

# Policy Brief

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## From the Mediterranean to the Atlantic: A Corridor Vulnerable to Terrorism

By Abdelhak Bassou

### Summary

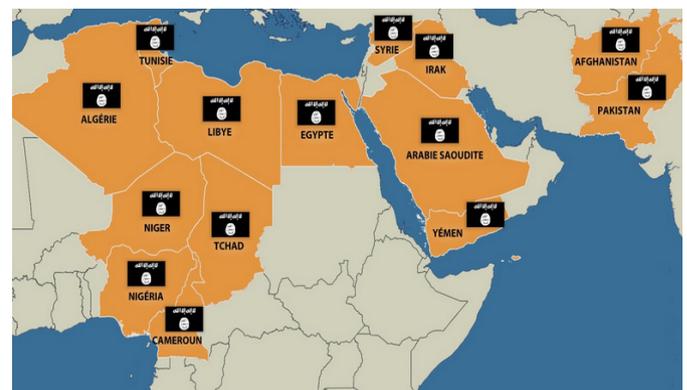
Two of the largest oil producers in Africa, Nigeria on the Atlantic and Libya on the Mediterranean are facing the two most violent terrorist groups on the continent. The Libyan version of Daesh and Boko Haram seem to be gaining ground to join in an area formed by three states that are vulnerable to the spread of terrorism. In Cameroon, the chaos is a concern post-Biya. Battle fatigue may reach the Chadian state that has been involved in an all-out battle. Niger, which is limited by both a lack of resources and a porous border, is also vulnerable. These are all factors that call for international mobilization to ensure that the tradeoff of undoing Daesh in the Middle East does not result in Daesh taking over the area between the Maghreb and West Africa, linking the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. The threat is all the more real now as this area is adjacent to Mali and Burkina Faso, two countries where terrorist groups, which were scattered during the operation Serval, seem to be reorganizing - as evidenced by the attacks perpetrated recently against the hotels in Bamako and Ouagadougou.

The terrorist phenomenon seems to have taken up residence in the Greater Middle East. Its foundations are essentially located in the area ranging from Afghanistan to the Atlantic. If this part of the world seems small, given the extent of the globe, it is certainly a sensitive area in terms of geopolitics. In maritime affairs the Greater Middle East has access to the Indian Ocean to the east and the Atlantic to the west. It contains the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea and forms the Mediterranean's southern shore. It controls the passage of Bab El Mendeb, the Suez Canal and the Strait of Gibraltar. The geographical area that constitutes the Greater Middle East is an important strategic interest for world trade including the transportation of hydrocarbons from the Gulf as well as for global security and peace because of geopolitical conflicts and tension running through it.

From Afghanistan, still under the threat of the Taliban, to North Africa, where Libya is now particularly vulnerable, through Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt (Sinai), the Greater Middle East is full of conflicts and violent

armed groups that threaten the stability of the area and thus of all the neighboring regions. Europe, central Asia and especially Africa suffer the impacts of the turbulence that has shaken the Greater Middle East (see Map 1).

Map 1: The presence of Daesh worldwide



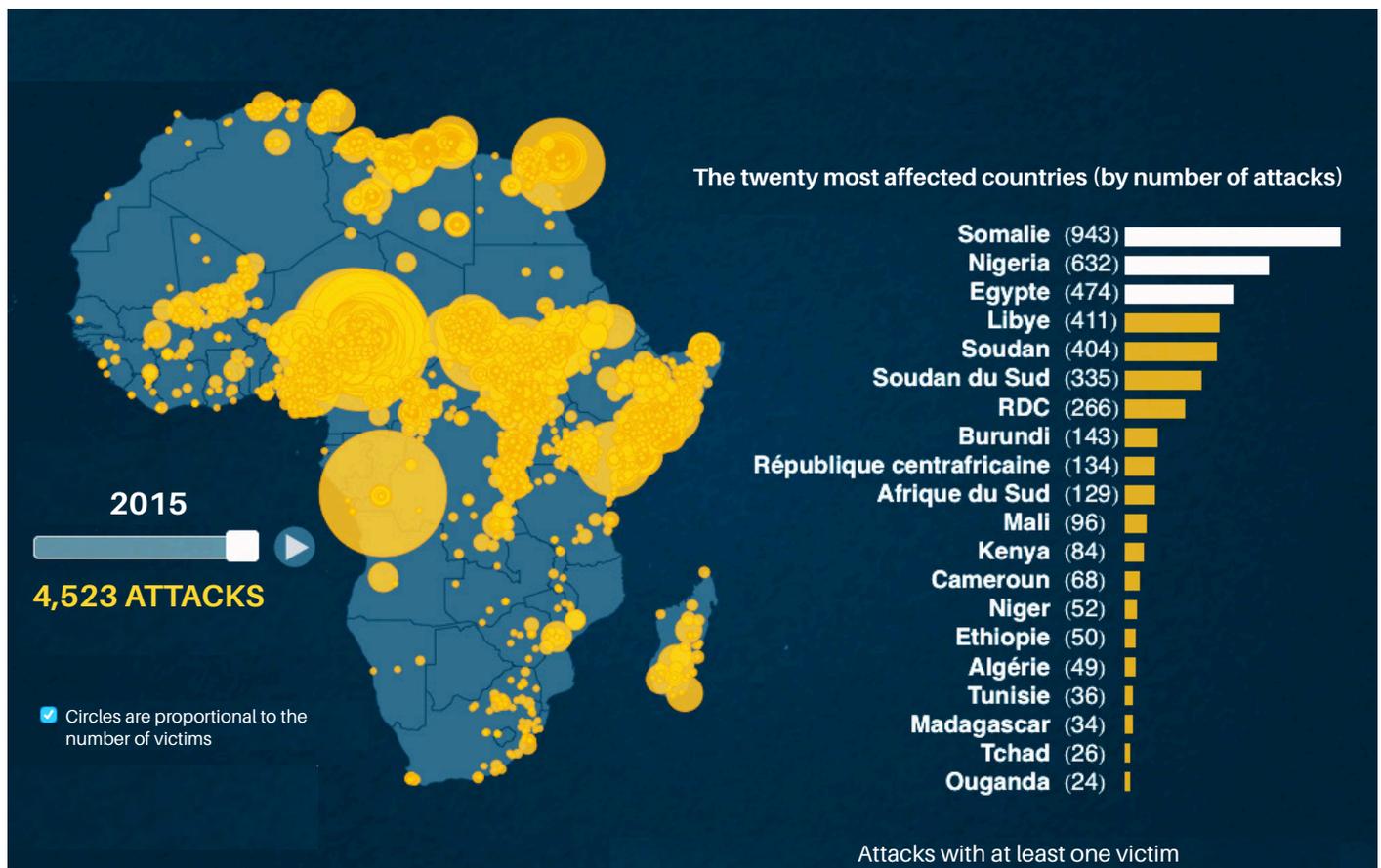
Source: <https://français.rt.com/international>

The already alarming situation in this region is likely to worsen and even become uncontrollable if the chaos that prevails in the Middle East meets further destabilizing turbulence generated by the terrorist bases that are increasingly anchored in the African area near the Greater Middle East.

If the international community shows some reactivity regarding the Iraqi-Syrian situation and is recently giving signs of an interest in the Libyan situation, the fact remains that the African situation seems, despite French efforts and sub-regional initiatives, even today, external to the agendas of the major powers in their fight against international terrorism<sup>1</sup>.

On the African continent, one area particularly attracts attention. It opens a corridor to terrorism stretching from the Mediterranean (Libya) to Nigeria (Atlantic) through Niger, Chad and Cameroon. This corridor opens an area to terrorism facilitating the movement of its fighters and weapons between North and West Africa. It is in the image of an hourglass where matter changes vessels without ever decreasing in volume. By looking at the symbols on Map 2 concerning the intensity of the attacks, the area between Libya and Nigeria is clearly taking shape. The area totals more than a quarter of the attacks perpetrated in Africa in 2015.

Map 2: Terrorism in Africa in 2015



Source: [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project](#)

Two groups are spreading terror in this space, which is fragmented and subject to several vulnerabilities:

- Boko Haram, which began as a local organization confined to northeast Nigeria and now has spread through the above-mentioned corridor and risks

making a junction with Libya.

- Daesh in Libya as mentioned above, takes advantage of the Libyan chaos to prepare for its retreat asylum for the organization "Islamic State (ISIS)" in the event that is chased out of its present sanctuary straddling Syria and Iraq.

(1) The French certainly are responding in the Sahel-Saharan strip. But terrorism does not appear to be receding so far. The attacks against the hotels in Bamako and Ouagadougou are a reminder that AQIM, MUJAO and the Ansar Eddine groups hold considerable power for harm.

## I. Libya: Daesh's Mediterranean vessel

### 1. In the North

Both authorities share power on the Libyan coast from Tripoli (west) to Tobruk (east). While some policies reduce the opposition between the two sides to a struggle between the Islamist clan (west) and the nationalist clan (east), a careful analysis rather shows a power struggle to position and reclassify themselves around the control of oil resources between tribal, ideological and denominational fragments<sup>2</sup>. Indeed Libya holds considerable oil reserves (the largest in Africa) even though its population is small. It shares borders with six other states and has a Mediterranean coastline of over 1,700 km. Thus, Libya's potential in terms of development has become an influential issue, and this is why today Libya is undergoing this great struggle for influence<sup>3</sup>.

The two visible trends in Libya are:

- Libya Dawn (فجر ليبيا) with its capital in Tripoli, evolves in an area corresponding to Tripolitania. It is a coalition formed around the Misrata militia, with two terrorist organizations:
  - The Fighting Islamic Group in Libya (الجماعة الإسلامية المقاتلة الليبية), allied to Islamist politicians. The group was founded in 1995 by Abu Laith al-Libi (1967-2008), and was an armed Islamist organization with ties to al Qaeda. The group had abandoned armed conflict in July 2009 but appears to be resuming it again.
  - The Partisans of Sharia (أنصار الشريعة) is a Salafist Islamist group that advocates a strict application of Sharia law in Libya. The group was founded during the Libyan revolution of 2011. The Partisans of Sharia group is accused of involvement in the attack against the US Consulate in Benghazi that killed the US Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three of his bodyguards on September 11, 2012.
- Operation Dignity (عملية الكرامة) whose capital is located in Tobruk. This clan is based on the followers of the

confederation, those who emphasize regional affiliation. It operates in the area corresponding to Cyrenaica. Political authority is provided by the parliament recognized by the international community, which is backed by General Haftar's army<sup>4</sup>. The clan is also home to dignitaries and those nostalgic for the old regime. An embryo of the Islamic State (IS) organization is implanting in this area of the Libyan coastline in Derna and Benghazi.

### 2. The oil crescent

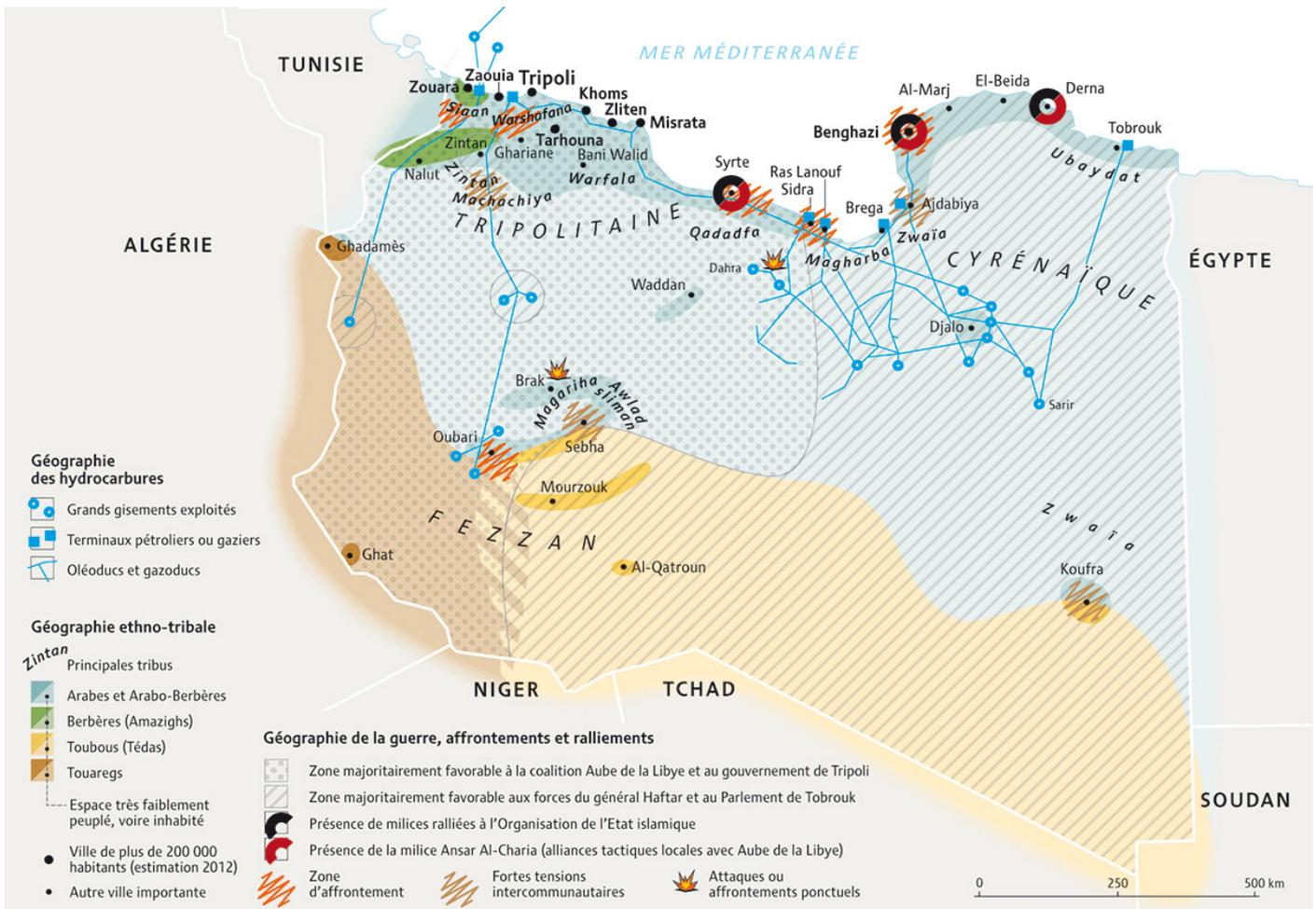
Between the two areas occupied by each of the Libyan parliaments, in the area called "oil crescent," the Islamic State (IS) took advantage of the discord between the two major authorities (Tripoli parliament and Tobruk parliament) to occupy the city of Sirte, around which it controls about 300 km of coastline and from where the organization launches attacks against the oil crescent, particularly against the towns of Ras Lanuf and Ajdabya. Moreover, true to its oil stain strategy to spread and expand to merge, Daesh has implanted cells in Derna, Tobruk, and Benghazi. The final goal is for each of these cells to expand to join with others and thereby enable Daesh in Libya to control north of Cyrenaica, before conquering the entire country (see map No. 3).

(2) Information report on Libya by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly following an information-gathering mission dated March 4, 2015.

(3) Presentation at the symposium on Libya by Mr. Hasni Abidi, Director of the Centre for Studies and Research on the Arab World and the Mediterranean (CERMAM), Global Studies Institute, University of Geneva, on October 26, 2015.

(4) A former senior officer of Gaddafi's army, this general is now seventy-two. He was commander of the Libyan expeditionary force in Chad in 1983. After a disagreement with Gaddafi, he went into exile in the United States and only reappeared in 2014.

Map 3: Daech Implantation in Libya



Source: Le Monde Diplomatique. This map was appended to the information report of the French National Assembly on Libya's Foreign Affairs Committee, March 4, 2015.

### 3. Central and southern Libya

In central and southern Libya, a multitude of groups straddling Islamic militancy and transnational criminal activities are strewn across the desert area, which is also littered with tribal and ethnic tensions and conflicts.

The residue of both Mali's Ansar Eddine and units of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) that were driven to northern Mali by French troops, or Al Mourabitoun, born of a merger between the Signers in Blood and the MUJAO, frequent each other in southern Libya where

Touareg and Toubou ally with different factions seeking a share of the dividends of the various trafficking. Jihadism and banditry exist in this southern area, where Libya opens up towards its African dimension.

The border is here porous due to the failure of the Libyan state, and the limited resources of the immediate neighboring states such as Niger and Chad.

This southern zone was the starting point of the commando group "Signers in Blood" (الموقعون بالدم) that had bloodied the Ain Amenas complex in Algeria<sup>5</sup>.

(5) This is a massive hostage-taking crisis from January 16, 2013 to January 19, 2013 by the Signers in Blood, an armed Islamist group of Al-Qaeda dissidents in the Islamic Maghreb, at the Tiguertourine gas facilities located 45 km west of In Amenas in southern Algeria. The operation resulted in the death toll of 37 hostages and 29 terrorists, per a communiqué issued by Algerian security services two days after the assault.

The presence of the French army in the region is insufficient to ensure the necessary sealed borders and impede the flow of traffickers and terrorists.

The occasional French operations seem more urgent but they alone cannot secure such a large area. They even seem to rely on the Toubou Libyan tribes to control the border, thus attracting the wrath of the Libyan Tuareg<sup>6</sup>.

## II. Half-measures against terrorism

### 1. The potential of an emerging country, yet...

In 2014, Nigeria became the first African economic power in terms of GDP (USD 510 billion as a result of changes in the GDP calculation method, USD 522 billion is estimated for 2016)<sup>7</sup>. This state, Africa's most populous with 180 million people (260 million in 2050 according to ADB forecasts), is the largest oil producer on the continent with a daily production of 2.5 million barrels. Nigeria almost regularly has had an average annual growth rate of 7% over the last decade. Yet the country is struggling to gain recognition as a power or even as a regional power in West Africa, where no country matches the Nigerian performance. Nigeria exemplifies economic potential that does not generate military power. Indeed this economic power relies only on an army of 82,000 men for a population of 180 million inhabitants. With twelve times less inhabitants (13 million), Chad has 22,000 soldiers. Brazil (200.3 million inhabitants) has a slightly higher population than Nigeria, and has an army of 318,000 men.

As we will see later, while Chad prioritizes its military development at the expense of economic development, Nigeria goes to the other extreme by not providing its economy a proportional military power.

### 2. Terrorism compounds the already known ills of governance

In addition to governance ills that plague Nigeria, terrorism by Boko Haram worsens the hindrance to the country's progress. The spread of Boko Haram had, as such, been among the first promises of the election campaign of the current president.

On 24 December 2015, the Nigerian President, Mohammed Buhari had said in a BBC interview that Boko Haram had become "incapable of conducting

articulated conventional attacks" as they had in the past. According to the Nigerian President, the organization had "technically" lost the war in Nigeria. The events show, however, an organization that has lost none of its terrorist verve. In the 40 days following the President's declaration, the terrorist group killed over 200 Nigerians in the northeast part of the country.

a) Friday, December 25, 2015: The jihadists raided the village of Kimba in Borno State. They opened fire on the villagers and burned their homes. The gunmen killed 14 people and burned the village.

b) Sunday, December 27, 2015: Boko Haram fighters invaded Jiddari Polo, a town on the outskirts of Maiduguri, in Borno state. The attack left 25 dead and 91 wounded.

c) Sunday, January 10, 2016: In another attack, members of the Islamist group Boko Haram killed seven people in Madagali.

d) Saturday, January 30, 2016: An attack against the village of Dalori, near the state capital Maiduguri, killed at least 85 people.

e) Saturday, February 6, 2016: Boko Haram again bloodied northern Nigeria. At least five people were killed in an attack on two villages in Borno State in northeastern Nigeria.

f) February 9, 2016: In Borno State, two female suicide bombers triggered their suicide belts in a crowd killing over fifty-eight and injuring many.

Suffice to say that the organization retains a very large capacity for harm, especially in matters of asymmetric warfare. Weakened but never destroyed, it disappears only to return. Nigeria seems to opt for half measures, both in terms of its security approach - where the state's military resources do not seem able to stop the evil, as well as in terms of soft power - because Nigeria has been unable to use its economic potential to clean up its modes of governance and curb the social inequalities that feed extremism.

## III. Between Nigeria and Libya, a fragmented region undermined by vulnerabilities

### 1. Chad: Fighting on several fronts

Chadian soldiers are warring on all fronts in Africa (see Map 4).

- In Mali, they continue to provide additional strength

(6) See the monde.fr website, in the "Décryptage" section, an article by Frédéric Bobin (Le Monde correspondent in Tunis) dated September 15, 2015: "Selon les Touaregs libyens, la France joue un "rôle trouble" au Sahel" (According to the Libyen Tuaregs, France is playing a "trouble role" in the Sahel).

(7) See "L'année stratégique, analyse des enjeux internationaux" (The strategic year, analysis of international issues) under the direction of Pascal Boniface, editor Arman Collin, page 234.

to the French army, in particular the Barkhane forces (1,700 soldiers);

- Another Chadian contingent was deployed with the armies from Niger, Cameroon and Nigeria to fight against Boko Haram (5,000 soldiers);
- A third contingent supports the Multinational Force of Central Africa (FOMAC) to secure the Central African Republic;
- A joint mixed force that Chad formed with Sudan patrols day and night over a 1,360 km continuous border. Chad has dispatched about 1,200 soldiers;
- Chad is also a member of G5 Sahel with Mauritania, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. It should soon provide a military contingent for this structure.

Although Chad's battlefronts are diverse both security-wise and militarily, the struggle for development and the economy is not being ignored. The oil price drop is dwindling the revenues of the State, which is also threatened by the effects of climate change. In Nairobi at the 2nd preparatory committee for the 3rd UN conference on housing and sustainable urban development (Habitat III) that will be held in Quito, Ecuador, from October

17 to 20, 2016, Chad's representative declared; "Chad is suffering the brunt of the catastrophic effects of climate change. It is not only dangerously threatened by desert encroachment and degradation of arable land, but also by the gradual and alarming reduction in the area of Lake Chad which feeds a population of over 30 million from the riparian countries."<sup>8</sup>

The army takes up a large part of the national budget. In 2015, the Finance Act had planned enrollment of 8,000 soldiers in the army ranks. The Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs account for nearly 77% of the recruitment quota in the civil service, according to specialists of the Chadian administration. This resource allocation deprives other public sectors of the human resources required for their development.

If Chad's economy continues to be swallowed up by the war effort that the country is leading intensively, will the semblance of social peace that Chad is experiencing now be sustained? The country is certainly surrounded by tension and conflict zones, but can it sustain a population explosion by expanding only as a military power?

Map 4: Deploying Chad's military



Source : <http://www.alwihdainfo.com>

(8) The second session of the Preparatory Committee for the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) was held in Nairobi, Kenya from Tuesday April 14 to Thursday, April 16, 2015.

## 2. Cameroon: after Paul Biya

The 83 year-old President of Cameroon is in his sixth term and his 34th year in power. If the last election was not clear-cut, it is best to recognize that the Cameroonian president has managed to preserve this country of major crises that could lead to the state's bankruptcy. The country indeed experiences security externalities from two sides: the Central African Republic and Nigeria

These threats and the climate of insecurity that they instill facilitate the dissemination and propagation of the concept of a need to defend the people, of an armed nation to first secure the country. The failures of economic and social policies then become secondary. Security threats are evoked to explain all social and economic woes. "The security crisis due to the Islamic sect Boko Haram in the northern part and political tensions in Central Africa have hindered sub-regional trade relations. The resulting border closures, documented human victims, the influx of refugees, and population displacement disrupt economic activity" per an official report by the Cameroon government.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, although the current president may have kept the country in a sort of inner calm for 34 years, many analysts fear the post-Paul Biya. The change in power, which so far concerns the North and South, would certainly be subject to claims of the people of East and West<sup>10</sup>. As elections in Africa are a crisis trigger, with the death of Paul Biya or at the end of his current mandate, the country risks a crisis that would aggravate the security situation in the region.

## 3. Niger: The challenge of mastering the border

A few days before the presidential elections, the country still has hundreds or thousands of internally displaced persons in the Diffa region in the south near the border with Nigeria. The displaced are victims of the expansion of the Boko Haram attacks in Niger.

In this region the border between Niger and Nigeria follows the course of the Yobe River that Nigerians from Boko Haram cross to loot and burn villages in the Diffa region. Niger has so far been unable to provide military units to secure the populations and enable them to return to their villages. The situation is even more serious since the Diffa region hosts about 130,000 Nigerian refugees who fled the atrocities committed by Boko Haram, according to aid agencies.

To defend itself, Niger, which covers an area of 1,267,000 Km<sup>2</sup> and hosts a population of 17 million, has only 5,300 soldiers and 1,400 policemen. The country mostly relies on the French forces present in the region, which also cannot extend over the whole territory of Niger<sup>11</sup>. The French protection efforts focus especially on the mining area rich in uranium.

Like Mali, Niger is experiencing a Tuareg protest movement. It is on hold for now, but may occasionally reappear. In the future, disproportionate growth between rapid population growth and economic potential that cannot follow should be expected.

The vulnerability is compounded by the immensity of the border it shares with all countries, each infested by terrorists (see table below), and all materially incapable of dealing with the danger of the porous open border, not only due to terrorism, but also due to all forms of organized crime. A total of 5,697 km of borders in a region that is most vulnerable to destabilization makes Niger a target country for terrorist predation.

(9) Report dated December 2014, entitled "Impact de la crise sécuritaire aux frontières sur l'économie Camerounaise" (Impact of the security crisis on the Cameroon border economy) written by the Cameroonian Ministry of Economy.

(10) In his book, "Les systèmes politiques précoloniaux au Cameroun" (Pre-colonial political systems in Cameroon) Joseph Owona, the academic and politician, thinks that we can experience regional "alternativity" at the head of the State in Cameroon. Owona is not the only one to mention the ethnic component. Hubert Mono Ndjana, philosopher and Cameroonian author had said in an interview in March 2014: "... For Cameroon to continue to remain in peace, a brother of Biya, meaning any Beti, should not consider being his successor. Otherwise, Cameroon will risk falling into civil war."

(11) Jean-Marc Tanguy, who has followed the military events since 1996 and is the author of ten books on the French forces and military operations, wrote: "Today, France has no ability to effectively fight against terrorism because of a lack of resources. Before the November attacks, there was talk of sending more soldiers to Barkhane, where a reinforcement of 500 soldiers had already arrived in recent months. Also, the internal situation in Libya to the north is not conducive to thinning out the area. The French army, which must also manage multiple fronts, has almost reached the limit for what it can do."

**Table Niger border lengths**

Country	Border length
Algeria	956 Km
Benin	266 Km
Burkina Faso	628 Km
Libya	354 Km
Mali	821 Km
Nigeria	1,497 Km
Chad	1,175 Km

Source: Author's calculations

#### IV. Boko Haram: advancing towards Libyan homes

When it was founded in 1995, Boko Haram went by several names. It was known as Jama'at Al Hijra Wa Takfir (JHWT) and also as Jama'atu Ahlissunnah lidda'awati wal Jihad. Its fighters identified with the Taliban so they called themselves the Nigerian Taliban.

The organization also refers to the Sokoto Caliphate, whose recovery is one of the organization's driving causes. Over the past two years, from its bases in Nigeria, the organization has stepped up its attacks on its neighbors. Boko Haram operations have extended to an area around Northern Cameroon and southern Chad and Niger despite the efforts of about 8,700 men belonging to the Chadian, Cameroonian and Nigerian forces as well as the fight led by the operation Barkhane.

During the past six years, Boko Haram has claimed over 15,000 victims and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates the number of displaced at 2.1 million people due to Boko Haram's violence. According to UNICEF and as reported by weekly publication, Express, dated September 18, 2015, the number of children who had to flee is about 1.2 million. They were uprooted by the Boko Haram rebellion in Nigeria. Over 265,000 other children are also affected in neighboring Nigeria, where Boko Haram has extended its deadly attacks.

Since Boko Haram was driven out of the cities it controlled, it headed further to the north to Lake Chad. Boko Haram has spread in this intersection zone between Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad once they were kicked out of the cities. From this sanctuary, it continues to launch its murderous attacks on people in four countries. From there, Boko Haram sends men to Libya via Chad, as the organization became the West African province of the Islamic State in March 2015. To encourage more fighters to join Libya, leaders of Boko Haram and Daesh Libya offer them to settle there with their families<sup>12</sup>.

The movement of Boko Haram towards Lake Chad, and the multiplication of its operations in Chad and Niger are a warning about the fears expressed by security officials<sup>13</sup> about Boko Haram and Daesh Libya joining forces. If this link occurs, it will re-intensify terrorism in Mali and Burkina Faso and increase the danger of destabilization not only in sub-Saharan Africa but also throughout the Maghreb.

(12) Four men were arrested in Kano on January 22, 2016 "while they were migrating to Libya with their families, including babies, with the intention of joining IS," according to a report by the Nigerian Department of State Services (DSS).

(13) "For a long time I have been warning about the situation in Libya. I had said in 2014 that the risk of Daesh implanting itself in Libya was real. This has occurred. Its members are now in the Sirte region. They occupy 250 kilometers of coastline and are extending southward. They want to conquer new sources of income by seizing oil wells and forging new alliances. There is a major risk that a link is made with Boko Haram," said Jean-Yves Le Drian, French Minister of Defense to Jeune Afrique in an interview in December 2015.

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## About the author, Abdelhak Bassou

Abdelhak Bassou is Senior Fellow at OCP Policy Center. He occupied several offices within the Directorate General of the Moroccan National Security where he was Borders' Division Chief from 1978 to 1993. He was the former Director of the Royal Institute of Police in 1998. He also served as the Chief of Regional Security (Errachidia 1999-2003, Sidi Kacem 2003-2005) and was also Head of the Central General Intelligence from 2006 to 2009.

He also contributed to the output of several international organizations endeavors including the Council of Arab Interior Ministers from 1986 to 1992, where he represented the Directorate General of National Security in several meetings. Abdelhak Bassou holds a Master's Degree in Political Science and International Studies from the Faculty of Law, Economics and Social Sciences of Agdal in Rabat

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