9] For example, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) use guerrilla warfare tactics such as ambushes, hit-and-run attacks and sabotage, as well as asymmetrical strategies like controlling resources and disseminating propaganda via social media (Olorunfemi, 2024). These tactics foster fear and insecurity, which, depending on the context, can either help them gain support from civilian communities or, conversely, lead to a loss of legitimacy. The limited presence of the state[10] in LCB borderlands implies that other actors (such as traditional rulers, community or youth leaders, cross-trade associations, etc.) exert certain forms of control therein. These local actors, networks and institutions can be coupled in different ways in border governance to achieve shared outcomes.[11]

Shifts in NSAG tactics have implications for border control strategies. This means that controls must be developed and implemented in a constantly changing context. Consequently, the success of border controls depends on their suitability and adaptability within a given conflict context (Beunen & Van Assche, 2021). To ensure that control measures remain effective in enhancing the safety of civilian communities, a nuanced understanding of local contexts is necessary, including

9 States often treat borders as symbols of sovereignty and/or a territorial conquest that must be defended from incursions by 'outsiders', such as jihadist insurgents. However, the distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' can be difficult to define when considering the roles of NSAGs and state security actors at the frontlines, as these actors influence the forms that border control can take (e.g. informal taxation practices or levy, etc. are sometimes collected by both actors).

10 Absence of social services, an effective justice system and accountable local authorities.

11 While we do not suggest that these local actors are on par with state authorities, they nonetheless play a vital role in border security governance.

the underlying predispositions and dependencies that shape conflict trajectories. It is also important to continuously adapt control policies to evolving security dynamics to build adaptive capacity in insecure spaces. Without this contextual sensitivity and flexibility, control policies risk becoming misaligned with on-the-ground realities, thereby undermining their intended impact.

Protecting border communities from NSAG violence requires continuous efforts that a one-stop policy can not address. Constant evaluation of what works, responding to NSAGs' changing strategy patterns and adjusting to new security challenges are all essential control strategies. This also necessitates assessing the effects of the controls on civilian communities and distinguishing these from the effects directly caused by NSAG violence. Observations, foresight and experimentation are essential tools for linking controls to strategies and impacts and for disempowering NSAGs in a rapidly changing security landscape. Learning from the successes and failures of past control measures and policies is vital for effective border governance. This enables corrective actions to be taken to enhance accountability and restore local trust, while gaining innovative insights from emerging security trends. However, these results cannot be realised without input from border inhabitants.

STATES MOSTLY SEEK HYBRID SECURITY SOLUTIONS TO COMPENSATE FOR SHORTAGES OF SECURITY PERSONNEL.

Governance in the LCB borderlands is characterised by hybrid arrangements. In other words, these borderlands are controlled by multiple actors and interests through a blend of formal and informal security arrangements that are both experimental and experiential. These arrangements reflect the unique historical, economic and political conjuncture and evolution of the borderlands (Awosusi et al., 2024; Bøås & Strazzari, 2020; Oginni & Philipsenburg, 2025). State actors (e.g. state military personnel) collaborate with non-state security providers (such as community/state-led vigilante groups) and traditional authorities through non-binding arrangements on specific security solutions to violence perpetrated by JAS and ISWAP. However, states mostly seek hybrid security solutions to compensate for shortages of security

personnel, bridge local intelligence gaps and strengthen their territorial presence in troubled borderlands (Berks et al., 2024). While boosting the number of security personnel at the borders has helped states reclaim some of the areas occupied by the NSAGs (Hoinathy & Delanga, 2024), security challenges from border porosity persist, especially given the vastness of the unmanned borders in the region.

The key issue is that states' approaches to border control mostly assume stable actors (i.e. consistent behaviour over time from actors operating or residing in borderlands). The implementation of checkpoint controls, border closures or mobility restrictions in response to armed insurgencies does little to reflect local conflict dynamics, such as the divergent interests, views and priorities of actors living in at-risk border communities or the evolving tactics of NSAGs. The interests and priorities of these actors evolve as the border policies, procedures and technologies put in place acquire new meaning. In other words, individual actors change in response to the new challenges posed or the new opportunities created by border control practices, in relation to the shifting tactics of NSAGs.

THE KEY ISSUE IS THAT STATES' APPROACHES TO BORDER CONTROL MOSTLY ASSUME STABLE ACTORS.

Impacts of Border Controls

The plausibility of border controls to mitigate violence from NSAGs remains contested to date (Kim & Tajima, 2022; Gade, 2020; Avdan & Gelpi, 2017). Nevertheless, border controls create specific trade-offs for NSAGs: While strict border controls disrupt their transnational logistical networks, thereby diminishing their access to external resources and increasing the cost of accessing these resources (Blair, 2023), NSAGs offset these costs by temporarily reducing attacks on civilians in border communities to gain their loyalty and access to such resources. They strategically present themselves as protectors in some communities while intensifying violence in others. As they deepen their ties with civilian populations, they gradually assert control over local resources, such as fertile agricultural land (Kemmerling, Schetter & Wirkus, 2022). Ultimately, they boost internal revenue by imposing levies on these communities for access to the local resources.

Not only do NSAGs exercise control over civilians in borderlands where they are highly present, but they also exert control in other areas where their physical presence is minimal. For example, in state-controlled suburban areas, the wealthy are 'taxed' by ISWAP fighters. In return, fighters protect their cattle and farming businesses from attacks in distant areas such as forests (see Chapter 4). The cycle of control exercised by NSAGs has a significant impact on the behaviours and actions of civilians towards states in borderlands. The wider and stronger the cycle of influence, the lower the state's legitimacy in borderlands and vice versa. However, the ways in which states control or manage borders and borderlands during an armed insurgency can either strengthen the relationship between civilians and the state, thus bolstering state

legitimacy in borderlands, or strain these relationships, creating opportunities for NSAGs to exploit. Similarly, if border control measures fail to address the persistent security threats posed by NSAGs, civilians may become less supportive of state border policies that restrict their access to economic opportunities or undermine their freedom in borderlands.

Against this backdrop, the understanding of the impact of border controls should evolve to reflect the complex relationships between civilians, states and NSAGs in borderlands, as well as how these relationships change through ongoing interaction. These impacts should include the lived experiences and perspectives of civilians affected by NSAG violence in border communities, as well as their significant role in securing their communities. This implies that state authorities and civilians act as change agents and stakeholders, respectively, driving the processes and outcomes of control policies aimed at addressing the security risks posed by NSAGs.

THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPACT OF BORDER CONTROLS SHOULD EVOLVE TO REFLECT THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CIVILIANS, STATES AND NSAGS IN BORDERLANDS

Border control impacts can, therefore, be understood as changes—whether deliberate, accidental, neglected or misunderstood, whether positive or negative—in how civilians experience, adapt to and navigate border regulations or governance. This relational perspective emphasises the interactions between state authorities, civilians and NSAGs in borderlands due to continued NSAG violence. State authorities and civilian communities at risk of violence should both be involved in border control implementation and must collaborate in anticipating, reporting and negotiating its impacts (Hurst, Johnston & Lane, 2023). Three interrelated elements are particularly relevant when analysing the impact of border controls as a counterinsurgency measure in border communities at risk: border control dimensions, border control practices and the capacities to secure borders. Together, these aspects address questions of what, how and why within the control cycle in insecure environments (Bahiss, Jackson, Mayhew & Weigand, 2022).

Border Control Dimensions

A state's border control strategies should align with cross-border dynamics, including historical and socio-cultural ties, mobility patterns and borderland livelihoods, to achieve shared outcomes of safety and security on the frontlines. Border control dimensions refer to the specific aspects of policy and practice where border control measures most significantly affect civilian lives—socially, economically and politically. Control measures that prevent civilians from exploring economic opportunities across borders can create openings for NSAGs who exploit these to offer civilians alternative routes to circumvent state-imposed mobility restrictions. Thus, civilians' compliance with state border controls may depend on the impact of control measures on their economic opportunities, safety perceptions and socio-cultural relations in borderlands, among other factors (see Chapter 3 for examples).

Border Control Practices

Border control practices refer to the methods by which state authorities regulate movement across borders and within borderlands—often through border closures, checkpoints or mobility restrictions. In other words, control practices are how states secure their borders and borderlands against threats from NSAGs (Blair, 2023). State authorities often use coercive violence to achieve compliance, such as restricting the movement of civilians across borders and within borderlands at risk of violent conflict. These restrictions can have unintended consequences for civilians in border communities, such as limited or no access to essential local resources (e.g. lakes and farmland) on the frontlines. This can change the attitudes of civilians towards state authorities. Practices such as illegal natural resource extraction and informal taxation imposed by some state military or police personnel at checkpoints can indeed lead civilians to comply or even collaborate with NSAGs. Thus, control practices influence the alternatives that civilians must forgo to comply with the state control measures; the opportunity cost of which can vary from high to low. Civilians may be drawn to the opportunities provided by NSAGs if they perceive that a state's border

control practices undermine their livelihoods (see Chapter 4 on security payments vs protection payments in LCB borderlands).

Border Control Capacities

Control capacities refer to how effectively control measures (e.g. establishment of security checkpoints) and regulatory actions adapt to evolving security threats posed by non-state armed groups (NSAGs). For instance, the increased use of drone technology for surveillance by ISWAP has necessitated investment in technology to enhance military air capabilities. Control capacities also require the ability to effectively anticipate, prevent and report assaults by NSAGs in border communities, as well as organisational capacity, such as holding state security personnel accountable, enforcing discipline and taking responsibility for the unintended consequences of using coercive violence against civilians during military operations. Financial capacity includes sustainable financing for cross-border intelligence sharing and joint military operations, such as the Multinational Joint Task Force's (MNJTF) operations in the LCB borderlands. Another example of border control capacities is improving welfare packages for security personnel to discourage corrupt practices that influence civilians' behaviour in favour of NSAGs.

A Framework for Assessing Border Control Impacts

As previously stated, the interplay of border control elements (dimensions, practices and capacities) produces distinct impacts within specific conflict contexts. Thus, we assume that border controls affect (and are affected by) civilian behaviour and NSAG influence in insecure spaces. Figure 1a illustrates the logical and iterative sequence of these interaction effects in unstable border areas, using a D → P → C → I framework. 'Dimensions' (D) refer to the foundational aspects of border controls, that is, the social, economic and political factors that shape the context in which state control measures are implemented in borderlands. These dimensions inform the 'practices' (P) of border controls, such as coercive enforcement and mobility restrictions. The effectiveness of these practices depends on the state's 'capacities' (C)—its operational, organisational and financial ability to respond to security threats posed by continued NSAG violence. Ultimately, the interaction between these three elements determines the 'impacts' (I) on civilian behaviour and NSAG influence in insecure borderlands.

Alterations made by **state authorities (S)** to the interplay of border control elements—namely dimensions (**D → D_1**), practices (**P →P_1**) and capacities (**C → C_1**)—can lead to changes in **civilian behaviour** and **NSAG influence** (**I → I_1**). The outcomes may be positive, fostering stronger ties between civilians and state authorities while reducing NSAG

THE INTERPLAY OF BORDER CONTROL ELEMENTS PRODUCES DISTINCT IMPACTS WITHIN SPECIFIC CONFLICT CONTEXTS.

influence (a win-win situation). However, they can also be negative, resulting in a breakdown in the relationships between state authorities and civilians and increased NSAG influence (see Figure 1b). Some changes produce immediate, visible impacts in the short term, while others take time to materialise in the long term. Disruptions/shocks introduced by such changes (i.e. D_1 P_1 C_1) can generate new security challenges or, conversely, stimulate innovative solutions/responses.

FIGURE 1A: INITIAL CONTROL IMPACTS

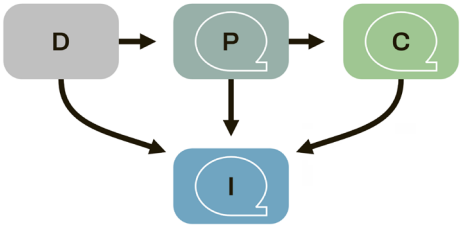
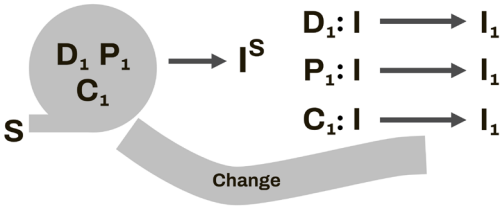


FIGURE 1B: NEW IMPACTS FROM CHANGE IN CONTROL ELEMENTS



Not all disruptions are detrimental; some may help reconfigure control mechanisms to enhance border governance. Similarly, time pressure can drive adaptive solutions/responses to NSAG violence or further entrench rigid, centralised responses. As a result, the impact

of control measures depends on how these elements (D1 P1 C1) are coupled within border governance systems to build adaptive capacity in a rapidly changing security landscape. We therefore suggest the continuous adaptation of border control policies and practices to local conflict dynamics to weaken NSAG influence in borderlands with limited state presence. Relying on a single, comprehensive control policy is rarely effective in insecure spaces. Border control needs a new approach. Effective border control strategies must be grounded in the three dimensions outlined above and designed to minimise opportunities for NSAGs to exploit security gaps.

THE LCB BORDERLANDS ARE CLOSELY CONNECTED POLITICALLY, ECONOMICALLY AND CULTURALLY.

CHAPTER 2
Methodology

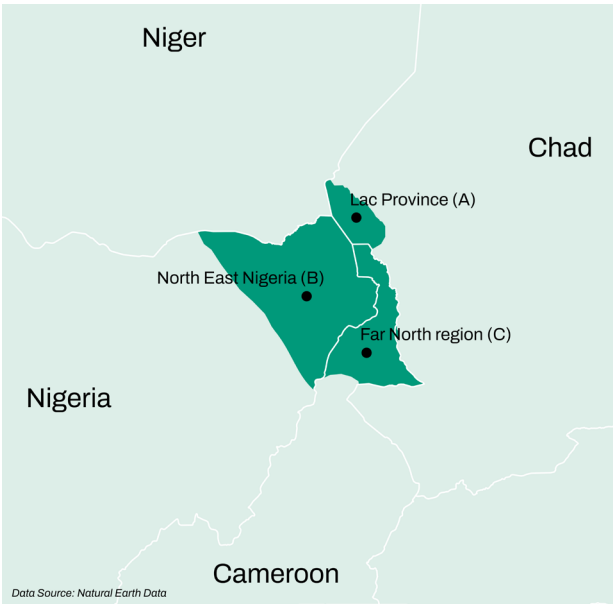
This *bicc report* is based on empirical evidence from Lake Chad Basin (LCB) borderlands, namely, North East Nigeria, the Lac Province of Chad and the Far North region of Cameroon (see Map 1). The LCB borderlands are closely connected politically, economically and culturally such that a new development in one borderland affects the others.

They exhibit similar traits regarding the patterns and dynamics of violent conflicts (e.g. violent extremism of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad–JAS and the Islamic State West Africa Province–ISWAP), as well as in terms of mobility practices and trades (e.g. farming, herding, blacksmithing, etc.) and banditry patterns. However, the level of impact of armed insurgency has varied in the three borderlands over the past decade: Nigeria's north-east has been hit hardest (with over 2.2 million people forcibly displaced and about 38,000 deaths), followed by Cameroon's Far North region (with 453,661 people displaced and over

3,000 deaths) and Chad's Lac Province (with 450,000 people forcibly displaced and over 1,000 deaths).

Our primary data sources include interviews, field observations, focus group discussions and a quantitative survey, as well as data collection activities that took place between March and November 2023. In the first phase, we conducted 316 expert and semi-structured interviews. In the second phase, we carried out a large-scale survey, reaching 4.536 people in over 40 border communities, using a stratified sampling procedure. The bicc research team and partners trained 100 research assistants/enumerators to assist with survey administration in local languages. The research participants included ex-combatants and former associates of armed groups, members of conflict-affected communities, individuals residing in communities into which former associates/ex-combatants had integrated, local authorities (traditional, religious and governmental) and civil society representatives.

MAP 1: LCB BORDERLANDS (STUDY AREAS)



Most participants are aged between 21 and 40. This represents 62 per cent of the study population, while participants over 70 years of age are the least represented age group. The study had more male (64%) than female participants (36%). Of the participants, 26 per cent were from Cameroon, 30 per cent from Chad and 44 per cent from Nigeria (see Table 1 in Annex I). Data collection, analysis and management and ethical considerations followed bicc's data management regulations and the German Research Association's recommendations for safeguarding good scientific practice (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, 2022). We coded the qualitative data using MAXQDA and performed a thematic analysis of the coded data. We also carried out a descriptive analysis of the quantitative data, using simple percentage and mean comparisons using R.

BORDER CONTROLS ARE THE MOST WIDELY USED SECURITY STRATEGY IN THE LCB BORDERLANDS.

CHAPTER 3

Assessing the Impact of Border Controls

To understand the impact of border controls on civilian communities in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) borderlands, we examined how state security actors enforced mobility restrictions to curb the territorial reach of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgents while also highlighting the socio-economic impact of such measures on inhabitants of the border regions. Our central finding is the complex interplay between state-imposed mobility restrictions and cross-border livelihoods, revealing the protective and disruptive impacts of border control practices in insecure borderlands. This highlights the need for balanced, adaptable border control strategies that protect civilian communities while maintaining effective counterinsurgency operations.

Border Controls as a Key Mitigation Strategy

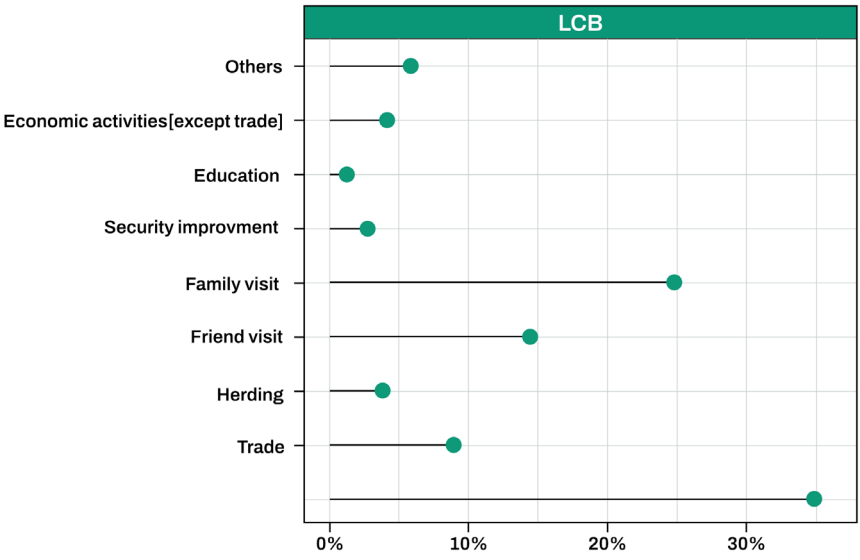
Border controls are the most widely used security strategy in the LCB borderlands[12] and are a vital measure for containing the territorial expansion of ISWAP and JAS insurgents. The presence of state police, immigration and military personnel at the borders facilitates the movement of people who rely primarily on cross-border trade and social relations for their daily livelihood. Many state-recognised, accessible and motorable routes in the observed borderlands are patrolled by military personnel, police, customs officers and anti-drug and anti-robbery agencies, among others. This creates a sense of security among inhabitants of the borderlands. Study participants reported that the cooperation between the military and the border police enhanced the mobility of goods and people in the LCB region. However, political stalemate (such as the coup d'état in Niger in July 2023) has disrupted the movement of goods and people between Niger and North East Nigeria. As a result, there was a sharp increase in the prices of essential commodities (e.g. rice and oil doubled in price), which the study participants attributed to the border closure between the two countries.

Since 2013, the LCB governments have implemented various control measures to manage the activities of Boko Haram insurgents (now known as JAS) in their borderlands. These measures include

12 While we acknowledge that border police, customs and immigration personnel are usually responsible for border control, they are rarely present in border communities that face continuous violence from JAS and ISWAP. In fact, military operations replace almost all other functions because many communities are considered as "red zones" (known as "zion d'axion" in French-speaking borderlands).

restrictions on mobility across borders and within conflict-affected borderlands, as well as stringent regulations on transporting goods and livestock such as cattle and horses, which JAS insurgents use to move weapons and other items. The degree of mobility restrictions in the borderlands depends on the level of security threats: Some borderlands have tighter restrictions due to the presence of ISWAP and JAS and ongoing military operations, whereas others experience minimal insurgent activity and fewer restrictions. For instance, during the initial phase of the armed insurgency, the Nigerian government disrupted Internet access and communication networks in some borderlands (mostly Adamawa north and some parts of Borno) adjacent to Cameroon's Far North region as part of its counterinsurgency efforts. Similarly, the Cameroonian government has imposed mobility restrictions in certain borderlands in the Far North region (e.g. Mora, Kolofata, Amchide, Ashigashia).

FIGURE 3: WHAT DRIVES BORDER CROSSINGS WITHIN LCB BORDERLANDS



As shown in Figure 3, border closures and mobility restrictions in LCB borderlands most affect trade, family reunions, friend visits, farming and herding. Of the study participants, 37 per cent cross borders for trade, 25 per cent for family reunions and 15 per cent to visit friends. There are slight gender dynamics in how mobility restrictions affect individuals: women mainly cross borders to visit family (31%), while men mostly do so for trade (38%). Nonetheless, we observe no notable age-related differences: except that older people (65 years and over) are less likely to be affected by mobility restrictions and border closures than younger and middle-aged individuals, who usually engage in cross-border trades and visit friends and family.

Military operations in borderlands also affect agricultural production systems and wealth distribution among households. Due to the attacks on civilians in remote farming areas by JAS and ISWAP, as well as military restrictions on cultivating tall and dense crops that could obstruct visibility, local communities in some borderlands have been unable to grow traditional staples like millet and sorghum. This has caused the price of staple foods to rise sharply in borderlands (e.g. around Nigeria's Mandara Mountain areas—Kolofata, Madagali, etc.) as locals turn to border markets, which have lighter restrictions, to purchase their food—albeit at twice the local market price. While the state authorities across the LCB have recently eased mobility restrictions in some borderlands (e.g. the Michika and Mubi areas and parts of the Mayo-Sava region around Mora) due to improved security situations, state military forces continue to closely monitor most conflict-affected communities (e.g. Madagali, Bama, Banki, Ngala and Damasak). Overnight stays in farmsteads remain prohibited in the observed borderlands due to an enforced state curfew.

MILITARY OPERATIONS IN BORDERLANDS ALSO AFFECT AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION SYSTEMS AND WEALTH DISTRIBUTION AMONG HOUSEHOLDS

Impacts of Border Control Practices

Border control practices encapsulate the ways in which state authorities, including the military, police and immigration personnel, enforce border regulations to ensure security, stability and human rights in the LCB borderlands. Our research reveals mixed outcomes regarding the impact of these practices on at-risk border communities. On the one hand, an increase in the number of military personnel, hybrid security arrangements, such as the use of non-state security providers (community-led vigilante groups), and the operations of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) have led to the establishment of more security checkpoints, extending the state's territorial presence at the borders and within the borderlands. This has encouraged border communities to choose legal routes/ checkpoints over JAS/ ISWAP-controlled areas. On the other hand, relations between these security providers and local residents continue to deteriorate due to illegal control practices, such as levies, extortion and conflicts of interest in local businesses, as well as the continued use of coercive violence at checkpoints. This creates opportunities for ISWAP and JAS insurgents to exploit.

Rigorous border checks take place in high-risk areas of the LCB borders. Border crossers must provide national identification cards, and their vehicles are checked for contraband: 78 per cent of the people crossing the legal routes in the observed LCB borderlands are subjected to checks by state security personnel. However, scrutiny is slightly higher in Cameroon's Far North region (83%) and North East Nigeria (76%) than in Chad's Lac Province (72%)—see Table 1. This can be explained by the persistent violence of JAS and ISWAP

insurgents, amongst others, which appears to be more prevalent in Cameroon's and Nigeria's borderlands.

The variation in the rigour of border controls across the LCB can largely be traced to the difference of conflict exposure, with Nigeria and Cameroon facing more frequent JAS/ ISWAP attacks in recent years than Chad. Along these borders, military personnel and informal security actors, such as vigilante groups and hunters, frequently stop vehicles for checks. Men are often asked to step out for inspection, while women are typically allowed to remain in the cars/ tricycles with the driver. On average, men (78%) are slightly more scrutinised than women (76%) in LCB borderlands. Yet, this pattern reverses in some communities where women are believed to be the major food and drug suppliers to JAS sheltering in Sambisa Forest. For example, more women than men are subjected to checks in Kolofata and Madagali.[13]

TABLE 1: ARE YOU CONFRONTED WITH BORDER CONTROLS WHEN CROSSING THE LCB BORDERS?

	Region	Borderlands		
Response	LCB	Lac Province (Chad)	North East (Nigeria)	Far North region (Cameroon)
Yes	78%	72%	76%	83%
No	22%	28%	24%	17%

13 Interviews with local vigilante groups in the communities close to the Cameroon–Nigeria border.

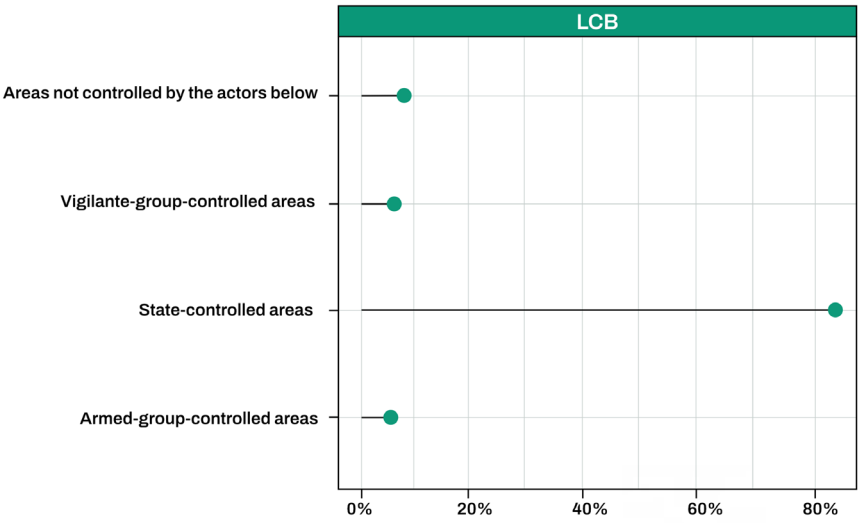
Border 'Porosity' and State-controlled Frontlines

Contrary to the existing studies that link armed insurgencies in the Sahel border regions to border porosity (Ojo, 2020; Zoubar, 2022), border inhabitants themselves often prefer crossing areas controlled by state security personnel over those overseen by armed groups, vigilantes or areas that are not controlled by any of these three actors. On average, 83 per cent of the local population report favouring state-controlled routes over others (see Figure 4). This trend is also reflected in the behaviour of women, 84 per cent of whom choose state-monitored legal crossings compared to 82 per cent of men. Across the three borderlands surveyed, the pattern holds consistently: The locals in Chad's Lac Province (84%), North East Nigeria (81%) and Cameroon's Far North (85%) prefer state-controlled routes over others.

BORDER INHABITANTS OFTEN PREFER CROSSING AREAS CONTROLLED BY STATE SECURITY PERSONNEL.

This preference reveals a potential leverage point: If border control procedures are more streamlined and border police, military personnel or immigration officers receive regular training on engaging with communities under stress or at risk of violent conflict, more borderland residents are likely to favour state-controlled crossings for their daily activities. This, in turn, could reduce the number of people recruited by ISWAP and JAS via unofficial routes. Nevertheless, a minority— about seven per cent in Cameroon's Far North, three per cent in North East Nigeria and five per cent in Chad's Lac Province— still use routes that are predominantly under JAS and ISWAP control, typically securing safe daily passage through levies (examined in detail below). Community sensitisation programmes can play a role in discouraging risk-tolerance among border residents, but such efforts must be accompanied by improved civil–military engagement at legal routes and checkpoints.

FIGURE 4: WHERE IS IT EASIER FOR YOU TO PASS THE BORDER?



MOBILITY ACROSS THE LCB BORDERLANDS IS HEAVILY RESTRICTED BY STATE SECURITY FORCES AND INSURGENT GROUPS.

CHAPTER 4

Payments for Security and Protection

Mobility across the LCB borderlands is heavily restricted by state security forces and the insurgent groups of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), all of which maintain checkpoints in border communities and along the borders. These controls limit civilians' ability to move freely across borders or carry out daily activities, partly due to the demands for two kinds of payments: 'Security payments', which are bribes or informal, compulsory levies extracted by some state security personnel from civilians, either at border crossings or checkpoints within border communities. By contrast, 'protection payments' are levies imposed by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in areas under their control. While the former are rooted in corruption and opportunism, the latter serve multiple purposes: They can be transactional, amounting to organised criminal

extortion (Bahiss et al., 2022), a temporary strategy civilians adopt for self-protection (Buba, 2023) or a part of NSAGs' border governing strategy (Oginni,2023).

Findings from our field survey in 40 border communities[14] highlight the centrality of these payments. We asked respondents what additional requirements—beyond their national ID cards—were needed to cross the border. The most frequently cited response was 'security payments', that is, bribes paid to some state security personnel. Of the 1,466 respondents across the three borderlands studied, 36 per cent reported making such payments, 30 per cent said that no additional requirements were needed, 19 per cent mentioned language skills, and nine per cent mentioned personal contacts, among other factors. Notably, more women (35%) reported making security payments than men (25%), which may reflect a greater reluctance among women to risk travelling through areas controlled by JAS and ISWAP, even if they have to pay at official checkpoints.

NORTH EAST NIGERIA HAS THE HIGHEST INCIDENCE OF SECURITY PAYMENTS, WITH 41 PER CENT AFFECTED.

A regional comparison offers further insight: North East Nigeria has the highest incidence of security payments, with 41 per cent affected, compared to 33 per cent in Cameroon's Far North region and 29 per cent in Chad's Lac Province. In Nigeria's North East, younger adults (18 to 44) were more likely to make such payments (42%) than older individuals (37%). Younger people are at higher risk of being punished for refusing payment, which may explain this difference. Exploitation around fuel transport illustrates these dynamics: While strict regulations on transporting fuel (PMS/diesel) in many border communities are intended to restrict insurgents' access to energy, some state security personnel at checkpoints reportedly exploit this by taxing or demanding cash from the local population who transport fuel. Others profit by collaborating with cross-border traders permitted to travel at night. A farmer from the Madagali area of

14 Field survey (September—November 2023), comprising 4,536 respondents in 40 border communities.

North East Nigeria shared his experience:

> We, who work in the garden, suffer because we need the fuel for our machines in the farm daily. We must give them [some military personnel] money before we can pass with it. Every day, these military personnel demand payment (interview with a farmer, North East Nigeria, September 2023).

While such practices highlight state-linked corruption, civilians also face parallel demandes in insurgent-controlled areas. Individuals crossing ISWAP and JAS-held zones are required to make protection payments,particularly if they engage in farming or business activities in insurgent-held border areas. People crossing there typically face less scrutiny for contraband—such as illicit arms, drugs or mineral resources—compared to official crossings. However, the risks are considerable: Failure to comply with the rules set by the insurgents often leads to brutal punishment, and frequent crossers may risk recruitment by these groups.

The next section explores four scenarios that illustrate how border control practices shape civilians' relationships with state authorities and JAS/ ISWAP in the LCB borderlands.

Illicit Payment Practices: Four Borderland Scenarios

To understand how payments for security and protection affect civilian life, we analyse four distinct scenarios:

1. Contested areas where JAS/ ISWAP and state military forces compete for control.
2. Border areas under exclusive control of non-state armed groups.
3. Formerly insurgent-held areas now under state control.
4. 'Safe corridors' close to border areas with NSAGs activity.'

Drawing on field interviews and observations from 40 border communities at risk, as well as from border authorities and experts on border controls, we analyse local views on border militarisation, border closure and negotiated safe passage through security or protection payments in these four scenarios to highlight the opportunities for and challenges to border control practices in the borderlands for informed policymaking.

Each of the four scenarios reveals different opportunity costs for civilians deciding whether to use official routes or those controlled by insurgents. A lower opportunity cost refers to situations where border residents are discouraged from engaging in activities in insurgent-controlled areas due to the comparative advantage of state-monitored, legal routes (see Figure 5).

Scenario 1: Civilians pay for Either Security or Protection

In areas where JAS/ ISWAP are active and where state military operations are ongoing, civilians are often forced to make either security payments (to the military) or protection payments (to NSAGs) to move across borders or within their communities. The amount extracted by JAS/ ISWAP varies depending on the specific faction and the proximity of military operations to areas under NSAG control.

Lower protection payments are typically imposed when military forces are nearby and when locals can reasonably afford the security payments demanded at official checkpoints. In some cases, JAS/ ISWAP offer reduced or more flexible levies in an effort to gain legitimacy and goodwill. For example, fishermen working around Lake Chad reported paying roughly US $38 for a fishing permit, plus an additional US $5–$10 per bag of fish caught.[15] While access to these fishing areas is often restricted during military operations, border inhabitants reported that some military personnel engage in fishing while on duty.[16]

When the cost of protection and security payments is nearly the same or the difference is insignificant, many civilians tend to be indifferent to which authority controls the border or checkpoint. This creates a kind of equilibrium where people choose routes or checkpoints based on practical considerations (see Figure 5c). However, when military personnel refrain from collecting security payments, civilians are more likely to use state-designated routes. This behaviour can foster greater trust in state authority—provided that official security forces refrain from accepting bribes.

CIVILIANS ARE OFTEN FORCED TO MAKE SECURITY PAYMENTS OR PROTECTION PAYMENTS TO MOVE ACROSS BORDERS.

15 Interview with border communities in the LCB (June–November, 2023).
16 Interviews with border communities in the LCB (June–November 2023).

FIGURE 5: ILLICIT CONTROL PRACTICES BY STATE SECURITY ACTORS AND NSAGS

Figure 5a: Protection Payment (PP)

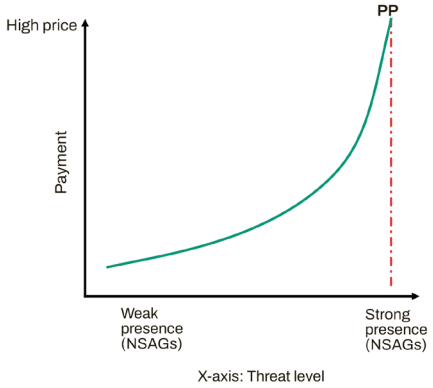


Figure 5b: Security Payment (SP)

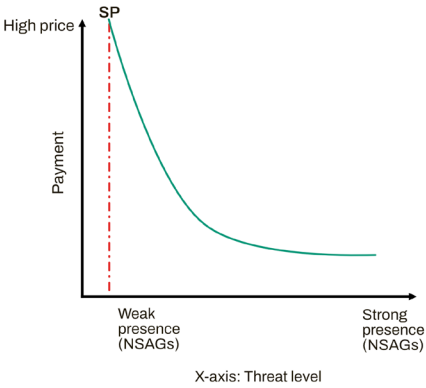
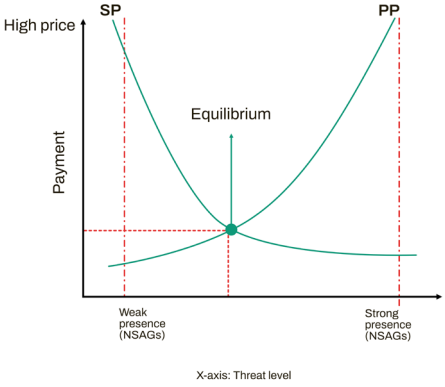


FIGURE 5C: SECURITY/ PROTECTION PAYMENT AT THE CHECKPOINTS



Scenario 2: Civilians make Protection Payments in Areas Under the Exclusive Control of JAS/ ISWAP

In some border areas under the exclusive control of JAS/ ISWAP, civilians are required to pay protection money to the insurgents. These payments—often collected at checkpoints or during border crossings—can be extremely high (as illustrated by the peak on the y-axis in Figure 5a). Payments are typically collected at regular intervals, including monthly, pre-harvest and post-harvest periods. Non-compliance can carry severe consequences, including threats to lives.[17]

In forested border areas, civilian communities (who are cattle rearers) have to pay fees per herd of cattle to JAS/ ISWAP, while farmers are required to pay before planting and again during harvest or face punishment. Another means of payment for protection is offering labour services—many farmers are forced to work on farms owned by JAS/ ISWAP, and herders are coerced into selling stolen cattle in open markets. The level of firepower possessed by the insurgents often determines the amount demanded as protection payments. Despite complying, locals report instances of cattle rustling and occasional attacks.[18]

The absence of state presence erodes civilian rights, allowing NSAGs to entrench a coercive form of local governance through fear and economic exploitation, thereby maintaining control (see Figure 5a). And yet, communities feel unsafe despite making protection payments to the insurgents. However, when military operations are conducted in these areas—and if military personnel refrain from demanding security payments—civilians may opt for official routes or checkpoints instead. Raising awareness of the risks associated with relying on insurgents for protection may help reduce the practice of paying armed groups.

17 Interviews with border communities in the LCB (June–November 2023).
18 Interviews with border communities in the LCB (June–November 2023).

Scenario 3: Civilians make Security Payments in Border Areas under the Exclusive Control of the State Military

In some border communities formerly controlled by JAS/ ISWAP, civilians still report being required to make security payments to some state military personnel at border crossings and checkpoints. Despite improved security that has enabled large-scale cross-border trade—particularly in towns such as Michika, Mubi and Madagali, where agricultural produce and other goods are regularly exchanged between Nigeria and Cameroon—informal security payments demanded by some military personnel remain significantly high (as shown by the peak on the x-axis in Figure 5b).

And yet, not all goods are treated equally. While traders have to pay relatively small amounts (between US $1 and $10) on some goods, others—such as fertiliser and fuel—tend to be 'taxed' heavily. Fertiliser, though essential for farming, is also a potential component in the production of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which is why its trade is subject to strict regulations by security and immigration authorities in conflict-affected areas. Study participants noted that these items were frequently subject to high security payments during checkpoint controls.[19] The persistence of these informal taxation practices reflects the legacy of earlier governance structures and highlights the limited reach of state institutions. Even after regaining control from NSAGs, the continued demand for mobility payments remains entrenched, restricting civilian movement and undermining trust in state-led security efforts.

EFFECTIVE STABILISATION MEASURES WILL HAVE TO ADDRESS THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND GOVERNANCE GAPS LEFT BY NSAG RULE.

19 Interviews with border communities in LCB (June–November 2023). About 1,466 survey respondents also confirmed security payments when crossing borders and at checkpoints.

Over time, such practices risk further alienating civilians and increasing resentment toward state forces. This dynamic may shift sympathies toward NSAGs and elevate risks for military personnel. Beyond a military presence, effective stabilisation measures will have to address the socio-economic and governance gaps left by NSAG rule. In the short term, rotating security personnel, improving their welfare through better salaries and allowances and enhancing training could reduce rent-seeking practices and help rebuild civilian trust.

Scenario 4: In 'Safe Corridors', Civilians may still have to make Protection Payments

Safe corridors, located mostly in urban and peri-urban areas near insurgent-controlled border zones, experience limited JAS/ ISWAP activity. Though some of these areas (e.g. Mokolo and Koza in Cameroon; Toulotoulo and Gella in Nigeria) are relatively secure and rarely experience direct attacks, their proximity to active conflict zones along the border creates ongoing tensions. While overt security payments are rare in safe corridors, some residents still make protection payments to JAS/ ISWAP, particularly when they do business in insurgent-controlled border areas. ISWAP's collection of *zakat* (almsgiving) and protection payments extends far beyond its territorial strongholds. For example, such payments reportedly generate approximately six billion naira annually in north-eastern Nigeria, drawing revenue even from business owners in cities like Maiduguri, Potiskum, Damaturu and Gwaza.

INFORMAL SYSTEMS OF TAXATION IN SAFE CORRIDORS DEMONSTRATE THE NSAGS' SUSTAINED INFLUENCE.

These informal systems of taxation in safe corridors—often less visibly coercive than those in insurgent-held territories—demonstrate the NSAGs' sustained influence, even beyond their immediate zones of control. The presence of families of active JAS/ ISWAP fighters and informants in these safe corridors further blurs the line between state authority and insurgent influence. In the peri-urban areas of Kousseri and Koza, residents expressed concern

that this dynamic complicates the local security landscape.[20] This situation underscores the complex nature of NSAG influence, even in areas nominally under state control.

Three risks emerge from this situation:

1. Expansion of insurgent revenue: With business owners and cross-border traders operating from the relative safety of state-controlled areas, they continue to maintain financial ties with insurgent-held zones, sustaining JAS/ ISWAP's income streams.
2. Growth of informant networks: Family members and sympathisers in safe corridors may facilitate the gradual expansion of JAS/ ISWAP's informant networks, thereby increasing the risk of surveillance, coercion and recruitment within communities otherwise considered secure.
3. Increased risk of coercion and recruitment: As JAS/ISWAP expand their informal presence, civilians are likely to face growing pressure to comply with insurgent demands, either through financial contributions or participation in support roles.

Targeted investments in livelihoods and small business support could reduce civilians' economic reliance on insurgent-controlled trade routes. Enhancing border infrastructure and improving civil–military relations at official crossings may also encourage the use of formal routes and reduce insurgent access to cross-border trade and protection money.

20 Interviews with some former JAS and ISWAP commanders (June–November 2023)

THE PRESENCE OF THE STATE MILITARY IS KEY TO COUNTERING JAS AND ISWAP.

CHAPTER 5

Capacities to Secure Borders

The state's capacity to secure its borders and borderlands in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) can be assessed by examining how effectively border controls and regulatory actions adapt to evolving security threats posed by non-state armed groups (NSAGs), along with the resulting changes in civilian behaviour due to military operations[21], border policing and other border control initiatives. However, the LCB's borderlands affected by ISWAP and JAS are largely secured through military operations. These operations are often associated with the state's territorial

21 While we observed immigration officers at the borders during our fieldwork, state military personnel are primarily responsible for securing the conflict-affected border areas. Several checkpoints were largely controlled by the military, while the MNJTF engaged in ad hoc military operations across the LCB borderlands.

presence, while immigration and customs, even though they exist in these border communities, play only passive roles during military operations. Consequently, this report primarily examines the capacity of military operations to secure the LCB borderlands against JAS and ISWAP violence.

The presence of the state military is key to countering JAS and ISWAP. Military camps, such as those operated by the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) in Cameroon's Far North (Kolofata and Amchide), and the extensive network of military checkpoints in North East Nigeria, for instance, provide a semblance of security and order. Beyond unilateral operations, bilateral ad hoc security arrangements—so-called coalitions of the willing—have also emerged, including cooperation between Nigeria and Cameroon, Benin and Nigeria or Nigeria and Chad for specific operations. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is a prime example of a multi-national security cooperation mechanism engaged in counter-terrorism operations aimed at neutralising Boko Haram. The MNJTF has made substantial progress in improving regional security and reducing the group's operational capacity, with many insurgents either neutralised or surrendering voluntarily. This shift has also led to a marked decrease in casualties and attacks.

The MNJTF's non-combat initiative, Operation Nashrul Salam, has played a crucial role in encouraging former Boko Haram members to renounce violence, resulting in widespread surrenders in Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria. Joint operations Lake Sanity 1 and 2 removed the blockage

TABLE 2: HOW MUCH DO YOU TRUST YOUR NATIONAL MILITARY IN FIGHTING ARMED GROUPS IN YOUR AREA?

	Region	Borderlands		
Response	LCB	Lac Province (Chad)	North East (Nigeria)	Far North region (Cameroon)
Mean	3.22	3.13	3.18	3.34

Note: I don't trust the military at all = 1; I hardly trust the military = 2; I trust the military to some extent = 3; I fully trust the military = 4

imposed by JAS and ISWAP on Lake Chad areas, such as in Doro Naira, Muzuri and Tumbuma. The MNJTF also supported some communities around the lake with fishing nets and agricultural seeds ahead of the planting season. These achievements highlight the value of the MNJTF's dual approach of combining military operations with humanitarian and peacebuilding initiatives (Multinational Joint Task Force, 2024a).

As Table 2 shows, locals generally trust the national military to some extent in fighting JAS and ISWAP. Trust levels are slightly higher in the Far North (Cameroon) compared to other borderlands, and above the LCB average (3.22). We also observe no major differences in trust between men and women, or across age groups. Men and women, as well as young and older adults, report similar levels of trust. Policies could leverage this trust to deepen local support and civil–military collaboration.

In communities where trust is lower—particularly in Lac Province and parts of North East Nigeria (e.g. Wuro Wandu, Garin Gada and communities on the Niger–Nigeria border)—there may be a need to build stronger relationships through community outreach, transparent operations and public engagement to highlight the military's role in ensuring civilian safety, thus fostering a more supportive environment.

However, our research also shows that residents in high-risk border areas rarely fully trust the military, highlighting concerns including the military's use of coercive violence against civilians, response times, infrastructure deficiencies and operational and coordination challenges. We therefore examine in greater detail below the factors that limit the effectiveness of military operations across the LCB.

Militarised Borders and Borderlands

The expansion of military roles in civilian areas has raised concerns about increased militarisation, that is, the constant use of coercive violence against civilians to enforce compliance in border communities. This creates openings for JAS and ISWAP to exploit. While the military presence is intended to provide security in the examined borderlands, our research findings show that it sometimes leads to collateral damage and growing distrust, complicating stabilisation efforts. Due to its extensive counter-terrorism mandate, the military has taken over policing and community liaison roles in many areas. Allegations of military extortion and oppression during operations, as well as dissatisfaction with military interventions, erode trust in security institutions and perpetuate cycles of insecurity.

Study participants cited repression, abuse, mass arrests and the need for protection from military mistreatment as key reasons why local youth choose to align with JAS and ISWAP. For them in particular, experiences with military behaviour can strongly influence their decision (not) to join armed groups. These dynamics deepen the divide between civilians and the military, resulting in a trust deficit that insurgents can easily exploit. In these instances, military interventions may inadvertently become a push factor. To prevent this, operations must be sensitive to community dynamics, and LCB governments should invest in public awareness campaigns and channels for transparent civil–military engagement.

Military Response Time and Infrastructure

Infrastructure, particularly inadequate road networks,[22] plays a critical role in shaping the military's response time. Delays of approximately two days are common in Lac Province and the Far North region of Cameroon, whereas North East Nigeria often sees a military response within the same day (see Table 3). Further analysis reveals that gender and age also influence how military responsiveness is perceived: Women and older individuals are more likely to criticise the state military for being slow to respond. This may reflect societal gender roles and levels of mobility: Women generally remain with their children and are less mobile, while older adults may struggle to flee. This leads to greater vulnerability during attacks and stronger expectations for timely military intervention.

TABLE 3: HOW MUCH TIME USUALLY PASSES BETWEEN AN NSAG ATTACK AND THE MILITARY RESPONSE?

	Region	Borderlands		
Response	LCB	Lac Province (Chad)	North East (Nigeria)	Far North region (Cameroon)
Mean	3.02	2.77	3.10	2.99

Note: No response = 1; response within appprox. two days = 2; response within the same day = 3; immediate response = 4

22 During our fieldwork, it was difficult to travel from Mubi to Madagali due to the destruction of the bridge by JAS. The area is inaccessible whenever it rains. Consequently, military vehicles cannot access the Sambisa areas around Shua, close to Wur Wandu or the mountainous regions between Adamawa North and Mayo-Tchanaga in the Far North region of Cameroon.

In places like Kolofata, Cameroon's Far North, poor road infrastructure—worsened during the rainy season—and mountainous terrain (e.g. Mandara Mountains around Mayo-Sava) constrain operations. Specialised vehicles are required, complicating logistics. These difficulties not only hinder regional, bilateral and unilateral military operations but also the delivery of essential services and humanitarian aid, exacerbating the overall challenges faced in the LCB region.

INFRASTRUCTURE PLAYS A CRITICAL ROLE IN SHAPING THE MILITARY'S RESPONSE TIME.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach: improving infrastructure and access, supporting community-based security initiatives, strengthening government–NGO coordination and promoting accountability and transparency in military operations—particularly in areas where trust is low.

Operation and Coordination Challenges

Operational and command coordination gaps—along with limited technology and intelligence-sharing—undermine military effectiveness in LCB borderlands. Sustained funding is critical for adapting border controls to changing security situations. Resource constraints, as witnessed, for instance, during *Lake Sanity 1 and 2*, limit MNJTF's operability and create challenges when conducting sustained operations, enabling JAS and ISWAP to regroup and cause further harm. The 2023 coup in Niger further complicated joint operations. Although a member of the MNJTF, Niger's military did not participate in *Operation Sanity 2* (April–August 2024), leaving western areas of the LCB more vulnerable to JAS assaults.

Inadequate equipment, such as tankers and communication tools (few of which are supplied by the LCB governments), hinders sustained military operations.Language and cultural differences further complicate coordination and engagement with local communties causing delays in decision making and errors in judgement. For example, the lack of equipment to counter improvised explosive devices (IEDs) (e.g., hosting vehicles) remains a significant issue. In 2024, IEDs accounted for 60 per cent of casualties from JAS and ISWAP attacks. ISWAP's use of drones in recent years for surveillance of troop movements[23] has also intensified, increasing exposure to direct attacks.[24] IEDs pose serious threats not only to border communities and critical infrastructure but also to the military. The next section outlines two scenarios illustrating how ISWAP leverage technical know-how and cross-border networks to acquire (combat) drones.

23 Quadcopters are often used for surveillance and to drop IEDs (explosives) on military targets.
24 Interview with Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), Mora, Cameroon.

ISWAP's Access to (Combat) Drones

ISWAP's ability to further threaten the LCB borderlands through drone warfare hinges on two scenarios: First, whether ISWAP gains direct access to superior drone warfare technologies or successfully repurposes commercial drones to deliver IEDs. Second, whether it can leverage transnational networks to gain access to advanced combat drone technologies. The following analysis explores both possible scenarios and their implications for security in the LCB borderlands.

Scenario 1: ISWAP gains direct access to combat drones or repurposes commercial drones

Over the past seven years, ISWAP has adopted advanced communication technologies—originally intended for commercial use—to coordinate operations across the LCB borderlands, particularly for surveillance and monitoring military movements. The group relies heavily on local logistical routes connecting commercial hubs (such as areas around Lagos) and capital cities (like N'Djamena in Chad). Since 2022, jihadists have repurposed commercial drones for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), before launching direct attacks on troops and military assets. For example, ISWAP used drones for surveillance in Gubio, North East Nigeria, in July 2022 and attempted to overrun a military base there in late 2024 (Adebayo, 2024; Olorunfemi, 2024). At the time of writing, ISWAP lacks access to medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) combat drones, the purchase of which is restricted to

nation-states. However, the group possesses man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS), which pose a serious threat to air defence capabilities. Given this, ISWAP may shift its focus to hijacking military drones used by the LCB governments for counterinsurgency operations (e.g., *Bayrakat TB2* or *Akinci* recently acquired by Niger, Nigeria and Chad). It is, therefore, critical to prevent these military assets from falling into the hands of ISWAP through rigorous testing before deployment, regular maintenance, robust human intelligence and strict frontline protocols. ISWAP and JAS have previously seized military assets during attacks—capturing vehicles and weapons to bolster their capabilities.

ISWAP is also likely to expand its stockpile of commercial drones through diversification strategies and repurpose them for long-range strikes. According to our research, ISWAP generates at least US $1.3 million (approx. two billion naira) annually from taxes and levies, excluding proceeds from kidnapping—each ransom averaging US $36,000 in LCB areas. With growing independent revenue and falling costs of commercial drones, ISWAP could increasingly access a wide range of drones. The group has also developed expertise in modifying drones to carry explosives, leveraging both local and transnational networks, and using social media to build technical capacity. In June 2023, some ISWAP members travelled to Mali to train fighters from the Islamic State in Sahel Province (ISSP) on the use of IEDs.[25] The deployment of drones for explosives heightens the threat to border communities and military operations. The greater ISWAP's technical proficieny in adapting commercial drones, the more likely they are to display significant aerial capabilities in the LCB borderlands.

OVER THE PAST YEARS, ISWAP HAS ADOPTED ADVANCED COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES TO COORDINATE OPERATIONS ACROSS THE LCB BORDERLAND

25 Informal discussion with a Malian captain in June 2023.

Scenario 2: ISWAP Leverages Network-building to Access Combat Drone Capabilities

ISWAP's allegiance to the Islamic State (known as IS) is key to its potential access to more sophisticated drone technology. ISWAP's use of drones aligns with broader ideological and strategic trends within IS. While direct evidence of IS training ISWAP fighters in drone warfare is lacking, both groups have repurposed civilian and commercial drones for surveillance, attacks and propaganda in recent years. IS has used drones for longer-range missions, sometimes with payload delivery capability (Watson, 2017).

Meanwhile, growing collaboration among historically rival armed factions—such as the Houthis and the Yemen-based Al-Qaeda affiliate AQAP—may enable ISWAP and other jihadist groups in the Sahel to gain access to combat drones like the *Ababil-2T, Samad-2* and *Samad-3* and *Shahed-136*, which are capable of long-range strikes. Such alliances have already facilitated cooperation between the Houthis and Somalia-based Al-Shabaab, particularly in smuggling and logistics, as well as drone technology exchanges (Karr, 2024). Similarly, Al-Shabaab has formed ties with jihadist Sahelian groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State—Sahel Province (ISSP) in the Central Sahel region (Tyson, 2024). ISWAP is thus likely to enhance its drone capabilities in the LCB by capitalising on these expanding jihadist networks.

ISWAP'S ALLEGIANCE TO THE ISLAMIC STATE IS KEY TO ITS POTENTIAL ACCESS TO MORE SOPHISTICATED DRONE TECHNOLOGY.

Although Niger, Nigeria and Chad operate MALE combat drones, their effectiveness is limited by challenging terrain (mountainous topography and poor visibility) and ISWAP's blending into the civilian population, using of irregular warfare or guerrilla tactics. In addition, security threats from beyond the LCB influence how LCB governments deploy their aerial assets. For example, Chad must also address security threats from armed groups like Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad

(FACT) along its border with Libya, while Nigeria faces growing insecurity from banditry and a new Al-Qaeda/JNIM-linked faction (Lakurawa)[26] in its north-western borderlands.

Given these challenges, LCB governments must pursue broader regional security cooperation. The stability of LCB depends not only on the security of its immediate borders but also on surrounding areas—including the Chad–Sudan borderlands, the Central African Republic–Cameroon corridor and Chad's border with Libya, which are crucial to the overall stability in the Alliance of Sahel States. A wider regional strategy is essential to preempt and mitigate security risks, requiring strengthened partnerships between regional and sub-regional bodies such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the Alliance of Sahel States, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN-SAD). Additionally, affected states should adopt strict measures to stop the illicit conversion of commercial drones into weapons, in line with the Berlin Memorandum on Good Practices for Countering Terrorist Use of Unmanned Aerial Systems.

26 The link between Lakurawa and ISIS is highly contested, as the group has yet to properly define its affiliation. However, our field research suggests that the group is linked to Maccina Katiba, which is part of JNIM (Al-Qaeda affiliates).

BORDER CONTROLS ARE MOST EFFECTIVE AGAINST NSAGS' VIOLENCE WHEN THEY ARE TAILORED TO LOCAL CONTEXTS AND RESPONSIVE TO EVOLVING THREATS.

CHAPTER 6

Recalibrating Border Controls for Long-term Stability

Our research highlights how border controls can be more effectively implemented to weaken Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgents operating in the borderlands. The following insights can help maximise the impact of border controls amid ongoing jihadist violence:

Border controls need to be tailored to border communities
Border controls are most effective against non-state armed groups' (NSAGs) violence when they are tailored to local contexts and responsive to evolving threats. Flexible and inclusive border management—grounded in continuous feedback from local residents—enables state authorities to tailor control measures to the specific safety concerns and socio-economic realities of affected border communities. This creates

a win-win situation: Authorities disrupt NSAG mobility while civilians retain access to essential cross-border networks and livelihoods.

Our research shows that most LCB borderland residents prefer to use official routes designated by the respective states—except when controls restrict access to socio-economic opportunities. Militarising or closing legal border crossings tends to backfire. NSAGs benefit from heavily securitised borders and borderlands, turning them into opportunities: Civilians are forced to pay to use less restrictive, insurgent-controlled routes, while NSAGs gain revenue by establishing alternative routes or offering free passage to civilians to win their loyalty.

Securing borders relies upon stronger civil–military relations

Strengthening ties between state authorities and civilians amid ongoing insurgent violence requires timely and sustained community engagement. Regular interactions between the military and local residents help build trust and improve relationships. These engagements also offer opportunities to share information about shared risks, such as identifying drones carrying explosives, navigating landmines or safely conducting business in areas controlled by NSAGs.

OUR FINDINGS SUGGEST THAT MILITARY RESPONSE TO INSURGENCIES CAN INADVERTENTLY SUPPORT JAS/ ISWAP RECRUITMENT EFFORTS.

Our findings suggest that military response to insurgencies can inadvertently support JAS/ ISWAP recruitment efforts—especially when military operations seem insensitive to local needs during violent conflicts or poorly communicated. Awareness campaigns involving the military, humanitarian and development actors can play a key role in improving civil–military relations—especially where security operations are perceived as disconnected from local needs.

Infrastructure is a force multiplier in insecure borderlands

Investment in critical infrastructure—particularly roads—in remote and insecure border areas plays a key role in improving the mobility of both military and humanitarian actors. Better road access enhances response times and operational effectiveness, enabling quicker

deployment of resources in crisis settings. As our findings note, poor road conditions significantly delay military response to JAS and ISWAP in isolated areas. Women with children and the elderly are disproportionately affected by these delays, as their limited mobility makes them more vulnerable to attacks than men and younger individuals.

Evolving security threats require stable, long-term security financing models

More stable and sustained financial models are crucial for effective regional security responses. Addressing evolving threats—such as the use of drones by NSAGs—requires consistent funding to support long-term operations and the acquisition of counter-drone technologies, including jamming systems. Our findings show that short-term or ad-hoc funding arrangements, like those supporting the Multinational Joint Task Force have limited the scope and duration of counterinsurgency operations. Interventions like Operations Lake Sanity I and II lasted only about three months each over three years, largely due to financial constraints and limited political commitment. These gaps allow jihadist insurgents to regroup and intensify attacks.

Corruption undermines border security

Illicit security payment practices are a product of deeply embedded institutional, economic and social dynamics within the security sector. Tackling these practices requires both immediate operational adjustments and longer-term structural reforms.

In the short term, eliminating illicit payment practices requires strengthening oversight mechanisms in LCB borderlands. Civilian feedback is essential to improving transparency and responsiveness. Enhancing the living and working conditions of state security personnel on the frontlines is also critical, as poor conditions increase vulnerability to informal income generation. Ongoing training in interpersonal communication, stress management and expectation management contributes to better conduct and professionalism among security personnel. Enforcing disciplinary measures for corrupt practices is central to accountability and restoring public trust.

In the long term, addressing the root causes of corruption requires institutional reform. Material shortages, such as inadequate or irregular pay or lack of logistical support, often drive informal taxation. Structural reforms in financial governance and resource allocation, as well as institutional oversight, are key to reducing these vulnerabilities and promoting sustainable change.

Cross-border collaboration is essential to secure borders and border communities

Expanding regional security cooperation beyond the Lake Chad Basin is the first step towards long-term stability. The LCB region's security is linked to dynamics in nearby and distant borderlands, including the Central Sahel, Libya and Sudan. Effective cross-border cooperation is necessary to address the transnational threat by JAS and ISWAP. Broader regional collaboration could support the development of joint initiatives, such as a regional strategy for countering improvised explosive devices, to protect border communities. Furthermore, because the purchase of military-grade drones is restricted to state actors, LCB governments have a strategic opportunity to negotiate with drone-producing countries for stricter export controls. These efforts would reinforce compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1540, which mandates states to prevent the transfer of such technologies to non-state actors.

Conclusion

State-imposed restrictions on the movement of civilians, goods and livestock, along with state-military checkpoint controls, offer a degree of security and order. However, these measures also create opportunities for exploitation by Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), particularly in communities they once controlled.

Border closures threaten livelihoods in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) borderlands, and checkpoints intended to counter insurgent activity often have counterproductive effects. Practices such as informal taxation ('security payments') by some military personnel increase civilian frustration and risk tolerance toward JAS and ISWAP interventions.

Border controls should not be limited to achieving 'hard security' goals, such as asserting state presence or containing non-state armed groups (NSAGs). When informed by the needs and perspectives of local border communities, they can also contribute to soft security by building trust with local civilians vulnerable to NSAG influence and prevent border control practices that push civilians toward tolerance—or even support—of insurgent groups as observed in the cases of ISWAP and JAS in the LCB region.

Exclusive or isolated approaches to border management in the LCB region are unlikely to deliver lasting peace. Governments must acknowledge the interconnected nature of borderland insecurity and consider the ripple effects of instability in adjacent regions—including areas beyond the Lake Chad Basin.

EXCLUSIVE OR ISOLATED APPROACHES TO BORDER MANAGEMENT IN THE LCB REGION ARE UNLIKELY TO DELIVER LASTING PEACE.

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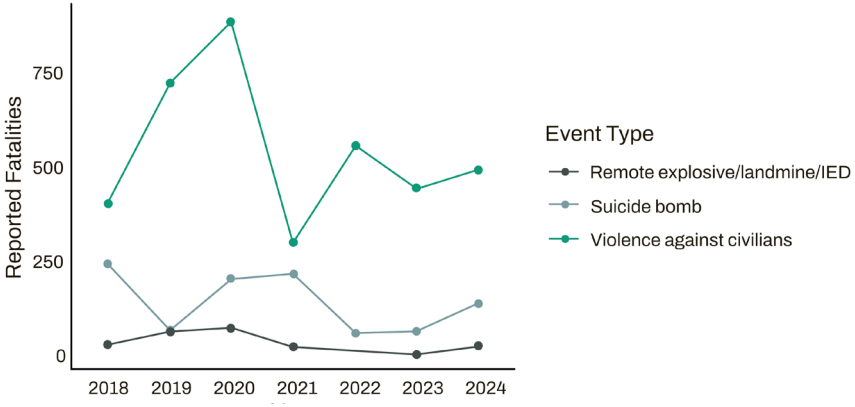
Acronyms and Abbreviations

AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
bicc	Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies
CEN-SAD	Community of Sahel–Saharan States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FACT	Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad
IED	Improvised explosive device
IS	Islamic State
ISSP	Islamic State—Sahel Province
ISWAP	Islamic State in the West Africa Province
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin
JAS	Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'adati wal-Jihad
LCB	Lake Chad Basin
LCB-TAP	LCB Territorial Action Plans
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission
MALE	Medium-altitude long-endurance (drone)
MANPADS	Man-portable air defence system
MAXQDA	Software for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis
MNJTF	Multinational Joint Task Force
NSAG	Non-state armed group
UN	United Nations

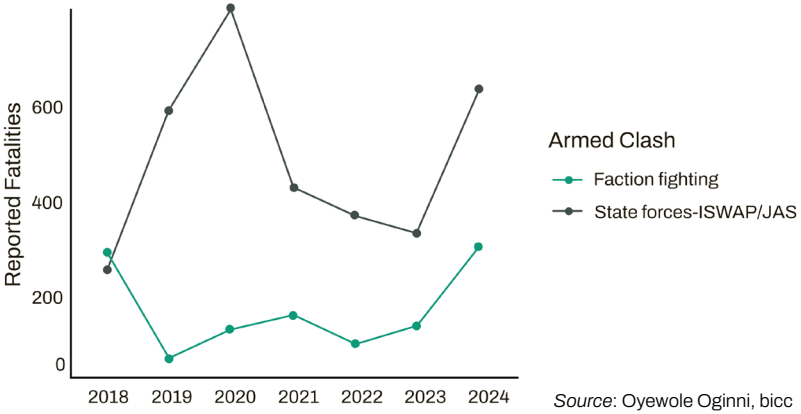
Annex

Annex 1: Conflict Trends in LCB Borderlands (2018–2024)

Annex 1a: Attacks by JAS/ ISWAP



Annex 1b: Armed clashes between ISWAP/ JAS and state forces



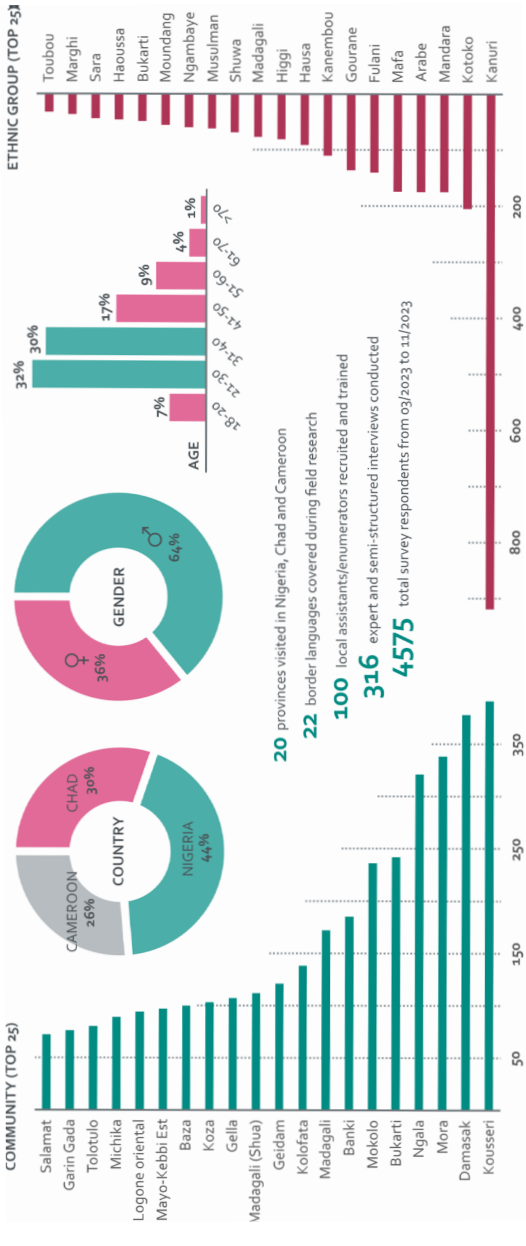
Source: Oyewole Oginni, bicc
Data Source: ACLED

Annex 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Study

Annex 2a: Number of survey respondents in the Lake Chad Basin

Country	Number of participants	Percentage
Nigeria	1986	44%
Cameroon	1206	26%
Chad	1344	30
Total	4536	100%

Annex 2b: Study demographic characteristics



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MAPS, CHARTS AND TABLES: © bicc/ Ben Buchenau, p. 74; Oyewole Oginni, p. 24, 28, 33, 36, 38, 45, 52, 55, 72, 73, 74; Mehraveh Sakhaei, p. 45; Julian Schindler, p. 45, 73; Noah Schauen, p. 28
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This *bicc report* offers insights into how border controls can be implemented more effectively to disempower NSAGs in borderlands where state presence is weak. It introduces a new framework for assessing the impact of border controls in conflict settings—one that recognises how these controls interact with civilian behaviour and non-state armed groups strategies. As such, the report contributes to strengthening the adaptive capacity of border control strategies across the volatile security landscape of the Sahelian borderlands, particularly in the Lake Chad Basin.

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