

LAKE CHAD BASIN RESEARCH INITIATIVE

FOREWORD

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FAST FACTS

- Authors recommend engagement with university populations not just for the sake of preventing and countering extremism, but also to facilitate dialogue around other issues.
- Authors stressed the potential for universities to act as spaces where important conversations about identity can occur.
- Diplomats, military officers, and intelligence professionals should cultivate a sense for when the term “extremist” is being used as a political weapon rather than an analytical descriptor.
- The rapid growth of the higher education sector in the region, the limits to what is currently known about individual campuses, and the gaps in knowledge about the societal impacts of student activism all require further inquiry.

Since 2009, the area around Lake Chad has been afflicted by an insurgency carried out by Boko Haram and more recently also by its offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The conflict has led to tens of thousands of deaths¹ and the displacement of millions.² The escalation of violence starting in 2009 initially seemed to explode out of nowhere. But the roots of the conflict—political, religious, socioeconomic, and more—extend much farther back in time. The effects of the crisis have extended well beyond the Lake Chad Basin itself. For example, Boko Haram and the associated conflict were major issues in the 2015 and 2019 Nigerian presidential elections.

Amid the crisis, there has been substantial focus on education and schooling. The very name Boko Haram—a nickname of sorts, mostly applied by outsiders but based on a slogan used by the group’s founder—translates roughly as “Western-style

1 For up-to-date casualty figures, geographical data about attacks, and analysis, see John Campbell, “Nigeria Security Tracker,” *Council on Foreign Relations Africa Program*, last updated October 12, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483>.

2 For up-to-date figures on the humanitarian emergency, see OCHA Services, “Lake Chad Basin: Crisis Overview,” last accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/west-and-central-africa/lake-chad-basin-crisis-overview>.

education is prohibited by Islam.” Schools and universities have been targets of horrific violence, from mass kidnappings of students to suicide bombings. They have also been spaces for vital reflection, experimentation, and policy implementation. Finally, students and schools, particularly Qur’an schools, have often been unfairly demonized amid the crisis, sometimes assumed to be extremists or potential extremists even without evidence for such claims.

In fall 2017, the RESOLVE Network launched a major project to analyze religiosity on university campuses in the Lake Chad Basin.³ The project was related but not limited to the context of the Boko Haram insurgency. The project generated four major studies, including one research report based on a desk literature review⁴ and three country case studies (Nigeria,⁵ Cameroon,⁶ and Chad⁷) based on original fieldwork. The project was driven by policymakers’ and researchers’ desire to more fully understand political and religious change in this conflict-affected region.

This RESOLVE research project sought not merely to investigate questions of radicalization but also to challenge stereotypes, particularly the idea that campuses are inevitably hotbeds of religious extremism. It has been credibly asserted that some of Boko Haram’s recruits, particularly in its early phases in the 2000s, were university students.⁸ Yet universities in the region have also been sites where key peacemaking initiatives are both studied and implemented. The University of Diffa, for example, helped to establish a program for deradicalizing and reintegrating former Boko Haram members.⁹ Higher education institutions in the Lake Chad Basin should not be seen in black-and-white terms: beyond dynamics of radicalization or deradicalization, they are spaces of experimentation. On campus, emerging youth leaders are exploring modes of thought leadership and activism that will have repercussions for local and national politics and identities.

Charting Violent Extremism Research Priorities in North Africa and the Sahel

The three country case studies and the research report all caution observers against thinking of campuses as sites of extremism. For example, Abdoulaye Sounaye and Medinat Abdulazeez Malefakis find, in their case study of a northern Nigerian university, that “there is little evidence that violent extremism is a present threat at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU) and other Nigerian higher education institutions examined.”¹⁰ When student groups compete over

3 RESOLVE Network, “Project Backgrounder: Higher Education in Lake Chad Basin,” 2017, https://resolvenet.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounders/RSVE_LCB-HigherEd17-18_Backgrounder_FINAL.pdf.

4 Alexander Thurston, *Campuses and Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin: Violent Extremism and the Politics of Religion in Higher Education*, Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.37805/lcb2018.1>.

5 Abdoulaye Sounaye and Medinat Abdulazeez Malefakis, *Religious Politics and Student Associations in Nigeria*, Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.37805/lcb2019.3>.

6 Brandon Kendhammer and Adama Ousmanou, *Islam, Higher Education, and Extremism in Cameroon*, Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.37805/lcb2019.1>.

7 Remadji Hoinathy and Daniel Eizenga, *The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education: Testing Perceived Ties to Violent Extremism*, Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.37805/lcb2019.2>.

8 See, for example, Freedom C. Onuoha, “Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?” *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report 348, June 2014, 3, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR348-Why_do_Youth_Join_Boko_Haram.pdf.

9 Obi Anyadike, “How Jobs Can Help Niger Win the War Against Boko Haram,” *The New Humanitarian* (formerly IRIN), July 17, 2017, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2017/07/17/how-jobs-can-help-niger-win-war-against-boko-haram>.

10 Sounaye and Malefakis, “Religious Politics and Student Associations in Nigeria,” 1.

resources or disagree with one another over questions relating to religion and politics, this does not necessarily mean that tensions will lead to violence. And when some students object to state and university policies they see as biased, this does not inevitably make today's student activists tomorrow's extremists. Meanwhile, the term "extremism" can itself be loaded and polemical on Lake Chad Basin campuses, with some student groups hurling the label at their rivals despite their lack of connection to violence.

Students' religious activism, usually nonviolent, has profound implications for the surrounding societies. In the Lake Chad Basin countries, university enrollment is relatively limited (as the country case studies discuss, enrollment is 17.5% in Cameroon as of 2015, and a negligible percentage of the Chadian population). University students are quite often aspiring elites. As students look ahead to their careers, religious ties can become part of their religious identities. Sounaye and Malefakis note that "student religious groups...facilitate connections to influential actors beyond the university system."¹¹ This dynamic can run in both directions. The authors add, "Increasingly, at both state and federal levels, political leaders outside of the university system have courted students' associations, especially during election campaigns."¹²

Amid divided societies, universities become arenas where students attempt to negotiate with states over issues of representation: geographic, ethnic, linguistic, or otherwise. Sometimes, as Brandon Kendhammer and Adama Ousmanou write in their research brief on Cameroon, "The need to maintain cordial relations with the state provides a strong incentive for Muslim student activists to maintain a united front."¹³ In other contexts, there are intra-religious tensions concerning state policies. Sounaye and Malefakis find that at ABU in Nigeria, some Sufi and Shia students increasingly resent what they see as preferential treatment given to the Muslim Students Society, a somewhat Islamist-leaning organization, and to Salafis.¹⁴ The dynamics of inter-group relations vary from country to country, and from campus to campus.

Some of the authors see a potential for grievances and extremist sentiments to rise if representational struggles intensify or are mishandled by the central state. For example, language policy is a key issue on campuses in Chad, which has both French and Arabic as official languages. Remadji Hoinathy and Dan Eizenga write that "State and government policies that support bilingualism and that are perceived as promoting favoritism of one religion over others run the risk of exacerbating inter- and intra-religious tensions. Such an effect could contribute to the erosion of the state's secular character and increase the vulnerability of Chad to violent extremist threats and actors such as Boko Haram."¹⁵

What happens on campuses also has ramifications for secularism. Hoinathy and Eizenga comment, "The boundaries of the public and religious spheres may be well-defined in the constitution and other juridical documents; however, like much of Chadian society and politics, the actual application of those boundaries is undergoing a constant reconfiguration."¹⁶ At important, semi-public institutions such as King Fayçal University in Chad's capital N'Djamena, explicitly religious admissions requirements and curricula pose an implicit challenge to the secularism of the state.

11 Sounaye and Malefakis, "Religious Politics and Student Associations in Nigeria," 1.

12 Sounaye and Malefakis, "Religious Politics and Student Associations in Nigeria," 13.

13 Kendhammer and Ousmanou, "Islam, Higher Education, and Extremism in Cameroon," 1.

14 Sounaye and Malefakis, "Religious Politics and Student Associations in Nigeria," 13.

15 Hoinathy and Eizenga, "The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education," 2.

16 Hoinathy and Eizenga, "The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education," 14.

The authors express concern that the university, as currently structured, “creates a kind of exclusionary atmosphere, precluding some from attaining the connections and education that [it] provides.”¹⁷

Neither students nor the wider societies see issues of representation on campuses as distinct from wider cleavages and debates: in contexts where Christians fear “Islamization” and “sharianization” in their countries, or where Muslims feel excluded by Christian-dominated political networks (in Cameroon, particularly), what happens on campuses can exacerbate broader divisions. Moreover, secularism is understood very differently in Nigeria’s religion-saturated public sphere than in its Francophone neighbors, which are at least ostensibly “laïc.”¹⁸ In Nigeria, religiously-inflected politics on campus is in step with trends in the wider political arena; in the Francophone countries, religious activism by students can probe the limits of secularism and can make secular intellectuals and elites nervous.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Partnering with university staff and student groups to combat and prevent extremism

This theme emerged in all of the country case studies as well as in the mapping paper. Kendhammer and Ousmanou write, “Cameroonian students and key university stakeholders largely agree that higher education institutions can and do serve as a bulwark against the spread of violent extremism in the region.” As Sounaye and Malefakis note, many Nigerian universities already have programs oriented toward combating extremism.¹⁹ Engagement, therefore, should often aim not to create programs from scratch but to amplify and refine existing efforts.

Authors recommend engagement with university populations not just for the sake of preventing and countering extremism, but also to facilitate dialogue around other issues. Kendhammer and Ousmanou recommend that that policymakers “engage with religious student organizations on campus as key P/CVE partners, particularly around programs promoting nonsectarian civil engagement.”²⁰ Sounaye and Malefakis argue that “expanding participation in such activities may help to unite otherwise disparate student religious populations around a common cause and grow a sense of community and resiliency.”²¹ When American and European diplomats and development practitioners are seeking partners at the sub-national level, student groups are important to consider and engage. At the same time, diplomatic engagement should balance among different groups, for example Sufis and Salafis.

17 Hoinathy and Eizenga, “The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education,” 18.

18 A strong version of secularism based on French legal tradition. See: Hoinathy and Eizenga, *The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education*.

19 Sounaye and Malefakis, “Religious Politics and Student Associations in Nigeria,” 17.

20 Kendhammer and Ousmanou, “Islam, Higher Education, and Extremism in Cameroon,” 4.

21 Sounaye and Malefakis, “Religious Politics and Student Associations in Nigeria,” 19.

Expanding access to and inclusivity in education

The case study authors call attention to the ways that higher education in and of itself can prevent the spread of extremism. Addressing the case of Cameroon, Kendhammer and Ousmanou recommend “support[ing] Muslim students’ access to university education, and diversify[ing] the class, ethnic, and educational backgrounds of Muslim students on campus.”²² Issues of fairness and inclusion affect both admissions and on-campus life, and greater inclusivity can have far-reaching and positive effects.

Authors stressed the potential for universities to act as spaces where important conversations about identity can occur. Hoinathy and Eizenga urge policymakers to “ensure that universities and other institutions of higher education remain environments for the open debate of ideas and aim to improve cross-cultural interactions to overcome linguistic and religious divisions on campuses.”²³ Hoinathy and Eizenga emphasize how crucial it is, in cultivating such environments, for the state to remain neutral “in the regulation of religious issues in the country in general and in higher education curricula in both Arabic and French in particular.”²⁴ When American policymakers become aware of issues of discrimination and unfairness in higher education, they should raise these issues with their counterparts in Lake Chad Basin governments, because issues of balance on campuses have wider implications for how societies interact with and perceive states.

Critically examining the “extremist” label

Sounaye and Malefakis note that Nigerian student groups sometimes deride rivals and opponents as extremists. These authors argue that the resulting atmosphere “polarizes student populations and creates false alarms within the community regarding the nature of those groups deemed ‘extremists’ by other groups vying for influence.”²⁵ Diplomats, military officers, and intelligence professionals should cultivate a sense for when the term “extremist” is being used as a political weapon rather than an analytical descriptor. American officials should not accept the label “extremist” at face value, but should rather probe speakers’ definitions of “extremism” and question what relationships exist, if any, between alleged “extremism” and actual propensity to commit violence.

In a related way, the surveillance of campuses can be counterproductive. Kendhammer and Ousmanou write that “The perceived ‘securitization’ of university campuses as part of the Cameroonian war on terror has already had consequences for Muslim students, who feel surveilled, targeted, and harassed.”²⁶ The risks of reducing surveillance are likely outweighed by the benefits of creating an atmosphere of inclusivity. Recall that students in the Lake Chad Basin (including Muslim students) are victims much more often than they are perpetrators of violence. Today’s Muslim student, moreover, may be tomorrow’s politician, lawyer, or doctor. An experience of discrimination on campus could affect the long-term dynamics of their career and sense of value within the society. American officials sometimes visit university campuses in the Lake Chad

22 Kendhammer and Ousmanou, “Islam, Higher Education, and Extremism in Cameroon,” 4.

23 Hoinathy and Eizenga, “The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education,” 3.

24 Hoinathy and Eizenga, “The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education,” 3.

25 Sounaye and Malefakis, “Religious Politics and Student Associations in Nigeria,” 18.

26 Kendhammer and Ousmanou, “Islam, Higher Education, and Extremism in Cameroon,” 1.

Basin countries, especially Nigeria; it would be well worth ensuring that on such visits, student leaders have opportunities to speak frankly with American diplomats.

Pursuing additional research

The authors were unanimous in recommending support for additional research on religious dynamics on campuses in the Lake Chad Basin region. The rapid growth of the higher education sector in the region, the limits to what is currently known about individual campuses, and the gaps in knowledge about the societal impacts of student activism all call out for further inquiry.

Conclusion

The policy recommendations emerging from this RESOLVE Network project point toward diverse avenues for engagement, messages to convey, and attitudes to cultivate. Policymakers should treat university campuses not as hotbeds of radicalism but as complex, sensitive spaces of debate and negotiation. Campuses offer opportunities for partnership, but also represent risks, particularly when states act unfairly or exacerbate feelings of discrimination. In approaching these opportunities and risks—many of which have little to do with violence and more to do with national cohesion—American policymakers should keep in mind that universities in the Lake Chad Basin are symbols of national and local identity as well as institutions for producing tomorrow’s elite. What happens on campuses has wider ramifications for politics, religiosity, and society. Ideally, the proper support and engagement can strengthen existing on-campus efforts to prevent and combat extremism, while simultaneously reducing the potential for bitter and divisive struggles over identity.

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