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TURBULENCE AND STABILITY:
CIVILIAN COOPERATION IN BOKO HARAM'S INSURGENCY

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ABSTRACT

Why do some civilians become embedded in militant organizations while others do not? It is commonly assumed that civilians either support or resist rebels, depending on whether they share their political cause, or that they are forced to cooperate. The messy reality, however, is that people rarely fall in just one category. Some cooperate but maintain weak linkages to insurgents, carrying out quotidian chores and labor, whereas others get swept up in high-stakes rebel activities. They move within militant hierarchies, experience and execute punishments, and provide logistics, social services, and military support on the frontline. This thesis seeks to describe a broad spectrum of civilian engagement, from collusion to compliance to resistance, and to explain variation in civilian patterns of cooperation in rebel-controlled territories.

Through a fieldwork-driven case study of Boko Haram's insurgency in Northeast Nigeria, this research examines theoretical and empirical differences in the roles that civilians perform and the relations they establish with a rebel movement. It relies on extensive interview material to identify and explain the emergence of two patterns of cooperation – stability and turbulence. Specifically, it demonstrates that these patterns result from civilian adaptation to varying levels of insurgent control. Contrary to the assumption that stability is rooted in high oversight, it is rebel neglect in areas of limited strategic value that allows for everyday civilian life to persist in the periphery. In turn, militarized governance in core territories draws civilians into high-risk and turbulent engagement as they try to navigate vulnerability and empowerment within the rebel system. Consequently, civilian behavior is shaped by proximity to military power, which creates unpredictability and entanglement with armed actors.

This fine-grained analysis is based on original qualitative data, primarily in-depth interviews with people who lived under Boko Haram's rule, collected in Nigeria over the course of eleven months between 2018 and 2020. By tracing insurgent-civilian interactions within their specific institutional settings, this study shows how the micro-dynamics of cooperation are shaped by the strategic and operational dimensions of insurgent war-making. Understanding patterns that define civilian experiences in conflict zones fundamentally shifts away from the politically charged assumptions of collusion to instead focus on constraints for civilian – and armed group – survival. Finally, this thesis bridges scholarly debates about civilian agency and rebel governance while applying them to a context that is representative of increasing Islamic extremist influence, violence, and territorial contestation in Africa.

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ACRONYMS & GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<i>Almajirai</i>	Hausa term for boys and young men in Northern Nigeria who move to live with a religious teacher (<i>mallam</i>) and study the <i>Qur'an</i>
<i>Amir</i>	Denotes a leader or ruler or someone in authority; rank in the Boko Haram hierarchy
APC	All Progressives Congress
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb
BAY	Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe state
Boko Haram	Hausa language nickname given to <i>Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad</i> , broadly meaning “Western education is forbidden by Islam”
CJTF	Civilian Joint Task Force, a vigilante force which developed in Borno state in 2013 to fight Boko Haram
DRR	Deradicalization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
<i>Hadith</i>	Collections of teachings, words, actions, and traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad
<i>Hijab</i>	Head covering for Muslim women
<i>Hisbah</i>	“Morality police” to enforce <i>Sharia</i>
<i>Iddah</i>	The period a woman must observe after the death of her husband or after a divorce, during which she may not marry another man
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration

IS	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ISWAP	Islamic State’s West Africa Province (<i>Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya</i>)
<i>Izala</i>	Short for <i>Jama’at Izalat al-Bid’a wa-Iqamat al-Sunna</i> (Arabic, “Society for Removing Heretical Innovation and Establishing the Sunna”)
JAS	<i>Jama’tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad</i> , commonly referred to as Boko Haram
LGA	Local Government Area, which is the administrative intermediary between the ward and the state level; there are 774 LGAs in Nigeria across 36 states and six geopolitical zones
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
<i>Jihad</i>	Arabic for “to struggle” or “exert effort”, especially in the context of conforming with God’s will, though most frequently associated with fighting and combat
LRA	Lord’s Resistance Army
<i>Malam</i>	Hausa term for a religious teacher (plural: <i>malamai</i>)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
<i>Niqab</i>	Full veil covering all the body but the eyes typical of Salafi Islam
<i>Oga</i>	Pidgin term for boss or someone in a position of authority (plural: <i>ogas</i>)
OSC	Operation Safe Corridor
PDP	People’s Democratic Party
<i>Purdah</i>	A form of female seclusion
RCD-G	Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie Goma
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
<i>Sallah</i>	Prayer; referring to the five daily prayers as well as to the two major Muslim holidays <i>Eid al-Fitr</i> and <i>Eid al-Kabir</i>
<i>Shari’a</i>	Islamic legal system based on the <i>Qur’an</i> , <i>sunna</i> , and supplementary sources of jurisprudence

<i>Sunna</i>	The teachings, sayings, actions, experiences, and omissions of the Prophet Muhammad, recorded in the <i>hadith</i> and constituting a source of law alongside the <i>Qur'an</i>
<i>Takfir</i>	Excommunication of other Muslims
<i>Ummah</i>	Muslim community
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

MAP OF NIGERIA



SOURCE: UN GEOSPATIAL (2014)

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INTRODUCTION

“My life changed when my husband became *amir*”, said Fatima about her association with *Jama’atul Alhul Sunnah Lidda’wati wal Jihad*, commonly known as Boko Haram.¹ “Before, we had to eat soup without salt, now I was well respected. My husband was *oga* and I was the first lady”, she explained proudly. Two years earlier, she had pleaded with her husband to divorce her upon discovering his involvement with the insurgents during a 2014 attack on her village in Madagali. As people were being killed in the streets and fleeing for their lives, he told her to stay calm when the insurgents knocked on their door. Previously, he had told her that his frequent travels to Maiduguri were for a diploma while he actually met with Boko Haram leaders to advise them on irrigation practices. In retrospect, his jubilation of “*Allahu Akbar*” when listening to news about the group’s self-proclaimed Caliphate in 2014 should have raised her suspicions, she reflected. At nine-months pregnant, she concluded that running away was not a viable option. A few weeks later, her husband asked her to get into the car with their newborn to visit relatives in Gulak, leaving behind the yellow farmland and driving into the darkness of Sambisa Forest. “Welcome, thank you for coming”, greeted the group’s then-leader Shekau. Over the course of five years, Fatima both cooperated with and resisted Boko Haram. She was subjected to punishments and executed them. She gained and lost power, enjoyed sleeping on a mattress, and suffered from “hunger, disturbances, and bombs”. She volunteered for a suicide bombing mission and then changed her mind at the last minute. She persuaded other women to stay, and then, she ran away one night in 2019. Her story captures the dynamic and chaotic experiences of noncombatants closest to the group. Yet, others described their daily life under Boko Haram’s governance as relatively normal and routine despite the havoc the militants had caused when

¹ Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

seizing control. People fetched water, bathed their children, conversed with neighbors, and went to the mosque. They were prohibited from leaving the community, women had to cover themselves in public, and farming was restricted, but they ignored some of the rules when the insurgents were not around. Occasionally, they were tasked with packing loot, grinding corn, and gathering for prayers and preaching. Apart from that, “we did not have to do anything”, said Zahrah.² Her experience encapsulates the veneer of stability that characterized cooperation at arm’s length.

The question

Neither of these two women lived voluntarily under Boko Haram’s rule. They both experienced violence and destruction, refused and complied with orders, and became actors in the fight against the Nigerian government. Nevertheless, their engagement with the militants differed significantly with Fatima’s being far more turbulent than Zahrah’s. This phenomenon is not exclusive to these two individuals but reflects a broader pattern in conflict zones from Somalia to Syria, where civilians who fall under rebel control develop different ties to armed groups. It is often assumed that civilians cooperate with rebels either out of support for their cause (Petersen 2001; Wickham-Crowley 1987; E. J. Wood 2003) or because they were forced to do so (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007). Conversely, those who oppose the group and have the capacity to resist are expected to do so (Avant et al. 2019; Hallward, Masullo, and Mouly 2017; O. Kaplan 2017; Masullo 2021). Along these lines, research on the insurgency in Northeast Nigeria has explored pathways into Boko Haram (Ehrhardt 2019; Mercy Corps 2016; Monguno et al. 2020) and mobilization against it (Agbibo 2015, 2020, 2022b; Bamidele 2017; Hassan and Pieri 2018). However, these portrayals fail to capture the nuanced and dynamic differences in civilian behavior beyond outright support, mere obedience, or resistance that take shape over time. Moreover, explanations centered on individual motives for mobilization do not conclusively explain why some people, even those whose association was involuntary, get swept up in high-stakes activities of rebellion, whereas others maintain more peripheral relations and avoid further entanglement with insurgents. The question therefore arises: *why and how do some civilians become embedded in insurgent organizations while others do not?* This dissertation sets out to describe a broad spectrum of

² Interview with Zahrah, May 2018.

civilian engagement, from collusion to compliance to resistance, and to explain variation in civilian patterns of cooperation in rebel-controlled territories.

The argument

I argue that civilians' adaptation to rebel control shapes how civilians behave and relate to the organization, that is, whether they do so in a more stable or turbulent manner. Once insurgents are victorious on the battlefield and seize control over territory, they must reckon with how to govern the population. Rebels have to decide whether to make civilians part of their military or political project. In other words, resource-constrained groups must prioritize either militarizing the population or maintaining its civilian character. By that, I refer to the extent to which the civilian sphere is preserved versus supplanted by military objectives, structures, and practices. This is a neglected distinction in governance approaches that accounts for the way in which rebels interfere in civilian affairs and structure social relations. Whether insurgents aim to integrate individuals into their military operations affects what social and organizational pathways are structurally available to individual civilians and how roles, relationships, and restraints are distributed and negotiated.

More specifically, civilianized governance is characterized by the reliance on civilian authorities and institutions to maintain social order, which allows people to engage in low-risk roles within both the public and private sphere. In these contexts, communities can uphold everyday norms and practices, contributing to continuity and predictability in civilian life. Such predictability supports stable civilian-rebel relations as well as resilience against deeper involvement. In contrast, in militarized enclaves, civilians are placed in the heart of the insurgency, expected to provide high-risk logistical and social support under the direct purview of centralized command. Adapting to militarized governance draws noncombatants into turbulence as they continuously engage in power struggles to negotiate their position, protection, and possibilities to survive or even thrive. While doing so, they get caught up in the unpredictability of a system where individuals' options for agency are intertwined with the fluctuating military needs of the group. In sum, it is civilians' proximity to military power that shapes their cooperation patterns. Understanding these patterns, which define civilian experiences in war zones, thus shifts away from the politically charged assumptions of collusion to instead focus on constraints for civilian – and armed group – survival.

Current scholarly approaches to explaining civilian cooperation

Academic research on civilian cooperation typically falls into two camps: examining the process from either the civilian perspective or from the rebel side. Regarding the former, scholars have examined the conditions and motivations behind support for armed groups, identifying multiple and interacting factors such as group identification (Gould 1995; M. C. Horowitz 2010; Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013; Shesterinina 2021; Wickham-Crowley 1987), emotional motivations (Balcells 2017; Petersen 2001; E. J. Wood 2003), and security considerations (Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas and Kocher 2009). The primary focus of their research is on understanding the factors that drive individuals and groups to mobilize towards or away from joining an armed group. However, this focus often overlooks the participation patterns that emerge after voluntary or forced association with such groups. In this context, although some scholars attempt to differentiate between levels of noncombat support (Arjona 2017; Petersen 2001; Wickham-Crowley 1987; E. J. Wood 2003), much of the academic and public discourse still perpetuates a binary image of civilian cooperation as either coerced obedience or voluntary support, thereby neglecting the complex and less extreme forms of engagement. The former is reflected in human rights advocates' portrayal of civilians – often reduced to women and children – as victims (R. C. Carpenter 2006), whereas the latter in counter-insurgency frameworks that emphasize the need to “win the hearts and minds” of the local population (Duyvesteyn 2011). Complementing the scholarship on civilian agency, a burgeoning body of research studies the various manifestations and conditions of collective resistance (Arjona 2015; Avant et al. 2019; Hallward, Masullo, and Mouly 2017; O. Kaplan 2017; Masullo 2021). However, cooperative patterns that transcend many of these categories and exhibit variation in the strength of ties that civilians develop with militant organizations, as my materials suggest, have not yet been explained.

Scholars focusing on the armed group perspective have investigated how rebels incentivize cooperation, either by employing different patterns of violence to enforce obedience (Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007; R. M. Wood 2010) or by providing public services and goods to garner popular support (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015; Kasfir 2005; Mampilly 2011). The fast-growing field of rebel governance has uncovered substantial variation in how rebels regulate the social, economic, and political lives of populations under their control. Research has demonstrated that armed groups differ in terms of the political institutions they establish (Cunningham and Loyle 2021; Furlan 2020a; Mampilly and Stewart 2021), the public

services they offer (Huang and Sullivan 2021; Mampilly 2011; Stewart 2018), and the dispute resolution mechanisms they implement (Ginsburg 2019; Loyle 2021; Sivakumaran 2009), among other aspects. The strong emphasis on rebel behavior has been counterbalanced by studies on governance variation *within* an armed group's territory (Arjona 2015, 2016; van Baalen 2021; Breslawski 2021; M. A. Rubin 2020), to which this project adds. These scholars have looked at combatant-civilian relations, highlighting the influence of communities' institutional capacity in influencing rebel orders, but leaving the impact of these orders on variation in civilian cooperation largely unexplored.

A separate body of work examines rebel governance not in terms of civilian administration but in terms of military structures to generate cooperation among the rank and file. The literature on wartime socialization engages with militarized institutions, practices, and norms that create allegiance (Gates 2017; Haer and Banholzer 2015; Vermeij 2014), violence (D. K. Cohen 2017; Marks 2013a; E. J. Wood 2008; E. J. Wood and Toppelberg 2017), and restraint (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Hoover Green 2018; Oppenheim and Weintraub 2017). As such, it takes as its starting point that the social environment not only provides incentives to behave in a certain way, but it might also reshape identities and interests (Checkel 2017). However, it primarily focuses on combatant socialization whereas research on civilian socialization is still scarce. Exploring internal military dynamics through a gendered lens, feminist research has highlighted not only women's noncombat and combat contributions, but also their tactical agency, which is sidelined in institutionalist perspectives. Gendered literature has provided rich qualitative accounts of women's participation in and navigation of rebellions (Coulter 2009; Marks 2014; Utas 2005; J. Viterna 2013). By foregrounding their voices and experiences, it reveals that, as Utas (2005, 426) put it in the context of Liberia's civil war, "agency of these women is not a matter of 'have, nor have not,' but rather represents a range of realizable possibilities that are informed by specific social contexts as well as larger economic and political contingencies". Nonetheless, our understanding of male and female role differentiation in noncombat labor remains limited, as is our knowledge of how these roles connect to individuals' maneuvering in both military and civilian spheres. Insights into these issues could shed light on how socio-organizational dynamics influence civilian engagement over time. Given these gaps in current scholarship, this project focuses on identifying and understanding the ways in which civilians are part of the rebel infrastructure, both near and far from the insurgency's center of power.

Contributions & relevance

Integrating and contributing to these diverse scholarly perspectives, this dissertation seeks to explain variation in civilian cooperation by examining how individual behavior is shaped and constrained by the roles and relations within the armed group. In line with the rebel governance literature, it emphasizes the importance of institutions in structuring daily life, but it challenges common ideas about how rebels and civilians interact and what it is like to be a civilian in a warzone.

First, this research challenges the traditional assumption that low levels of control are associated with chaos, disorder, and violence, as suggested in foundational political theories (Hobbes 1651; Locke 1689; Rousseau 1762). It reveals that regions neglected by insurgents, which are governed by civilian structures, can exhibit unexpected stability. Conversely, total control of hyper-militarized settings creates, counterintuitively, an unpredictable and volatile environment for noncombatants. The key factor influencing whether chaos or order prevails is not the absence or presence of rebels per se, but the type of the governing actors and the tools they use to exert social control. Taking into account systematic differences in both rebel rule and civilian experiences thus shows how the micro-dynamics of cooperation are shaped by the overarching strategic and operational dimensions of insurgent war-making. Further, it calls into question the generalizability of assumptions about the roots of order and disorder in rebel-territories.

Second, I analyze control as a social relationship between civilians and the organization that is defined by the group's pursued objectives in a specific area. This is different from thinking of control as a territorial status or bureaucratic capacity. It views insurgents as not only trying to make populations part of their state-building process, but also part of their armed struggle. This dissertation thereby moves the rebel governance debate beyond the civilian and into the military realm and, consequently, redirects attention away from bureaucratic administration and towards the process and effects of militarization. Doing so approaches armed groups more holistically, recognizing that they govern and rely on civilians for both political *and* military survival. Examining governance of military and civilian affairs together promises to provide a more comprehensive view of noncombatants' contributions and experiences and, ultimately, of the politics, functioning, and resilience of militant organizations.

Third, I explore how people navigate the opportunities and pitfalls of living in rebel territory. Investigating how they address the constraints they face, from how to feed their families to how to avoid being sent to the frontline, aims to counter “an analytical preference for the rebel rulers’, rather than civilian perspectives” (Pfeifer and Schwab 2023, 3). Doing so advances scholarly debates on the interaction between civilian agency and rebel governance beyond the effect of public services and violence. By painting a picture of different civilian realities in conflict zones, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how individuals relate to a rebel movement over time and across space. This more nuanced understanding steers away from the idea that motives to cooperate with rebels are static and directly linked to people’s levels of engagement. Instead, it highlights behavior and attitudes as shifting and influenced by various factors. This research thus shows that civilians’ integration into the rebel system is not only a relevant outcome, but also the result of contested, difficult, and dynamic processes.

But why does the study of civilian cooperation matter in the first place? Despite its significance, back-end military support continues to receive little scholarly attention. As Loken (2022, 140) recently noted, “[t]here is a relative dearth of comparative or systematic research about noncombat roles”. This is surprising, considering that noncombat support has been shown to be vital for developing and maintaining the critical infrastructure that sustains insurgencies. As Parkinson put it, “[w]ithout a logistical and support apparatus, organized armed rebellion reduces to violent protest” (2013, 418). Owing to its importance for armed group operations, rebels rely on a large number of people to provide noncombat labor. For example, based on captured documents from the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, about 18 percent of registered male members were assigned to governance roles (Milton 2021, 4). Along with their spouses and children, whose involvement often goes unreported, they are estimated to have comprised over 200,000 individuals, not to mention civilians who were not on the insurgents’ payroll but resided in the territory as large as the United Kingdom (Milton 2021, 4). This gives a glimpse into the phenomenon’s magnitude and shows that it affects people across gender and age, although women are more likely to fill support rather than combat roles in groups with female participants (Loken 2022; Marks 2017; J. Viterna 2013).³ A combat-centric conception of armed groups as well as a constituent-centered view of

³ Thomas and Bond (2015) found that 45 percent of non-state armed groups in Africa between 1950 and 2011 included women, especially large groups that adopted a gender-inclusive ideology, terrorist tactics, and forced recruitment.

civilians hence fails to account for the engagement of thousands of conflict actors. Enhancing our knowledge about their varied roles and experiences is therefore pivotal for theories of armed conflict, especially regarding militant organizations' internal dynamics, capacity, and resilience. And so is it for understanding the actual experiences of conflict zones and the populations affected by insurgent mobilization.

By investigating these questions in the case of Boko Haram, this study aims to provide a context-specific empirical contribution that is significant in its own right, while also holding broader relevance. Much has been written about Boko Haram as one of the most violent terrorist groups in recent history (Institute for Economics & Peace 2022). It has caused 350,000 deaths (UNDP 2021a), an acute humanitarian crisis, and the displacement of 2.7 million people throughout Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad (Nigeria Security Tracker 2022). Still, we know little about the group's governance and civilian roles therein. While civilian perspectives have been mostly documented in terms of the violence they faced (Amnesty International 2015a, 2020b, 2020a; Human Rights Watch 2014), relatively few scholars have examined Boko Haram's governance practices (Hassan 2022; Ladbury et al. 2016; O. S. Mahmood and Ani 2018a; Pieri and Zenn 2018). Those who did tend to agree that "there is no evidence indicating that any form of administration or governance is being implemented in this 'Islamic state'" (Comolli 2015, 161).⁴ This raises the question of how Boko Haram has managed to remain a viable threat for more than a decade, rendering a closer examination of rebel-civilian relations valuable. This is particularly the case given that "there is still a dearth of literature on the actual everyday lived experiences of those who are active participants in Boko Haram" (Pieri and Zenn 2018, 647).

Further, Boko Haram's insurgency echoes broader trends of conflicts becoming increasingly complex, transnational, and protracted (von Einsiedel et al. 2017) as well as fought by Islamic extremist groups (Håvard and Håvard 2021; Institute for Economics & Peace 2023). In fact, more

Henshaw (2016) found in a cross-national sample of rebel groups since 1990 that close to 60 percent had female participants. This, however, does not tell us about the gendered distribution of noncombat labor across armed groups. While females' contributions have received dedicated attention (Henshaw 2017; Loken 2022; Mason 2002; J. Viterna 2013), it should be noted that logistics and support apparatuses are gender-mixed. Armed groups also abduct and use men for manual labor, such as for carrying equipment, domestic work, in agriculture, or in extractive industries (UNODC 2018). Moreover, about 85 percent of children recruited and used by armed groups are boys who tend to provide military support until they are considered ready to join the fighting cadre (UNICEF 2020).

⁴ Pieri & Zenn (2018) offer a different angle by analyzing foot soldiers' interactions with civilians.

jihadi proto-states have been created between 2011 and 2016 than in the preceding 20 years (Lia 2015, 81). Africa has experienced a particularly drastic increase in Salafi-jihadist organizations, violence, and territorial contestation over the last two decades (Faleg and Mustasilta 2021).⁵ This has sparked debate about whether the continent will be the new frontier of global jihad (Bacon and Warner 2021; Clarke and Zenn 2021; Hansen 2022; Raineri 2022), with the IS calling its supporters to migrate to Africa (Dahiru 2022). To assess the current and potential future impact of Islamic extremist organizations trying to build Caliphates in Africa and elsewhere, it is crucial to understand what kind of relations they forge with communities. None of this is to say that these groups operate fundamentally differently than other insurgencies. I agree with Kalyvas (2018, 36) who argues that jihadi groups “can be profitably approached as the current species of revolutionary insurgents”, which is why I draw on insights from research on terrorism, civil war, and rebel governance and make comparisons to other insurgencies throughout. Nevertheless, ideologies shape insurgent institutions and governance strategies (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Mampilly 2011; Suykens 2015), which is why jihadists should also not be exceptionalized through exclusion.⁶ This is especially the case given that the public discourse about Islamic extremist groups generally, and Boko Haram in particular, has reinvigorated inaccurate, simplistic, and gender-stereotypical depictions of rebel violence and civilian victimization. Contextualized and nuanced analyses of civilian experiences may correct such portrayals and help us understand how conflict involvement is grounded and negotiated in local realities.

Data and design

This fieldwork-driven research on Boko Haram’s insurgency is primarily based on original interview data gathered during my eleven-month stay in Nigeria. Following a 2018 pilot study, the main data collection occurred in 2019 and 2020. I carried out 119 semi-structured, in-depth

⁵ According to data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP), there were 25 state-based armed conflicts in Africa in 2019 – the highest number recorded since 1946 – of which nine were fought by groups associated with the Islamic State (and accounting for 56 percent of violence against civilians in Africa in that year) while fights against al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama’ a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) took place in Burkina Faso and Mali, and against al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia. Together, 10 out of 18 conflict-affected countries confronted a militant Islamist organization. In contrast, in 2010, there were only 10 state-based armed conflicts with only two countries (Algeria and Somalia) facing Salafi-jihadist insurgencies (Pettersson and Öberg 2020).

⁶ Islamic extremist groups have long been bracketed from the study of rebel governance, which recently started to change (Anzalone forthcoming; Bamber and Svensson 2022; Honig and Yahel 2019; Lia 2015; Revkin 2020; Revkin and Ahram 2020; Svensson and Finnbogason 2021).

interviews in Abuja and Maiduguri, predominantly in IDP settlements with individuals who had lived under Boko Haram's control in various villages, towns, and forest camps, or who had fled insurgent attacks. These informants of diverse backgrounds had assumed noncombat and occasionally combat roles, holding positions across formal and informal group hierarchies. Given the methodological challenges of researching in a conflict zone, informants were purposively selected from a snowball sample. I also conducted focus group discussions (seven discussions with 47 participants across them) with conflict-affected community members. My research was further informed by expert interviews with journalists, policymakers, military personnel, researchers, security officers, and representatives of humanitarian and development organizations. I complemented and triangulated accounts with academic literature, news sources, and other secondary materials.

An iterative process of moving between theory and data led to the development of the proposed theoretical framework. By tracing individuals' and communities' engagement with Boko Haram over time and space, I identified and compared distinct cooperation patterns and used the fine-grained data to inductively uncover explanatory mechanisms. The analysis links micro-level experiences of cooperation and individuals' articulations and interpretations thereof to meso-level organizational dynamics and conflict realities. Throughout this work, I tried my best to be truthful to the horrors of war and violence without sensationalizing them, to the everydayness of life in rebel territory without trivializing the turmoil of insurgent action, and to individual agency without downplaying the constraints that shaped it. In doing so, I hope to have honored my informants' stories.

Outline

The structure of this dissertation is as follows. In Chapter 2, I present current conceptualizations of civilian cooperation and review the civil war scholarship that has provided significant empirical and theoretical insights on this subject. While building on these advances, I aim to bridge the underlying binaries – such as civilian agency versus rebel structures, cooperation versus resistance, and coercion versus commitment – in the theoretical framework I propose. I present a continuum of cooperation patterns, extending from stability to turbulence, which reflect whether individuals maintain consistent ties to the organization, or if they have volatile relationships at varying levels of engagement from low to high. As explanatory mechanisms, I introduce (1) the mode of

governance with corresponding levels of social control, and (2) civilian adaptation. At the end of the chapter, I outline the study's assumptions and scope conditions.

In Chapter 3, I present and reflect on the methodology of this project. I describe the ups and downs of the research process from the selection of the case, design, research sites, and informants to data collection and analysis. Here, I discuss the opportunities as well as the practical and ethical challenges of conducting qualitative research in complex settings, with people who have been affected by an insurgency, and on sensitive issues of violence and conflict involvement. I particularly focus on issues of trust, veracity, and protection.

In Chapter 4, I turn to the conflict's history. I summarize current scholarship on Boko Haram that focuses on the sect's emergence and trajectory. I then explore its engagement with civilians over time and space, demonstrating how it moved in and out of territorial and social spaces – namely through infiltration of communities, territorial control, and opportunistic presence – to adapt to the contingencies of the conflict and strategic needs of the insurgency.

Chapter 5 analyzes the emergence and manifestations of stable cooperation. It contends that Boko Haram's civilianized governance laid the basis for individuals' peripheral association. Presenting evidence from rural villages, it shows that lowest levels of social control resulted in neglect of communities, thereby challenging the assumption that rebels govern whenever they control territory. I illustrate the institutional aspects of low interference in civilian affairs and how it was perceived and managed by communities. The analysis reveals that people performed basic chores and logistical support with limited opportunities for social mobility and access to resources. However, despite deprivation, not having an active, persistent presence of military personnel allowed for continuity and the ability to uphold community practices and norms, which fostered a stabilizing sense of normalcy and resilience. The chapter then proceeds to hybrid forms of governance, as seen in occupied civil-military towns such as Gwoza. It demonstrates that the contestation of civilian life by military actors, who were stationed or passed through the transit hub, created instability for the population in urban spaces where civilian and military authorities overlapped.

In Chapter 6, I delve into the structural foundations of turbulence. The chapter focuses on how the militants sought to intertwine civilians with the armed struggle in all aspects of life, laying the

groundwork for high-risk participation. Drawing on data from Boko Haram's stronghold in Sambisa Forest, I scaffold the social and organizational landscape of militarized civilian governance designed to integrate recruits into the war machinery. I propose a categorization of civilian roles and relations that reflects the diversity in labor distribution and status within the rebel system. Next, I turn to the militarization of the private sphere and show how Boko Haram harnessed the reciprocal nature of social institutions, such as marriage, family, and community, to establish accountability mechanisms at the household level. Lastly, I discuss the use of religion and rules to align beliefs and behavior with group objectives.

Chapter 7 features selected informants' voices and their trajectories to illustrate how they navigated, interpreted, and participated in the militarized system. By exploring their narratives of empowerment and victimization, of rise and fall in the hierarchy, and of rewards and punishments, it becomes evident how adaptation – and resistance – led civilians into turbulent cooperation. The chapter pays particular attention to the roots and effects of unpredictability and discontinuities. Ultimately, it shows that embeddedness, rather than being a reflection of commitment to the cause, can emerge from a contested and dynamic process, influenced by the use and abuse of relationships by both combatants and civilians. To facilitate comparison, I follow a similar structure in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, exploring civilian roles and positions in the hierarchy, private relationships, rebel laws, religion, and forms of resistance and resilience. In each one, I hone in on specific mechanisms and dynamics.

In Chapter 8, I conclude by summarizing the key findings and how they advance our scholarly understanding of what differentiates and drives civilian cooperation. I reflect on key emerging themes, namely rebel control and order, civilian rebels, and armed group constraints. I suggest how the findings may inform policy interventions, especially counterinsurgency and rehabilitation and reintegration measures. I recognize limitations and remaining questions, which suggest avenues for further research.

2

EXPLAINING PATTERNS OF CIVILIAN COOPERATION IN REBEL TERRITORIES

Despite a focus on combatants in the civil war literature, civilians' influence on conflict dynamics has received substantial attention over the last two decades. As noted in the introduction, different bodies of scholarship have emerged analyzing the role of civilians as rebels' targets of violence (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007), supporters (Petersen 2001; E. J. Wood 2003), constituents (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015; Mampilly 2011), and opponents (Avant et al. 2019; Masullo 2021). They all offer compelling explanations for why people choose to comply, join, endorse, or resist armed groups. The messy reality, however, is that people do not necessarily fall into just one category, nor do they gravitate towards extremes, but rather hover somewhere in the space in-between. Still, as they do so, some people develop close and others only tangential ties to insurgents. Extant theories struggle to explain such variation in civilian cooperation.

Part of the problem is conceptual. First, terms such as cooperation, support, collaboration, participation, and collusion are often used interchangeably in the literature, sometimes describing the same and other times different things. Scholars have developed various conceptualizations and typologies. Wickham-Crowley (1987) arranges civilian support from minor to major. Petersen (2001) categorizes positions in either the regime or guerilla forces during rebellion on a spectrum from neutrality to joining the armed group. Barter (2012) uses the term support and Kalyvas (2006, 104) collaboration, which at the minimum is nonbetrayal, but can also be active and exclusive. For Arjona (2017), cooperation entails obedience, spontaneous support, and enlistment.⁷ Such

⁷ For a more comprehensive overview and criticism of the conceptual landscape, see Arjona (2017).

conceptual ambiguity makes it difficult to compare findings within and across contexts. Second, actions and motives tend to be conflated. Obedience and compliance are associated with coercion whereas support, collaboration, and collusion carry the notion that people act voluntarily. However, there is no consensus. Barter (2012, 558) prefers “the neutral term ‘support’, which does not imply whether goods are forced or given freely” whereas Arjona (2017, 762) describes spontaneous support as “volunteering to do specific tasks that favor the armed group short of joining, without the latter having given the civilian, either explicitly or implicitly, the order to do so”. Third, noncooperation and migration tend to be studied in isolation from cooperation, assuming that they are mutually exclusive. Migration has also been referred to as displacement (Arnon, McAlexander, and Rubin 2023; Steele 2009), exit (Barter 2012), or leaving (Masullo 2021). Noncooperation can range from violent to non-violent behavior, individual to collective action, and vary in the extent to which it confronts the armed group (Masullo 2021).⁸ Yet, forms of noncooperation and displacement can feature alongside and in relation to cooperation, which links to a final point. Existing typologies have been developed for civilians in conflict zones, but not specifically for those in rebel-held areas. Migration might come down to escape in captured territories that turns it into a life-or-death decision and into a form of noncooperation. For example, in IS-controlled Mosul, migration policies became ever more restrictive until a travel ban was introduced that prevented people from leaving, including those who were opposed to the group’s governance and ideology (Revkin 2021). This goes against the often held assumption that only supporters stay (Adhikari 2013, 86–87; Steele 2009, 426). Likewise, joining an armed group loses its meaning when abducted to a rebel camp. These examples by no means render current typologies invaluable. But they need to be taken with a grain of salt in contexts of rebel rule where the scope of decision-making is constrained, depriving some of the more fine-grained categories of their essence and, thus, the theories building on them of their explanatory power.

This chapter aims to bridge some of these gaps. In the first part, I review civil war scholarship along main binaries that underpin current differentiations and explanations of civilian behavior,

⁸ To only mention a few conceptualizations, Kalyvas (2006, 104) refers to noncooperation as “defection” and categorizes it into noncompliance, informing, and switching sides while Barter (2012, 556), based on Hirschman (1970), differentiates “voice” into defiance, everyday resistance, and engagement. Arjona (2017, 761–62) divides noncooperation into disobedience, resistance, and defection whereas Masullo (2021, 902) covers it on a spectrum from opaque to pacted to armed.

indicating how I divert from, draw on, and add to them. Specifically, I outline approaches that focus on rebels' treatment of the population as constituents or targets of violence in contrast to strands of literature that engage with civilian agency, either in the form of support or resistance against an armed group. I point to overlooked aspects, especially regarding civilian cooperation inside the military apparatus, that may shed light on why existing theories fail to conclusively explain my empirical findings. The second part lays out the theoretical framework, starting by introducing patterns of cooperation as a continuum from stability to turbulence, followed by an exploration of the explanatory mechanisms that emphasizes the strategic, organizational, and social contexts of rebel-civilian interactions. Lastly, I conclude by discussing the primary assumptions and scope conditions of this study, in particular addressing armed group decision-making, the impact of other conflict actors, and the unobserved case of extensive civilianization, which lies beyond the framework's scope.

Approaches to Explaining Civilian-Rebel Relations

Rebel rule: civilians as constituents vs victims

The crucial role of civilians in rebellion has long been recognized, causing rebel leaders (Cabral 1966; Guevara 1969; Mao Zedong 1961) and scholars (C. A. Johnson 1962; Popkin 1979; Wickham-Crowley 1987) to think about how armed groups relate to the population. The conundrum revolves around the question of how much or little violence is needed for rebels to get what they want. Put differently, do rebels turn civilians into constituents who provide support based on political voluntarism or make them victims who comply based on coercion? Current explanations focus predominantly on rebel governance and territorial control as central determinants for how rebels exert power and touch on civilian life.

Schlichte (2009) asserts that insurgents must negotiate the contradictions between their coercive force and desired legitimacy to overcome “the shadow of violence”. Differences in rebel governance, defined as “the set of actions insurgents engage in to regulate the social, political, and economic life of non-combatants during war” (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015, 3), illustrate different approaches to these contradictions. Mampilly (2011) demonstrates in the case of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka that armed groups establish mechanisms of justice, order, and security; provide education and health services in their territory; and allow

noncombatants to participate in the decision-making process. Others rely more on unilateral directives, intimidation, and coercion, which might not be a group's preference but the result of a failed attempt to establish civilian administration, as seen with the RCD-Goma in the DRC where leaders lacked a sufficient understanding of the political landscape to build a functioning governing system (Mampilly 2011). Scholars have identified wide variation in *how* rebels govern, including in their provisioning of public goods and services from security to health care to education (Arjona 2016; Mampilly 2011; Stewart 2018), their establishment of political institutions (Furlan 2020b; Mampilly and Stewart 2021), and their dispute resolution mechanisms (Ginsburg 2019; Ledwidge 2017; Loyle 2021; March and Revkin 2015; Sivakumaran 2009). Others have investigated *why* groups differ in the way they govern. They have explored the impact of armed groups' ideology (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Kalyvas 2015a; Suykens 2015), political objectives (Jo 2015; Mampilly 2011; Stewart 2021), resources (Carnegie et al. 2022b; Huang 2016b; Reno 2015; Weinstein 2007), and interactions with state actors (van Baalen and Terpstra 2023; Huang 2016a; Sienknecht 2021; Terpstra 2020). Consequently, this strand of literature has shown that rebels are not only destructive and violent organizations, but also constructive actors who establish order and institutions to gain popular support.

While more theoretical and empirical progress has been made on identifying and explaining differences in rebel governance *across* armed groups, scholars have also found variation *within* territories controlled by the same group, such as by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in Liberia (Lidow 2016), the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in South Sudan (Rolandsen 2005), the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador (E. J. Wood 2003), or the New People's Army (CPP-NPA) in the Philippines (M. A. Rubin 2020). Also the Taliban exhibited different behavior toward the local population within and across regions in Afghanistan (M. A. Rubin 2002; Sinno 2008). One of the main explanations for in-group variation are levels of territorial control.⁹ When talking about control in the context of asymmetric warfare, one usually refers to territorial control that, as a key variable, affects armed groups' conduct in many ways (de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2012). It gives power over people who fire weapons, prepare food, share information, and, ideally, goals. It has not only been linked to

⁹ Another identified factor is civilian capacity (Arjona 2016; van Baalen 2021; Breslawski 2021; M. A. Rubin 2020), which will be discussed in the next section.

conflict intensity and duration (Buhaug, Gates, and Lujala 2009) and tactical choices of terrorist or guerrilla warfare (Anders 2020; de la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca 2015), but also to rebel-civilian relations (Arjona 2016; Mampilly 2011; Metelits 2010; Stewart 2018; Stewart and Liou 2017). Territorial contestation has been associated with more coercive and violent practices across empirical contexts (Kalyvas 2006, 2015b; Kalyvas and Kocher 2009; Kasfir 2005; Quinn 2015). According to Kalyvas (2006, 111; 210), the higher the level of control, defined as “the extent to which actors are able to establish exclusive rule on a territory” and “measured empirically, using various indicators such as the level of, presence of, and access enjoyed by political actors”, the higher the rate of civilian collaboration. Arjona (2016) theorizes that territorial control is a determinant of the emergence of different wartime social orders. In contrast to the importance of information availability in Kalyvas’ (2006) control-collaboration model, she argues that it matters for governance because it shapes rebels’ time horizons. Armed groups with short time horizons cause disorder because they do not establish a social contract with communities. Those with long time horizons prefer to implement a governance system that restructures public and private life (*rebelocracy*). Where pre-existing local institutions are effective and legitimate, however, they are unable to do so and have to settle for minimal interventions (*aliocracy*). Territorial control, as a main goal of insurgencies and scope condition for rebel governance, thus shapes whether rebels politicize or victimize civilians.

While my research builds on scholarship on sub-national variation in rebel regimes, it deviates from certain assumptions about the use and nature of control. First, territorial control and governance may not always go together. Some scholars have already relaxed territorial control as a pre-condition of governance (Cunningham and Loyle 2021; Loyle et al. 2021; Uribe 2017; Waterman 2023). They have demonstrated that rebels even engage in forms of governance in territory they do not control, such as with regard to the use of mobile People’s Courts outside of areas seized by Maoists in Nepal (Loyle 2021), or the impromptu overseeing and provisioning of humanitarian aid by armed groups in Libyan towns in response to anti-Qaddafi protests in 2011 (Lacher 2020, 19–21) and in many places in response to COVID-19 (Sieff, George, and Fahim 2020). It can also go the other way, which has received less attention. Actors can have exclusive access but choose to be absent. Governance is not the default. Huang (2016b) found that only about one-third of rebel groups provide any form of social services in the first place while Albert’s (2022) analysis suggests that 64 percent of rebel groups between 1945 and 2012 created at least one

governing institution, not to mention variation within their territories. When rebels who have territorial control can be absent and refrain from governing or be highly present and establish sophisticated institutions, this indicates that the territorial status alone tells us little about rebels' actual use of control. Rather than interpreting non-governance as a failure to achieve state-like governance, Breslawski (2021) argues that rebels seek to maximize the utility of controlled territory. The costs of governance can therefore make non-interference the preferred choice. While Breslawski links utility considerations to whether rebels' constituency resides in an area, other factors might shape objectives and strategies in local territories, such as the strategic military value, as I will argue.

Secondly and relatedly, looking at violence and civilian administration as core routes through which control is exerted provides an incomplete view of power relations. Much of the literature conceptualizes governance in rather technical and bureaucratic terms, equating it with the existence of state-like institutions. As stated by Pfeifer and Schwab (2023, 4), "rebel governance is often analysed within a rationalist, functionalist, and instrumentalist framework" and is "seen as an instrument to manage civilians which is less costly than other strategies, such as coercion, under certain conditions". This brackets many of the social processes of civil war, understood as "the transformation of social actors, structures, norms, and practices at the local level – that sometimes leave profound social changes in their wake" (E. J. Wood 2008, 540). How we conceptualize control matters because it informs our expectations of civilian behavior, which tends to be modelled on game theoretical frameworks. Accordingly, individuals respond to incentive structures in which either the avoidance of punishment or the access to food, medical assistance, education, or political representation outweigh the costs of cooperation. Clearly, extensive service provisioning is more likely to elicit voluntary support than coercion, but what explains more nuanced differences in civilian cooperation, or stability and turbulence for that matter? Giving analytical priority to governance structures comes at the expense of paying attention to civilian agency. Although the theories revolve around the central role of civilians, they predominantly seek

to explain rebel behavior.¹⁰ I therefore turn now to scholarship that complements the rebel governance literature by exploring the civilian side.

Civilian agency as support vs resistance

Civilian reactions to the presence of armed actors have primarily been examined in terms of support and resistance. Scholarship on mobilization has demonstrated that individuals and groups may support rebels because of low opportunity costs (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Dube and Vargas 2013; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Mkandawire 2002), inequality along ethnic, identity, and socio-economic categories (Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011; Gurr 1970; Østby 2008; Sambanis 2001; Wucherpfennig et al. 2012), and security considerations (Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas and Kocher 2007). Some have highlighted social dimensions, such as identification with and organizational ties to a group (Gould 1995; D. L. Horowitz 1985; Sarbahi 2014; Staniland 2012; Wickham-Crowley 1992). Others have emphasized the role of moral and emotional motivations (Balcells 2017; McDoom 2012; Petersen 2001; E. J. Wood 2003), including the fight for sacred values (Gómez et al. 2017), or the quest for significance (Kruglanski et al. 2013, 2014). For example, Petersen (2001) shows that resentment and risk acceptance, which themselves are shaped by community dynamics, prompt people to move along a spectrum from neutrality to membership in a guerilla organization.¹¹ Different factors are thus not mutually exclusive. Multiple, interacting causes create pathways to support for and participation in collective violence. Viterna's (2006) microlevel analysis illustrates this point particularly well by revealing how varied patterns of women's biographies, social networks, and situational contexts ultimately led to the same outcome of high-risk mobilization and activism in the FMLN in El Salvador. These studies predominantly seek to explain voluntarism to take up arms, or consider noncombat support as a step in that direction, but are also relevant for understanding why civilians may decide to cooperate with militants. However, these studies fall short in explaining why individuals engage in different forms of cooperation and noncooperation at the same time or why

¹⁰ As noted by Breslawski (2021: 457), "Despite the fact that characteristics of civilians feature prominently in the theory, civilians themselves are not assumed to be strategic actors".

¹¹ This resonates with later work by Fuji (2011), McDoom (2012), Shesterinina (2016), and Tezcür (2016) on the social dynamics of threat perception and their effects on mobilization.

they may change over time, given that neither preferences, attitudes, and beliefs nor conflict dynamics are static.

On the other end of the spectrum, a growing body of research explores civilian agency in the form of noncooperation. It provides an important counternarrative to portrayals of civilians as passive victims and to cooperation as the only behavioral choice. The field of inquiry has not only expanded substantively, but also methodologically by adding more microlevel data capturing how resistance affects subnational conflict dynamics.¹² Scholars have identified various resistance strategies against armed groups, from early warning mechanisms and public protesting to negotiations and armed self-defense, and factors that influence community resilience. These findings highlight the importance of community characteristics, including leadership (J. Krause 2018; Zürcher 2019) and institutional capacity (O. Kaplan 2017; Masullo 2021) in shaping successful resistance efforts. At the direct intersection of noncooperation and rebel governance, others found that institutional capacity conditions how and where communities are governed by rebels (Arjona 2016; van Baalen 2021; Breslawski 2021; M. A. Rubin 2020). Community capacity derives from the ability to mobilize support – or resistance – based on social cohesion (Breslawski 2021), kinship ties (M. A. Rubin 2020), or clientelist networks (van Baalen 2021), which increases communities bargaining power and can make rebels more responsive to their preferences.¹³ Turning the line of causality around, some studies have investigated the impact of rebel governance on civil resistance as the dependent variable. In their comparative study of jihadist proto-states in Mali, Iraq, and Yemen, Svensson and Finnbogason (2021) found that civil resistance is more likely when a group's rule is perceived as alien and when social structures can mobilize resistance. Similarly, Bamber and Svensson (2022) discovered that the governance structures of the three main Salafi-jihadi rebel groups in Syria provided varying opportunities for protest mobilization, with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTM) creating the greatest need and opportunity for resistance.

¹² It has been studied in the form of individual everyday resistance (Scott 1985) and self-protection (Baines and Paddon 2012; Jose and Medie 2015; Mégret 2009), as disguised collective action (Fu 2017), civil action (Avant et al. 2019), civilian autonomy (Dorff 2015; O. Kaplan 2017), resilience (A. C. Carpenter 2012; J. Krause 2018), zones of peace (Hancock and Mitchell 2007), civilian noncooperation (Arjona 2017; Masullo 2021), resistance (Arjona 2015; Dorff 2019; Mouly and Hernández Delgado 2019), and as mobilization of vigilantes and militias (Bateson 2021; Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger 2015; Schubiger 2021).

¹³ This applies unless the community is not part of an organization's constituency (Breslawski 2021), rebels have short time horizons (Arjona 2016), or government service provision is so high that rebels refrain from controlling the community all together (M. A. Rubin 2020).

The focus on collective action that these studies have in common leaves room for further exploration of individual resistance under rebel rule à la Scott's (1985) "Weapons of the Weak", and for the interplay between resistance and cooperation in such settings.

The outlined literature has made significant strides in uncovering variation in civilian responses to armed actors in conflict zones. However, it also conveys a notion of civilian opportunity – for individual support or collective resistance – that may not match the realities faced by civilians who find themselves living under rebel rule. Specifically, it has not been thoroughly explored how agency is exercised and molded in highly constrained contexts. Our understanding therefore remains limited in terms of how individuals handle and adapt to pressures and incentives to provide assistance. Literature on wartime socialization (Checkel 2017; Hoover Green 2016; E. J. Wood 2008) as well as feminist ethnographic research on conflict participation (Coulter 2009; Marks 2014; Utas 2005) may provide valuable insights in this regard. Turning to these bodies of work will not only further the discussion on tactical agency, but also opens an avenue into unpacking the socio-organizational dynamics of militarism that shape constraints in rebel-held territories. These dynamics have been largely sidelined in the current scholarship on rebel governance although the overlaps between civilian administration and the military organization "are often dense and integral for analysis" (Mampilly 2011, 4).

Civilian cooperation inside rebellion

Despite their physical presence inside rebel territory, current scholarship frequently depicts civilians as organizationally external to insurgent forces. However, support often extends beyond occasional handouts of food, information, and taxes. Mechanics, midwives, and IT specialists, who, respectively, service armored vehicles, help deliver a new generation of fighters, and encrypt online communication are essential for keeping militant operations viable. In addition to operational roles, civilians and combatants often share private ties as neighbors, spouses, parents, or confidants, which further blurs the line between insiders and outsiders. In her study on the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and other militant groups in 1980s Lebanon, Parkinson (2013) demonstrates that social and logistical support apparatuses sustained these organizations. She also shows how the overlap between formal militant hierarchies and quotidian social networks, including kinship, family, and community relationships, shaped civilian mobilization and participation trajectories. Furthermore, we know by now that women's material, logistical, social,

and sexual labor was integral to sustaining insurgent warfare in RUF rebel camps over years (Denov and Gervais 2007; MacKenzie 2012; McKay and Mazurana 2004). Thus, civilians provide noncombat labor in the wider territory behind frontlines as well as inside the military core of a rebellion.

As scholars started to open the black box of rebellion, some adopted an organizational angle to theorize at the group level (Staniland 2012; Weinstein 2007) whereas others followed a micro-level approach to study the social production of violence (Baaz and Stern 2009; Verwimp, Justino, and Brück 2009; J. Viterna 2013; E. J. Wood 2003). At the intersection, sparked by the puzzling brutality of child soldiers in African civil wars, some revisited the interplay between social dynamics and military structures (Beber and Blattman 2013; Denov 2010; Gates and Reich 2010; Horgan et al. 2017; Vermeij 2014). Building on insights in military sociology to understand how armed groups create obedient and loyal combatants, there has been an effort to systematize the study of wartime socialization by differentiating between formal and informal armed group institutions (Checkel 2017; E. J. Wood 2008; E. J. Wood and Toppelberg 2017). This corresponds with top-down and horizontal relations used to explain military cohesion (King 2006; Shils and Janowitz 1948; Siebold 2007). Recruitment, military training, hierarchical structures, indoctrination, and disciplinary regimes have been found to be important formal institutions that transform new recruits into military personnel (Hoover Green 2016; Vermeij 2014; E. J. Wood 2008). Informal institutions are “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels” (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 727). These practices include rituals among members, hazing, and other peer-to-peer activities that can strengthen or undermine official group policies. Internalization as the “endpoint” of socialization (Dawson, Prewitt, and Dawson 1977, 9) assumes the fusion of individual and group identity that can lead to self-sacrificial pro-group behavior (Swann et al. 2010; Whitehouse 2018). Although the socialization of civilians has so far been left unexamined,¹⁴ it offers an inroad

¹⁴ A notable exception is Bateson’s work (2017) on civilian acceptance of extra-legal security patrolling in Guatemala. She points to the importance of analyzing wartime socialization of the civilian population for understanding its enduring impact on post-war behavior. Taking a comparative perspective, Hirschel-Burns (2021) addresses the question why some armed groups invest more in ideological education of civilians than others. He traces variation back to differences in combatant socialization, the value a group ascribes to education, and its reliance on civilian cooperation.

toward incorporating the social transformations of behavior and beliefs into the study of civilian cooperation.

However, socialization has a complicated relationship with agency. Already classical sociologists engaged with the question how individuals, groups, and societies interact with their environment. In fact, the work of scholars such as Bourdieu (1958, 1977) have their origins in understanding people's navigation of the deep social, economic, and political transformation of colonial domination and resistance in Algeria. By analyzing how agents adapt to their evolving sets of roles and relationships to operate in a social field, he shed light on how action is at once "structured" and "structuring" (1972). Bourdieu's and other sociologists' (Durkheim 1893; Merton 1949; Simmel 1903) views on how large-scale societal change interpermeates everyday life has paved the way for research on how people maneuver, subvert, and resist shifts in power relations. Even in armies, which are an exemplary case of a "total institution" (Goffman 1961), people do not simply transform into loyal combatants. They may engage in unordered violence (D. K. Cohen 2016; Hoover Green 2016; E. J. Wood 2018), shirk or resist orders (Cohen, 2016; Hoover Green, 2016; E. J. Wood, 2018), desert or mutiny (Dwyer 2018; Lyall 2014). Dynamics of agency are also evident in feminist scholarship on how girls and women navigate everyday life in a militant organization as "bush wives", mothers, and "girl soldiers" (Baines 2018; Coulter 2009; Marks 2014; Utas 2005). These studies reveal that tactical agency is influenced by the opportunities and perils of taking up arms and is further shaped by group norms, practices, and social categories such as gender, age, and status. Far from being homogenous or predetermined, women's wartime experiences differ depending on their ability to broker protection, authority, and resources – often through their relationships with men (Marks 2014). By defining the gendered contours of maneuvering the social and military domains inside insurgencies, this body of work underscores the frictions and synergies of social institutions and individual action for both men and women, which heavily informs this study methodologically, conceptually, and empirically.

What further complicates the structure-agency relationship is that war zones are inherently dynamic and volatile. Although this seems self-evident, the impact of such ruptures remains undertheorized in the scholarship on how rebels govern and socialize members. To survive, organizations must respond to external and internal shocks. Scholars have demonstrated how fluctuations in economic endowments, battlefield conditions, or social cohesion, translated into

altered provisioning of welfare (Biberman and Turnbull 2018), patterns of violence against civilians (Bloom 2005) and the regulation of gender relations (Marks 2014), respectively. Civilians have to manage organizational and individual discontinuities, such as getting punished, married, or promoted. It therefore becomes “a matter of constantly adjusting tactics in response to the social and economic opportunities and constraints that emerge unexpectedly and ambiguously within war zones” (Utas 2005, 426). As external conditions change, so may individuals’ nature and calculus of cooperation. Recognizing the interconnection between structures and ruptures can help move away from linear perspectives of rebel-civilian relations and, instead, uncover an organization and its members as an organism with moving parts that sometimes pull in the same and other times in different directions in response to their environment.

A Theoretical Framework of Civilian Patterns of Cooperation

Building on the reviewed scholarship, this section proposes a framework of civilian patterns of cooperation that connects the survival strategies of armed groups to these employed by civilians. Before diving into it, the concept of civilian cooperation and related terms need further clarification. Cooperation, as studied in other fields without normative connotations, simply means that individuals do what benefits the group. This understanding mirrors Arjona’s (2017, 762) definition of civilian cooperation as “an act performed by a civilian that directly benefits the armed group”, which I draw on throughout. This provides an umbrella term that captures any cooperative behavior engaged in for any reason. It can range from minimal to extensive, from low- to high-risk, or from individual to collective, and it can be underpinned by drivers from coercion to commitment.¹⁵ By non-state armed group, I am referring to a rebel organization as a collective, institutionalized armed entity that employs violence to challenge the state’s political power.¹⁶

Who counts as a civilian during irregular warfare is less straightforward.¹⁷ The Geneva Convention defines civilians as “persons taking no active part in the hostilities” (IV Art. 3.1.). For the purpose

¹⁵ For stylistic reasons, I will also use the terms “participation”, “involvement”, and “engagement”.

¹⁶ I sometimes refer to it simply as an “armed group” or “militant organization” and use the terms “rebels”, “combatants”, “insurgents”, and “militants” interchangeably. See Bhatia (2005) for conceptual differences and the politics of naming violent actors.

¹⁷ For a brief review of different concepts of civilians, see Masullo and O’Connor (2020, 79–80).

of this research, which does not address moral or legal responsibility, I refer to civilians and noncombatants as individuals inside rebel-controlled territories who do not hold active combat roles in an insurgent organization. I replace “no active part” – or no participation in the military activities of an armed group as used by other scholars (Masullo and O’Connor 2020, 80; Steele 2009, 421) – with “no active combat roles”. I therefore include civilians who participate in hostilities and military activities as porters, doctors, arms manufacturers, and in other support roles that fall short of combat but are military in nature. This follows Barter (2012, 546), who states that civilians “remain civilians if they provide support to armed groups, even if this means that they pose an indirect threat and are integral to the coercive capacities of combatants”. The definition is consequently more inclusive regarding what roles civilians may have and more exclusive in scope by only referring to a subset of the general civilian population, that is, people residing in rebel-held areas. In contrast to other definitions, I refrain from any reference to membership in an armed group, given how hazy the lines are between different states of association in rebel areas.¹⁸ Also, I do not assume that status as a civilian is fixed, but that individuals can fall in and out of it over time, being incorporated and then again excluded from combat service.

To proceed, I first introduce patterns of cooperation on a continuum from stability to turbulence. I continue with a summary of the framework’s core argument, followed by a deeper exploration of the explanatory mechanisms. Finally, I conclude by outlining the framework’s underpinning assumptions and scope conditions.

A continuum of civilian cooperation: from stability to turbulence

Fuji (2011, 8) notes about standard categories of victims, bystanders, and perpetrators in the Rwandan genocide that “actors did not confine their activities to one category; rather, they often moved back and forth between categories, or straddled multiple categories at the same time.” I similarly found that civilian behavior toward Boko Haram hardly fit into neat categories. For example, it was not uncommon to simultaneously enjoy participating in Quranic studies, to

¹⁸ A main distinction among scholars is whether they consider part-time affiliates to be civilians, as Arjona (2017), Kalyvas (2006), and Steele (2009) do. For example, Arjona (2017, 758) defines civilians as “persons who live in a given local territory, do not participate in hostilities, and are not full-time members of any state or non-state armed group”. Steele similarly describes civilians as “individuals who do not participate in the military activities of any armed group, but who may be ‘part-time’ affiliates or collaborators”. Masullo and O’Connor (2020, 80), in contrast, exclude part-timers: “civilians are all individuals who do not participate in the military activities of any organized armed group as full- or part-time members”.

reluctantly comply with movement restrictions, and to resist marriage to insurgents; not to speak of changes over time. Examining behavior through existing conceptual lenses produced fragmented and contradictory snapshots – of contestation, compliance, or contentment – rather than a comprehensive picture. More importantly, these categories grouped empirics in a way that distracted from and obscured a key dimension of variation: the level of stability in how people behaved and related to the organization.

To reiterate, the continuum I propose spans from stability to turbulence. Stable cooperation is characterized by civilians engaging with rebels in a consistent manner where the roles they inhabit, and the relationships they have with insurgents are steady.¹⁹ People perform low-risk labor, jobs, and tasks without frequent changes in their positions within formal and informal hierarchies. Their roles in the public and private spheres are intertwined with everyday community life. Zahrah, a woman who stayed in a Boko Haram-controlled village in Gwoza Local Government Area (LGA), gave an emblematic description by saying: “We did not really have to do anything, but Boko Haram was in the area patrolling to make sure that no one could escape. We just did normal things; nothing special”.²⁰ People may also cooperate more extensively, taking part in the daily administration of the community by distributing resources, working in educational or health facilities, or mediating conflicts among residents. This is to say that the scope of cooperative behavior may vary within both patterns.

Overall, there is a low likelihood of abrupt shifts in stable cooperative dynamics; rather, they tend to be routinized and persistent. However, this does not imply that individuals are free from violence or do not perceive life under rebel control as unstable. People who exhibit stable cooperation can hold different views of the armed group and can carry out acts of noncooperation to the extent that neither significantly destabilizes their relation to insurgents. The concept of stability here pertains to stability vis-à-vis their roles and relations, not vis-à-vis subjective experiences. These two aspects can coincide, but they do not necessarily align.. For instance, consider a farmer who continues to work their field daily, as they did before, but now lives in fear of sporadic visits from

¹⁹ Roles are positions within an organization that are defined by their required skills, entailed tasks and practices, and associated objectives. Relations are the social linkages between roles that themselves are governed by formal and informal institutions (S. E. Parkinson and Zaks 2018, 274).

²⁰ Interview with Zahrah, May 2018.

insurgents who demand a portion of the harvest. Although there is stability in the way the farmer cooperates, the situation may still be perceived as unstable and disruptive. In Chapter 5, I will explore what stable cooperation under Boko Haram's control looked like.

In contrast, turbulence is characterized by fluctuating forms of cooperation. Over time, civilians assume different public and private roles that involve varying levels of engagement and risk, as the example of Fatima in the introduction illustrated and which will be further outlined in Chapter 6. As individuals shift between statuses in the hierarchy, they also change how they relate to the insurgency. For example, people may transition from being farmers to bomb-makers, from leaders to slaves, from wives to widows, or from offenders to enforcers of the law. These changes in power dynamics are a central feature of turbulence. Chapter 7 delves into civilian experiences that, while far from homogenous, were all characterized by the element of volatility in their participation; they oscillated between being powerful and powerless, being abused and protected, and being coerced and committed. Their experiences turn the dynamic discontinuities, which can vary in the scope of cooperative behavior they entail, into the subject of inquiry..

But why should we care about stable and turbulent cooperation? The aim is not to unnecessarily blur categories, but to make it easier to recognize and understand differences in civilian-rebel relations. The proposed continuum seeks to do so by addressing the question of how close individuals are to an organization. Are they touched by an insurgency or absorbed by it? This is an important distinction that concerns scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. It addresses differences in degrees of involvement that are more encompassing than specific attitudes or singular actions while still being observable. In contrast to typologies that look at individual acts and drivers of cooperation, such as coerced obedience or ideologically motivated support, this approach looks to patterns that indicate the nature and depth of bonds between civilians and rebels. It is relational and process-oriented. In taking this broader perspective, the framework does not explain variation at the individual level, instead focusing on how a system of relations tends to produce a pattern in which stability does not exist alongside turbulence. At a more granular level, by looking at the organizational roles that individuals occupy, it considers that contributions to armed groups differ in nature. Some tasks are clearly more dangerous, difficult, or valuable for group survival than others. Similarly, those who receive orders under the military command chain or are married to insurgents have very different relations to the group than those without formal

rank or family ties. In addition to its descriptive potential, this pattern-based approach opens a line of inquiry into the underlying causes: what determines whether people get caught up in rebellions or not? Finally, the focus on processual and relational dimensions might also improve our ability to explain other civil war outcomes, such as organizational resilience, conflict duration and intensity, and post-conflict trajectories.

The argument

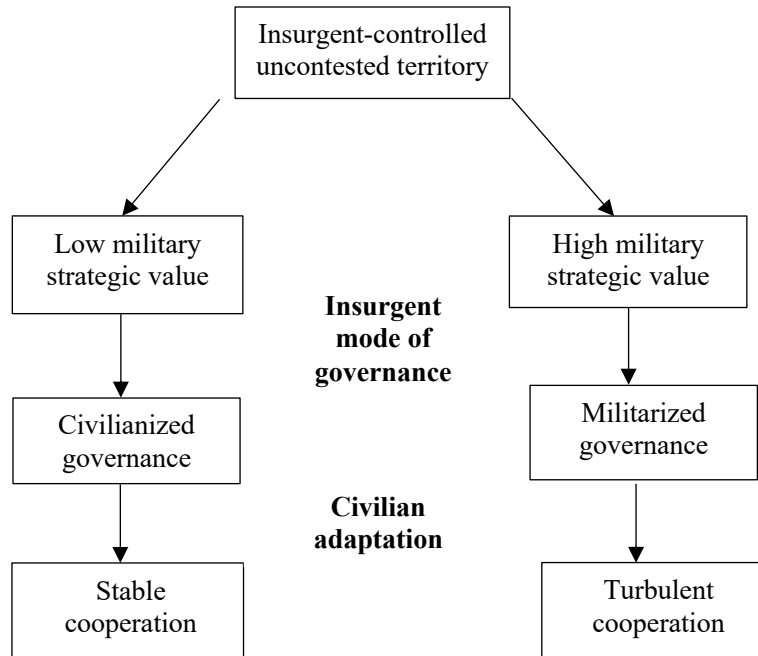
Once insurgents have seized territory, they must decide how to engage with the local population. I maintain that there are two core organizational objectives that rebels pursue in their relationships with and governance of populations: civilianization and militarization. Civilianization refers to a form of governance that relies on civilian actors and institutions to maintain social order, whereas militarization is characterized by the dominance of military personnel and structures. The choice between these two approaches depends on the strategic value of the territory to the survival of the group. Consequently, the mode of governance varies, with more assertive militarized control in strategically significant areas and a lighter, more civilianized approach in less important places. This has important implications for how civilians adapt to living under these different modalities of power. Civilian governance allows communities to uphold parts of their everyday practices, routines, and networks in the public and private, thereby fostering stability in cooperative dynamics. The opposite is the case in militarized sites, where individuals face ruptures and uncertainty due to their proximity to military power. As civilians are drawn into high-risk roles within the war machinery, the search for protection and their struggle to find their place within an inherently volatile environment gives rise to engagement frequently marked by turbulence. The interplay of these factors is captured below. I will now turn to the explanatory mechanisms in more detail.

FIGURE 1: PATTERNS OF COOPERATION UNDER MODES OF GOVERNANCE AT VARYING LEVELS OF SOCIAL CONTROL

		Mode of governance		
		Civilianized	Hybrid civil-military	Militarized
Social control	Low	Stability		Low turbulence
	High	Stability*	Instability	High turbulence

* unobserved

FIGURE 2: EXPLANATORY MECHANISMS



Mode of governance: civilianization vs militarization

The prevailing routes through which rebels are usually considered to influence civilian life are territorial control and administrative governance. However, inside uncontested rebel territory, there are different ways through which they can potentially exert control over people with or without active, persistent presence of a group’s military wing. To address this gap, I propose examining: (1) *the mode of governance*, determined by the organizational objective a group pursues in a location (civilianization or militarization), and (2) *its intensity*, which reflects the level of social control exercised through (civilian or military) formal and informal institutions to shape people’s actions, beliefs, and attitudes in line with the pursued objective. This understanding of control differs from administrative governance in that it approaches armed groups more comprehensively as actors with political *and* military agendas; each of which necessitates specialized governance strategies in terms of the implementing actors and tools employed, as further explained below. Conceptualizing rebel governance on one spectrum is therefore

insufficient.²¹ It also deviates from the emphasis on service provision found in the literature by instead focusing on how, and how intensely, insurgents constrain civilian options. It thus assesses population control vis-à-vis two distinct modes of governance at varying levels of intensity. This can affect, among other things, the types of tasks civilians are expected to perform, how private relations are structured, where civilians are positioned in militant hierarchies, and how laws and ideological training are used to modify behavior.

Why would an armed group refrain from always exerting maximum control? Because making civilians part of their project comes at a cost. It requires investing time, effort, and resources. Given that many armed groups are relatively resource-poor, they must prioritize where and when to make material and organizational investments. Adding the organizational objective to the definition is therefore not a formality, but accounts for a crucial source of variation. Functions of territorial spaces differ and with them the primary objective of governance. While there are many purposes that territories can serve, I argue that at the most basic level, they differ as to whether insurgents consider them to be of high military-strategic value and, as such, integral to group survival, or not. Various factors can make a place valuable, including its geographic location, terrain characteristics, accessibility, infrastructure, natural resources, and cultural significance, which are highly context dependent and can vary in importance depending on a group's strategies, capacity, and type of threats it faces.

Where the military stakes are high and territories are of strategic importance, an organization is more assertive in its interactions. In such zones, rebels engage in militarized governance, which relies heavily on the use of force, military structures, and military actors to exert control. This is because, first, insurgents need more immediate military support, and second, they must prevent costly resistance. Conversely, in regions of lower strategic importance, rebels may implement civilianized governance. Civilianized rebel governance is generally characterized by a focus on establishing and maintaining social order through civilian institutions and authorities. The key distinction lies in the methods of social control and implementing authorities, with civilianized governance being more integrated with and accommodating to civilian life and actors, while

²¹ This may help to explain why militarized governance tends to be mistaken for a lack of rebel governance or a rudimentary version of it, often referred to as “martial law” (Mampilly and Stewart 2021, 22–24), rather than as a governance mode that relies on its own function and logic, existing alongside civilian governance.

militarized governance is more coercive and centered around military strategy and combat actors. To be clear, in both cases a community resides in uncontested rebel territory, but it experiences a different kind of governance – civilianized or militarized – at varying levels of social control. That armed groups have more than one mode of governance is not surprising, given that they fight a military-political struggle. It therefore aligns with their nature of being violent and political entrepreneurs. Some rebel organizations construct distinct political/civilian and military wings with parallel hierarchies, as about one-third of rebel groups active between 1989 and 2011 did, while others pursue their bifurcated agendas under a more unitary structural form (Doctor 2021).²² Either way, this distinction is “one of the most common forms of specialization among rebel organisations” (Doctor 2021, 315), delineating the dual objectives and modalities of power.

Both modes of governance can exhibit different levels of social control. Under *civilianization*, rebels preserve the civilian sphere, which at one end, can imply minimal exertion of control over populations. In these cases, after seizing territory, rebels minimize their engagement with communities residing therein. Instead of integrating these communities, insurgents neglect them. While this lack of engagement can occur in any area, the periphery is often the site of low control civilianization. It is here where rebels enjoy a localized, relative advantage in military capacity (Buhaug 2010; Holtermann 2016) due to weak state projection of power (Herbst 2014). In this sense, rebels mirror the previous governance approach of the state, namely one marked by absence. This strategy allows them to benefit from the strategic and symbolic value of holding territory and gives access to human and material resource bases with low investment and threat to group survival if lost. As noted by Breslawski (2021, 471), “rebels are often resource poor and in fact prefer to devolve power to civilians when it is efficient for them to do so”. Even as they share power, “they retain the dominant position within such relationships” (Mampilly and Stewart 2021, 33). Neglect can allow communities to govern their own affairs without significant rebel interference, leaving local institutions untouched. This was the case for some villages under Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) in Indonesia where the group refrained from imposing restrictions or becoming involved in local affairs (Breslawski 2021; International Crisis Group 2011). Lack of engagement does not

²² A political wing is “a political organisation which is affiliated with and shares, at least in part, a common leadership with the militant arm of a rebel organization” (Doctor 2021, 315).

have to stem from insurgent trust in the prewar social order. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) neglected zones along sectarian lines, maintaining the “status quo” (Mampilly and Stewart 2021, 33) in areas dominated by Christians in its territory (Markakis 1990, 120). Neglect can also follow an episode of violent seizure, looting, killing, destruction, and instilling fear to reduce people’s capacity for resistance. Stripping communities down to their bones, akin to “roving bandits” (Olson 1993), sets the stage for subsequent disengagement, as was the case in many villages under Boko Haram. Consequently, in civilianized landscapes of low control, rebels minimize contact, interference, and efforts to build ties with communities, effectively refraining from governing.

When insurgents decide to slightly step up their efforts, people are confronted with a more engaged organization. Under the purview of the civilian wing, rebel delegates or appointed local civilian authorities organize the political, economic, administrative, and social affairs to various extents. For example, in some towns under IS-control, the group stationed security forces, controlled markets, and set up Shariah courts but “refrain[ed] from micro-managing towns, to whatever extent possible. Local forces and their relatives often [ran] day-to-day administrative affairs”, which created “flexibility, albeit limited, for locals to run their own affairs” (Weiss and Hassan 2016, 209–10). Armed groups may also choose to intervene extensively in civilian matters.²³ Even under these circumstances, “the evidence suggests that often armed groups are able to control the behavior of the civilian population without permanently deploying many combatants to the locality” (Arjona 2016, 191). In an attempt to keep the local administration running, the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie Goma (RCD-G) kept bureaucrats in their positions in the rebel-controlled Kivus (Tull 2005, 133). While a certain degree of coercion is almost always involved in rebel governance, civilianization tends to draw more heavily than militarization on the power of persuasion. Insurgents may use social control to establish effective, inclusive, and (semi-)autonomous civilian self-administration. One could think of the approach taken by the Partido Africano da Independencia da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) led by Amilcar Cabral during its violent struggle to gain independence for Portuguese Guinea in the 1960s. In addition to providing social services (Dhada 1993, 64), it also held elections for village committees that enjoyed significant autonomy as well as a fairly free national election that PAIGC’s candidates won by a

²³ This is what Arjona (2016) refers to as “rebelocracy”.

landslide (Chabal 1983; Davidson 2017). Another case is the Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (CPN-M), which established democratically-elected, inclusive “people’s committees” (Huang 2016, 124). High civilianization can also be less participatory, as the Khmer Rouge’s (Mampilly and Stewart 2021, 34–35; Mosyakov 2004) or LTTE’s efforts to govern civilian affairs (Mampilly 2011; Stokke 2006; Terpstra and Frerks 2017) demonstrated.

In contrast, the militarization process involves not only the acquisition of military capabilities to maintain the war effort, but also militarism as the social and political institutions that create a disposition for the use of force (Enloe 2000; Mann 1987). Therefore, militarized governance requires profound socio-organizational transformations. Military structures and hierarchies replace public and private civic institutions while economic, political, and cultural affairs are modified to further militaristic ideals and practices. The main actors are military personnel, and the main tool is force. In contrast to civilianization where it can be sufficient for rebels to co-opt a local leader, militarization is more difficult to outsource and tends to require boots on the ground. At the most extreme level, safe havens in jungles, mountains, or other densely vegetated and difficult terrain are characteristic locations for hyper-militarization. Across conflicts from Afghanistan to Colombia, guerilla camps in hard-to-reach areas have been used to ensure military survival by hiding leaders and high-level commanders, recruits, weapons stockpiles, and food. They can also serve as military training grounds and proto-societies for lived ideologies. For instance, the LRA has relied on bush sanctuaries for over three decades to maintain organizational autonomy, train and indoctrinate thousands of abductees, and access natural resources under Kony’s strict military and spiritual authority (Day 2019). Similarly, in line with the FARC’s militaristic blueprint, the group’s camps enforced a physical separation from the general civilian population, making sure that “lives unfolded within the organization” for security and ideational reasons (Gutiérrez Sanín 2018, 638). In these high-stakes contexts, armed actors have vested interests in maintaining a tight grip through coercive techniques, intense surveillance, and strict law enforcement as well as in allocating resources to the civilian workforce that supports the military agenda. This implies that, despite individuals’ civilian status, their relationship to the organization is a military one. Militarization can also comprise lower levels of control, such as in urban strongholds, locations throughout rebel-territory with military barracks, or villages located at a strategic transport axis.

It is important to keep in mind that civilianized and militarized rebel governance can coincide, with civilian and military spheres overlapping. This can be by design, such as in IS-controlled Raqqa that was a central city in the group's territorial network and model for its Caliphate vision, requiring the integration of military and civilian governance (Caris and Reynolds 2014). Similarly, Tamils often talked about the LTTE "in a nexus of respect and fear", as they had to navigate intimate surveillance and threat of forced recruitment despite sophisticated civilian administration (Terpstra and Frerks 2017, 288). It can also be the result of informal practices, as in the case of the SPLM/A in Sudan, where "despite claims to the contrary, the military wing continually held exclusive power" (Mampilly 2011, 147), intermeshing the civilian and military culture (D. H. Johnson 1998). Such a hybrid version of governance can be temporary until a certain threshold is reached, tipping the balance toward one mode of governance. While specific local realities at varying levels of control are context dependent, the general distinction between modes of governance brings to the fore that thinking about rebel governance as occurring on one spectrum is insufficient. Rather than mistaking militarization for a lack of governance, the framework shows that it is a form of governance with its own *modus operandi* that can operate in isolation or alongside civilianized governance. At a basic level, the distinction explains crucial differences in how civilian-rebel interactions are set up. To understand how these interactions unfold, however, we must not only look at rebel institutions, but also explore civilian agency within those. I suggest that adaptation provides a useful analytical lens to do so.

Adaptation

Following attacks and abduction, "[l]ife with the rebels ... consisted of few but nonetheless complex, options: adapt, die, or try to escape", writes Coulter (2009, 123) about the men and women who were taken to the RUF's jungle bases. Insurgents' seizure of control over communities and individuals almost always marks a rupture, but what options civilians have afterwards and what adaptation exactly entails differs. I define adaptation as a non-linear and iterative process in which civilians learn how to navigate and live under rebel governance. The process can be divided into two dimensions: socio-cultural (behavioral), which relates to one's ability to learn necessary skills to fit into the new environment, and psychological (emotional/affective), which relates to how one copes and adjusts internally (Ward and Kennedy 1996). Put another way, there is a more active, strategic, and behavior-focused side of adaptation, and a related more passive, subconscious, and value-focused one. Although the concept of adaptation is rooted in socialization

theories, it avoids the semantic and conceptual passivity of “being socialized”. It lends itself to explore the process through which civilians and rebels alike learn to approach and potentially grow into the demands of a system, while also leaving room to explore maneuvering and contestation as a way to negotiate power dynamics.

In this regard, I approach adaptation with the following assumption about the interaction between agency and structure in mind: I view civilians as rational agents who first and foremost prioritize survival. They also pursue other and often multiple interests, which can be anything from material to emotional, both self-oriented and altruistic, and changeable. How they pursue these interests is shaped by the confines and opportunities of their social relations.²⁴ As Fuji aptly put it, “[h]ow these relations define and structure contexts, perspectives, identities, and actions allows us to situate actors and the different possibilities for acting in precise moments” (2011, 18). I subscribe to her understanding of agency as not being a “binary state that was either ‘off’ or ‘on’, but a shifting set of possibilities that had as much to do with objective realities as subjective and intersubjective understandings of changing conditions and pressures” (2011, 18).

The degree and strategies of adaptation depend on the mode and intensity of governance exerted by the armed group. In civilianized settings, the imperative for adaptation tends to be comparatively lower. This is especially the case when insurgents preserve the status quo or introduce only minor modifications, but also applies at higher levels of civilianization because the persistence of civilian roles, networks, and authorities implies that individuals continue to engage in already familiar and routinized practices. The maintenance of daily activities, both public and private, fosters cooperation, as does interaction with established civilian authorities. These interactions rely on power dynamics that are generally understood, reducing the unpredictability associated with contact with military actors, which carries the risk of violence and rupture. This pattern challenges the notion that a lack of governance causes chaos and disorder. Rather, it is insurgent neglect that promotes stable cooperation in civilianized settings of low social control, as

²⁴ In line with behavioral economics literature (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), I do not assume that people always act perfectly rational to pursue gains of various kinds but take it as an approximation.

I demonstrate in Chapter 5. Likewise, the preservation of civilian institutions and actors contributes to stability, even when insurgents exert significant control.

In militarized settings, the need for adaptation is high. The environment is laden with sudden shocks, constraints, and pervasive uncertainty. As Utas (2003, 176) notes regarding Liberia's civil war, the day-to-day existence of woman was "a constant battle for protection under the wings of the right commando". Civilians must learn to navigate the structures of militant organizations, often with little room to maneuver the strict regulations imposed, and to broker the resources and safety from militants. Moreover, the volatility of warfare creates frequent disruptions and upheavals; whether it is the death of a rebel husband, an order to support a combat mission, or merely being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Survival hinges on civilians' ability to swiftly alter their roles and relationships in the organization. Hence, it is not only adapting to an unstable environment but also the close interaction with and reliance on military entities that lead to turbulent cooperation. The pattern of cooperation epitomizes the struggle to find protection and stability in a context where power is closely intertwined with militarism, as examined in Chapters 6 and 7.

In environments with hybrid civilian and military governance, people encounter significant uncertainty. Given that militarism is "centred on the always potentially antagonistic relation between armed actors (combatants) and civilians (non-combatants)" (Shaw 2012, 23), the coexistence of civilianized and militarized governance is fraught with frictions. When military actors move into the sphere of the civilian wing, the established arrangements are contested, raising the question to what extent civilian institutions endure or dissolve. As a result, not only do interactions with combatants carry uncertainty, but the specific adaptations civilians need to make can be unclear, conflicting, and changing. As the balance of power between the two wings may shift, individuals are compelled to constantly adapt, understanding expectations of both authorities, reevaluating options, and reacting accordingly in order to survive. The more power military actors gain over civilian authorities, the more tilts civilian behavior from stable to unstable to turbulent cooperation. In conclusion, by investigating adaptation and the resulting patterns of cooperation within both civilianized and militarized governance structures, we can glean insights into the ways in which power, control, and agency operate within complex and fluid rebel systems, and into what it is like to be a civilian in a warzone.

Assumptions and scope conditions

As with any theory, this one also takes certain factors for granted and excludes others for the benefit of parsimony. Clearly, it only applies to situations where insurgents have undisputed control over a territory, in which civilians reside. While I have already laid out assumptions about civilian agency, those about armed group behavior have not yet been addressed. First, the framework assumes that armed groups, just as civilians, act rationally and prioritize survival. To maximize the utility of the resources they possess, rebels adopt different governance strategies and levels of control in response to dynamic conflict environments. This means that their assessment of how strategically valuable territories are can change over time. The exact causes and mechanisms behind it remain unexplained though. At the most basic level, a place must have enough strategic value to make investments worthwhile. Just as a town may become militarized for having barracks, weapons and ammunition, or a village for its location as a launching point for attacks, so might these places lose their value when resources are depleted, missions are completed, or tactics change.

The power dynamics and challenges that insurgents face can also change and prompt adjustments in governance strategies. Against common assumptions, Stewart (2019) found that rebel governance services have no effect on rebel military strength, and sometimes even a negative one. This explains why movements transition into survival mode when under military pressure, using more coercive practices of recruitment and looting (Kalyvas 2006; Metelits 2010) or abandoning their civilian administration efforts all together (Kasfir 2005, 288; T. Young and Hall 1997, 18–19). For example, the National Revolutionary Movement (NRM) in Uganda suspended its civilian governance institutions when the army put them under pressure (Kasfir 2005, 288) just as the LTTE devoted its resources to its military wing during the final stage of the war (Mampilly 2011, 127). Likewise, FRELIMO focused on military efforts at the expense of gaining popular support after the death of its first leader Eduardo Mondlane (T. Young and Hall 1997, 18–19) while the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPFL) limited its territorial and governance ambitions until it chased out the Ethiopian army from Tigray region (J. Young 1997, 125–27). How insurgents approach a location is therefore neither pre-determined by its features, nor fixed over time. The theory, however, takes this decision as exogenously given. Relatedly, it neither explains why an armed group invests more or less in civilianized governance, whether it is a politically informed

decision or solely capacity-related, nor why it designs its governance institutions in a particular way.²⁵

Understanding that militarization and civilianization are not static implies that places and people can transition in and out of different forms of governance. Although the theory focuses on civilians and an insurgent organization, government forces affect their relationship in many ways, most directly by shaping these transitions through territorial contestation. When a place changes hands, it bumps people out of stability or turbulence. For example, during offensives by the Syrian government to recapture Northeast Aleppo in 2016, around 16,000 people fled. Some crossed into districts held by Kurdish forces or government-controlled Western Aleppo while others headed South into areas still under rebel control (Al Jazeera 2016). When towns are retaken, many civilians retreat with rebels to their hide-outs because they must, they want to, or because they consider it the least bad option. In these situations, civilians are often caught in a deadly Catch-22, facing violence and retaliation from both sides. Similarly, attacks on guerrilla camps can prompt dislocation that catapults people out of turbulence. Exogenous events create episodes of high interference by government or other forces that either cause civilians or the actors around them to move. These ruptures push people across porous rebel lines and make them fall in and out of behavioral patterns. While recognizing that conflicts are multi-actor contexts, the theory only indirectly accounts for their impact as a confounding variable on rebel-civilian relations. However, I will further reflect on the role of the state and other actors in the conclusion.

Finally, high social control was not observed in civilianized spaces under Boko Haram's rule. Generally speaking, extensive civilianization seems to be the exception rather than the norm. Huang (2016, 71–73) found that only 13 percent of insurgent groups built complex civilian administrative structures. She identified 17 “high institutionalist” rebel groups, including the FMLN in El Salvador, the Anya Nya in Sudan, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, and the Maoists in Nepal. This suggests that even though many insurgent groups exhibit higher civilian administration than Boko Haram did, extensive civilianization is overall relatively rare. Still, given that it has not been

²⁵ What kind of order emerges depends on factors identified in the rebel governance literature, such as the armed group's ideology (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Mampilly 2011), political objectives and preferences (Mampilly 2011; Stewart 2018), resource availability (Carnegie et al. 2022a; Huang 2016b; Reno 2015; Weinstein 2007), time horizons (Arjona 2016), or civilian capacity (Arjona 2016; van Baalen 2021; Breslawski 2021; M. A. Rubin 2020), among other things.

empirically captured, it is beyond the scope of the proposed framework. Although the previous section drew on empirical cases to make theoretical predictions, whether hyper-civilianization leads in fact to stable cooperation requires further probing of the empirical fit of the theory. The outlined caveats, which are far from comprehensive with further limitations discussed in Chapter 8, point to the theoretical and empirical limits of this work that only addresses a small fragment of the complex realities in conflict zones.

3

METHODOLOGY

By putting the “back” of rebellion at the fore, this research seeks to make the contributions and challenges of noncombatants in warzones visible. It is based on the personal accounts of people who have experienced Boko Haram’s insurgency first-hand. The goal is not only to amplify often overheard voices in discourses of civil war, but also to unravel the diversity in the realities they confront and the roles they play in rebel movements. Although transitions in and out of armed conflict are fluid, my approach to explaining the space between collusion and coercion focuses on the power dynamics that define rebel-insurgent relations during conflict. This focus was inspired by the work of scholars who have opened the black box of rebellion, paving the way for understanding the intricate relationship between politics, personal affairs, and violence inside insurgencies (Coulter 2009; Marks 2013b; Weinstein 2007; E. J. Wood 2003).

This problem-driven research is the product of extensive fieldwork in Nigeria, iterative data collection and analysis, and inductive theory building. At its core lies interview data that could not have been obtained without the willingness of informants to share stories, perspectives, and knowledge. The line of inquiry that guided the conversations zooms in on the more ordinary aspects of life under Boko Haram, such as food and friendships, as well as on instances of extraordinary force. It also zooms out to understand these elements that shape civilian experiences within the context of rebels’ organization of armed contestation. Narrative accounts have therefore served as windows into the empirical realities of rebel rule and the subjective realm of people’s perceptions and lived experiences. This required consulting both additional sources and secondary material to verify information and to interpret informants’ expressions and meanings ascribed to events within their social context.

While the dissertation aims to provide a coherent framework that disentangles the complexities of civilian cooperation, the path of getting there was all but straightforward. As Lubkemann (2008, 35) aptly notes, the “analysis of sites, processes, and people intimately associated with violence not only offers up formidable methodological problems of fragmented perspective and access, but requires navigation of conceptual terrain that is heavily laden with moral presupposition, bursting with emotional investment, and rife with politically contested representations”. To prepare for these challenges, I benefited from a growing array of scholarship and courses on the ethical, practical, and methodological challenges of research in conflict zones (S. P. Campbell 2017; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; P. Krause and Szekely 2020; E. J. Wood 2006).²⁶ When conducting interviews about wartime experiences in a volatile conflict setting, informants’ emotional and physical wellbeing is the prime responsibility of a researcher, along with maintaining their own safety. In the following sections, I outline the steps and precautions I took for everyone’s protection. The more unforeseen, but less severe challenges I encountered, however, were not directly related to the interview process itself. From having to redesign the project at the beginning of my fieldwork to a global pandemic abruptly ending it, it is fair to say that not everything went according to plan. Changing circumstances necessitated the changing of research questions, sites, and timelines, illustrating that making plans, letting go of them, and creating new ones was an integral part of the research process, which I lay out below. Given how entangled ethical and practical challenges are with the entire process, I address them throughout as I move from the selection of case and research sites to the data collection, and finally to the analysis.

Researching Boko Haram

Selecting a case

The decision to study Boko Haram in Nigeria emerged from a combination of factors. As discussed in the introduction, the case is emblematic of broader conflict trends on the continent and beyond, and it reignited oversimplified portrayals of violence and victimization that characterized African insurgencies two decades ago. From a regional security and humanitarian perspective, the case

²⁶ I participated in the SGSSS workshop “Ethics and Fieldwork in Conflict Zones and Challenging Environments” (Edinburgh, 08.-10.04.2019).

matters as Boko Haram is the most serious security threat to Africa's most populous country (Duerksen 2021). The insurgency has left 350,000 people dead in Northeast Nigeria (UNDP 2021a), 2 million displaced (IOM 2022), and 8.4 million in need of assistance (UN OCHA 2023), and it has further reverberated throughout the Lake Chad Basin region. Moreover, examining an active conflict amplifies the potential impact of the research, as the findings could directly feed into ongoing peacebuilding efforts, while also facilitating the identification of nuances that may be less discernible in retrospective analyses. From a practical standpoint, conducting this research appeared viable in terms of security and access. While Nigeria grapples with significant insecurity, there is considerable variation among and within its Local Government Areas (LGAs). This provided the opportunity to examine the ongoing insurgency away from the epicenters of violence or in pockets of stability, and to engage with individuals who had fled the war-torn areas. Finally, I chose to concentrate on Boko Haram (JAS) over Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) because Boko Haram has shaped the conflict landscape for more than a decade, established and lost its caliphate, and caused massive displacement. This long and winding organizational trajectory, coupled with the large number of people affected by and knowledgeable about the group, informed the decision to focus on this particular faction from its inception until 2019.

Selecting sites

I conducted research in Nigeria over eleven months between 2018 and 2020. My research sites were mostly informal IDP settlements and host communities in Abuja and the wider Federal Capital Territory (FCT), and different locations in Borno state's capital Maiduguri. The intensity and protractedness of the conflict in the Northeast have caused large-scale displacement. Although the majority of the displaced have stayed in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe State, in descending order (IOM 2022), 30,000 people still seek refuge in one of the approximately 18 settlements in the FCT according to 2021 estimates by the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Displaced Persons (The Nation 2022). Among those, I visited Durumi, Gongola, New Kuchigoro, Waru, Nyanya, and Kuje. The selection was driven by "convenience" of social and physical access, that is, available contacts and road security. The national capital is also the hub for various major national, regional, and international actors, which facilitated conversations with officials from the Nigerian government, judiciary, and military, with representatives of the humanitarian and development sector, and with civil society activists, journalists, and researchers who are based in or pass through the city. Maiduguri is a strategically and symbolically important site of the

insurgency. As the birthplace of Boko Haram, location of continuous political and military contestation, and center of the displacement crisis with 500,000 IDPs (International Crisis Group 2023), it probably holds the most comprehensive knowledge of Boko Haram.

Collecting data

The research and data collection process was problem-driven (Eidlin 2011; Shapiro 2009) and iterative with significant changes along the way. It consisted of two phases: The first round took place in May 2018 in Abuja and Maiduguri. I conducted 29 interviews in total, of which 15 were with civilians who had lived in Boko Haram-controlled territory, four with conflict-affected civilians who had fled Boko Haram's violence without living under their control, and 10 with elite civilians, meaning those who directly collaborated with top leadership, held positions only a select few could attain, or possessed access to and control over critical group information. I also conducted seven focus group discussions (FGDs) with another 47 participants who had been displaced by Boko Haram's violence. The interviews focused primarily on the organizational aspects of life inside Boko Haram while the group discussions explored collective experiences of the insurgency in terms of rebel recruitment and attacks, their impact on local community dynamics, and displacement. Initially, I wanted to understand how Boko Haram was internally organized, asking questions about institutions and practices, without a particular focus on noncombatants. But as respondents started to speak about their own entanglements with insurgents, I pursued this line of investigation to learn more about the experiences of those in front of me instead of continuing to ask questions that many could not answer based on first-hand knowledge. The second round of interviews comprised the main data collection conducted in 2019 and 2020. I had planned to spend most of my time in Maiduguri and other towns in the Northeast, with a focus on Boko Haram's governance of combatants, in order to gain a more holistic view of the organization's functioning and its production of violence. However, after several months of preparation, an approved risk assessment, and arrival in Nigeria, I ultimately did not obtain research clearance from the University of Edinburgh to travel to the Northeast.²⁷ Consequently, I had to swiftly redesign the project, with rising difficulties in accessing the small and dispersed population of ex-combatants in Abuja, causing an unforeseen delay in data collection. Building on

²⁷ I had the opportunity to travel to Maiduguri as part of a separate research project.

the material and findings from my first trip, I opted to dive deeper into the questions of how Boko Haram governed noncombatants, what daily life looked like under their rule, and how civilians managed interactions with insurgents. I therefore focused on increasing my sample of informants with respective experiences and met repeatedly with those who had the most extensive knowledge and insights, whose names and narratives come up throughout this work. This approach resulted in a total of 83 informants, primarily made up of civilian informants and a small number of former fighters. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an abrupt and early end of my research stay.

FIGURE 3: BREAKDOWN OF INTERVIEWS

Category	No. of informants
Former Boko Haram civilians and combatants	83
<i>Militarized</i>	51*
<i>Civilianized</i>	41*
<i>Male</i>	23
<i>Female</i>	60
Conflict-affected civilians (not under rebel control)	65**
Experts	18
Total	166

* Nine informants lived in civilianized and militarized locations.

** Including 47 FGD participants.

Note:

Numerous follow-up interviews have been conducted with key informants.

Informal conversations that informed this research are not included.

Selecting informants

Informants were purposively selected through snowball sampling, in which people refer other key informants in their networks. Given that previous associations with Boko Haram continue to be a source of stigmatization, the target population was “hidden” in IDP settlements and host

communities, which themselves were not readily accessible either. When I arrived in 2018, I therefore relied on personal connections to start building a network of local community activists, journalists, and NGO staff who could help me identify and meet with informants. I established several independent entry points, added research sites, and used respondents' referrals to expand and diversify the informant pool. I adjusted the framing of my selection criteria depending on the context and familiarity with gatekeepers. Specifically, when I first met community mobilizers or spokespeople of IDP communities, I avoided openly choosing participants based on their prior associations with Boko Haram. Instead, I expressed my interest in speaking with people from the Northeast who had experienced Boko Haram's insurgency. This approach narrowed the scope while remaining sufficiently broad to prevent inadvertently singling out individuals for their conflict participation. Nevertheless, it also implied accepting that I occasionally had to divert from my actual selection preferences. I was more explicit about who I wanted to interview after repeat visits, when collaborating with trusted gatekeepers, or when gaining access via contacts who worked directly with former Boko Haram associates, such as in rehabilitation centers. The selection of informants also developed iteratively. As the material started to reveal interesting diversity, I selected informants accordingly. For example, I would prioritize respondents from a specific location, those associated with Boko Haram during particular timeframes, or individuals who held certain roles. In doing so, I aimed to address gaps as much as the context permitted.

This strategy created a sample that includes individuals who had stayed in rebel-held villages, towns, and camps. Their length of association with Boko Haram varied, from a few days up to six years, with generally briefer periods in Boko Haram's short-lived Islamic State and longer timeframes in bush camps. Some had lived through both. Some had spent their entire time hidden in the attic of their house, while others had gained authority as commanders. They had cooked, spied, farmed, and prayed for the group, and some had also fought for it. The overwhelming majority of my informants became associated with the group involuntarily, either through abduction or occupation of their communities, while some were pressured by family members, and a small number joined of their own accord. The sample comprises civilians of diverse age, gender, religion, and ethnicity, coming from urban and rural areas, and from places that were strongholds of insurgent support and CJTF resistance, which occurred almost naturally given that IDP settlements host people of diverse backgrounds and origins.

There is a significant gender imbalance in the sample, with three times more female than male participants. As aforementioned, the gender dynamics within insurgent groups often involve the feminization of logistical, domestic, and military support. Consequently, the sample ratio and the narratives presented in the empirical chapters reflect the gendered division of civilian labor in armed organizations. Nevertheless, I sought to interview more men who held civilian roles, as they remain understudied. Several factors could explain the difficulty I faced engaging male participants. For instance, women's domestic responsibilities often make them more accessible in settlements during the day. Additionally, gender norms may have hindered Muslim men from conversing with a young, female researcher, although I found that as a Western woman, I was more often perceived as a "third gender" (Christia 2020, 76; Schwedler 2006) with access to both male and female spheres. More significantly, I believe men's fear of legal and social repercussions for their involvement acted as a deterrent. This is not unfounded given the state's counterinsurgency tactics, such as mass detention and extra-judicial killing of males (Amnesty International 2015b, 2016), and communities' greater reluctance to accept men back (Brechenmacher 2018; Felbab-Brown 2018). Furthermore, many male lives have been lost, the willingness of both insurgents and the military to kill men evident throughout subsequent chapters.

This points to the inevitable survivor bias in conflict research. I am therefore likely to over-represent the perspectives of people who cooperated at the expense of those who resisted. The omnipresence of death and violence in informants' accounts underscores the magnitude of the issue. To compensate for these missing voices, I pay particular attention to sections of informants' narratives discussing the circumstances and reasons for death and killing. As a mitigating factor, I learned through their stories that survival was often a matter of luck, contributing to a tragic randomization of survivors. Most of my respondents had indeed resisted, as evidenced by the fact that I interviewed escapees, which introduced another challenge. When studying an active conflict, an over-reliance on defectors compounds sampling problems by omitting those still with the movement. To address this, I inquired about the reasons and circumstances surrounding respondents' escapes, as well as the motives for others to stay. Moreover, informants' pathways out of the organization were diverse. Some risked their lives by running away, while others were taken out by the military during counterinsurgency operations. For most of my respondents, this

was perceived as a liberation, whereas for a few it was a “forceful rescue”.²⁸ While not a direct indicator of levels of engagement, I also interviewed people who had undergone military detention and/or de-radicalization and rehabilitation.²⁹ I thereby sought to reduce an over-reliance on forced, low-level participants. I would have preferred to interview more high-ranking civilians and military actors with strategic knowledge about internal politics and organizational dynamics. However, due to a combination of the mentioned reasons – they are more likely to have been killed, imprisoned, still with the group, or less willing to be interviewed – accessing such individuals in higher numbers proved challenging while also raising concerns about my own safety.

To balance the perspectives of people who were “inside” the insurgency, I relied on data from the FGDs with “outsiders” who fled their communities before Boko Haram controlled them. The research further incorporates insights from interviews and informal discussions with stakeholders working on the conflict in various capacities, such as representatives from intelligence agencies, the judiciary, the military, civilian defense forces, humanitarian organizations, civil society organizations, and human rights groups. I complemented and triangulated accounts with academic literature, news sources, policy briefs, NGO reports, and other secondary material.

Interviewing civilians

Interviews typically lasted around one hour. With some key informants, they took longer and led to several follow-up meetings. They were conducted in a semi-structured manner and consisted of open-ended questions, tailored to categories of informants (i.e., enslaved, marginally integrated, empowered, and elite). The conversations were structured chronologically (H. J. Rubin and Rubin 2012). I started with questions about respondents’ upbringing and life in their communities, then moved on to the start of the insurgency, which dovetailed to the main part. I did not ask directly about whether or how they had become associated with the group, instead waiting for respondents to bring up experiences of attacks, abductions, and occupation. When discussing areas of social

²⁸ Interview with Sadiya, February 2020.

²⁹ Depending on the accountability of the justice system, interviewing prisoners is one way to include sympathizers, as Fuji (2011) did when studying “joiners” of the Rwandan genocide. I found interviewing prison populations in this particular context as too fraught. Instead, I talked to people who were involved in the Kainji trials of Boko Haram suspects in 2017/18, but this shed more light on how deeply flawed the entire process of prosecution is than anything else (Human Rights Watch 2018).

and organizational aspects of life under Boko Haram, I began with descriptive questions, such as the content and frequency of Quranic education or rules and punishments. Then, I followed up with more subjective questions to elucidate their experiences and perceptions. Structuring this part of the conversation thematically sometimes obstructed the flow and impeded tracing informants' trajectories. Detours and circling back to certain topics were therefore necessary. I concluded with questions about the present and hopes for the future that I learned to phrase carefully. Although my intention was to transition out of the emotionally strenuous part of the conversation and end on a lighter note (Brounéus 2011), these questions sometimes raised issues of hardship, stigmatization, and fears for the future, which sometimes caused more distress than discussing past experiences. In practice, respondents did not always share my desire to follow this intended structure. Some jumped right to the end by recounting their escape, while others primarily wanted to discuss other matters they felt were important for me to understand. At times, I got carried away in details and side stories – some turned out to be relevant, others less so – but, either way, they gave room for surprises.

As part of the oral consent procedure, participants were informed about the purpose of the project and the way it would be conducted to transfer a degree of control (E. J. Wood 2006). I emphasized that there was no obligation to take part in this research, that none of the questions needed to be answered, and that they could withdraw at any time. To avoid false expectations, I made it clear that my research was conducted independently and explained that I could only provide them with a small compensation for their time that they would receive regardless of how much or little they shared. It can be argued that monetary compensation produces biases and reinforces power imbalances, but I see it as a necessity to remove obstacles to participation and avoid economic exploitation of informants who took time out of their day to talk to me (Refugee Studies Centre 2007). I asked for permission to take written notes and explained that the research information and confidentiality of participant identity and data would be protected at all times. Simultaneously leading the conversation, taking diligent notes, managing time, and monitoring both my informants' wellbeing and the surroundings stretched my multitasking ability. But not recording the interview enhanced the safety for informants and noticeably put them at ease. For matters of anonymity and safety, I did not take the names of interviewees and asked them for pseudonyms by which they would like to be referred to in the writings. At the end of each interview, I asked participants whether they had any questions and whether there was information they revealed that

they wanted off the record. In some cases, I offered the opportunity to connect them to psychosocial support services.

Power imbalances between displaced people, access-granting organizations, and researchers put into question whether consent is given voluntarily (Clark 2008). Although it is crucial to be aware of dependencies that exist between gatekeepers and interviewees (Crowhurst and Kennedy-Macfoy 2013), these are not always easy to recognize. I tried to involve as few people as possible in the logistics and conduction of interviews to avoid unnecessary social complexity. While interviews in Maiduguri could be arranged relatively easily and discreetly due to the anonymity of a bustling town, trips to the outskirts of Abuja were often more complicated endeavors, involving drivers, translators, gatekeepers, and community organizers. I ensured that interviews themselves took place in privacy, such as an empty classroom, quiet places outside in the shade, or informants' homes if they preferred, with only the translator present. The IDP settlements in the FCT are informal and self-organized, reducing the risk of individuals feeling pressured to participate because they might perceive me as affiliated with humanitarian organizations managing formal camps elsewhere. When I occasionally gained access through NGO staff, I took care to avoid arriving in their vehicles or displaying any signs of the organization. While I mostly had positive experiences with community leaders who cared about their people, there were a few rare instances of power abuse that led me to stop the interview process in specific locations (e.g., participants being pressured to hand over water bottles and compensations I provided). Over time, I therefore adjusted my approach and preferred to visit settlements closer to the city center. Improved accessibility allowed for more repeat visits to establish rapport and limit the number of external facilitators, both of which helped ensure that informants participated freely and that I adhered to the "do no harm" principle. A positive side effect was that I could make shorter yet more frequent visits, rather than maximizing the time and number of interviews in harder-to-reach locations. It gave me more control over the entire process, created a more relaxing and intimate interview atmosphere for everyone involved, and improved the quality of the data.

The interviews were conducted in Hausa or Kanuri, which meant that I always had a translator present. Although ten weeks of Hausa classes were sufficient to introduce myself and cause amusement among respondents, I was far from able to have in-depth conversations. I worked as much as possible with two translators who were introduced to me through personal connections in

Abuja. They were both from the Northeast and thus familiar with local customs. But they had somewhat different profiles. One was Monje, a young Christian woman with a law degree and interest in human rights, and the other Timothy, a mid-aged Muslim man. Timothy is a local researcher who has been documenting the conflict since its onset and therefore has an incredible wealth of detailed knowledge and contacts. He not only translated but also introduced me to key informants. I immensely benefitted from the rapport he had established with them. Especially in conflict settings where fear and suspicion are more likely to be encountered, being introduced through a local network can increase trust (N. Cohen and Arieli 2011). Although my status as a Western woman did not arouse much suspicion that I was working for the Department of State Services (DSS), which was a common fear among former male Boko Haram associates, Timothy's presence certainly provided reassurance to informants. The downside of my outsider status was that it conferred a level of respect that often gave the interview situation the appearance of a formal enterprise and impeded the friendly atmosphere for which I aimed. It was reassuring when respondents' body language and eye contact suggested that they became more relaxed. This usually went together with a more open and flowing conversation, but this state of ease was not always achieved. When it did, it was also thanks to my translators who told me if respondents seemed uncomfortable with a question, made occasional jokes to lighten the mood, and joined my attempts to provide comfort when someone showed emotions of distress or grief. Our intersecting identities, with different aspects becoming salient at different times (Bouka 2015; Schwedler 2006; Yacob-Haliso 2019), created countless constellations that affected participants' openness about their experiences. Ultimately, it also depended on personal sympathies, where I formed stronger bonds with some people than with others. Even among key informants with whom I spent a significant amount of time, I became quite close to some, while others maintained a more distant and colder demeanor towards me.

Especially in case of the latter, I gained the impression that "I don't know" or very short replies were forms of "counter control" (Kvale 2006, 485) to withhold information. I interpreted it as a sign to move on to another question or to cut the interview short. Generally speaking, there was a certain directness in conversations, not only in interview settings. It was clearly noticeable when someone had no interest in interacting with me or was dissatisfied. The majority, however, seemed willing to invest their time and energy in talking to me. This is not to say that respondents revealed their stories and secrets lightly. The process always entailed a certain unease and distrust, at least

at the beginning. As noted by Fuji (2010), denial, inventions, evasions, and silences are part of the behavioral repertoire in interviews on war and violence. It is very likely – and understandable – that some informants under-reported their involvement with Boko Haram, either by lying, omitting parts of their stories, or using “strategic ambiguities” (Warren 1998). However, even misrepresentations might not be a deliberate falsification but in fact their version of the truth that they hold on to for various reasons, including due to self-deception that makes us believe our own lies (Goleman 1996; Trivers 2000). In some cases, respondents elaborated or corrected earlier versions of their accounts as we built more trustful relationships. In other instances, asking probing questions about what I perceived as conflicting information was actually due to my lack of understanding or missing background information that would have connected the dots. Either way, I never directly challenged apparent misrepresentations or inaccuracies. As I saw it, people had neither an incentive to lie about everything nor to reveal everything.

In contrast to over-researched contexts (Clark 2008), participants had no ready versions of their conflict history and were rather puzzled by my visit and interest. Thus, the decision-making process regarding how much or little to share may have occurred during the interview, which explains some of the back and forth in their storytelling. It also raised the challenge of avoiding emotional and psychological harm when discussing untold and unprocessed memories, especially in a context where access to mental health care is scarce. Although I tried to act with extra precaution and empathy, as well as to avoid interviews with individuals who had exited Boko Haram only a few weeks or months prior, I was frequently concerned when asking questions about what had happened to them. Unfortunately, there is little evidence on the psychological impact that interviews about wartime experiences and violence have on research participants. Cilliers et al. (2016) found that taking part in a truth and reconciliation program in Sierra Leone worsened individuals’ psychological health. Seedat et al. (2004, 263), in contrast, argue that “the notion that participants are ‘re-traumatized’ through research participation may be inaccurate because perceptions of uncontrollability that characterize actual trauma cannot be equated with the experience of reliving an event in the controlled research setting”. They further note though that some discomfort is arguably inevitable when recounting tragic experiences, raising the question of what degree of discomfort, if any, can be justified. Nevertheless, many researchers describe that participants were pleased at the opportunity to tell their stories and welcomed what they interpreted as a practice that recognizes and respects their experience and expertise (Hoover Green 2018;

Lundy and McGovern 2006; E. J. Wood 2006). I share this impression based on informants' touching words of gratitude or calls to ask when I would return, but I could not help often feeling guilty about not offering any direct tangible support.

Although I treasure my time in Nigeria, it was not an easy place to navigate. During the first weeks, I relied heavily on a few personal contacts to learn the basics, from where to eat to how to move around safely. Maiduguri's security situation was particularly challenging due to frequent terrorist threats, while crime and road travel posed the primary risks in Abuja. However, the risk landscapes are complex and dynamic, making it advisable, especially for an independent researcher, to establish a network for accessing emergency alerts, daily monitoring reports, and security briefings. While I was certain that I would not want to affiliate with an aid organization, building institutional ties in the city proved valuable for embedding myself in the security infrastructure and connecting with knowledgeable individuals, such as diplomats and military officials. I generally refrained from discussing the specifics of my project to protect myself and my informants, such that I had to delicately balance sharing and withholding just enough detail to gain trust, be taken seriously, and obtain information without becoming vulnerable. In this regard, I did not feel unsafe interviewing former Boko Haram associates, whether civilians or combatants. However, I exercised greater caution during some elite interviews, particularly when they requested meetings in private locations, hotel rooms, or during nighttime hours. If I decided to proceed with such meetings, I would share the details and my GPS location with trusted contacts and schedule a check-in call at a specific time. Fortunately, there was never a need to activate any emergency plans. Ultimately, finding friends with whom I could share meals, laughter, and thoughts allowed me to unwind and maintain my emotional well-being.

Analysis

Interpreting narratives of the violent and ordinary aspects of daily life in rebel territory entailed verifying, systematizing, and contextualizing the data. As my objective was to explore the empirical realities of Boko Haram's governance and the subjective experiences of civilians, I used a descriptive-interpretivist approach, which is a middle path between realism and relativism (Rennie 2000). In practice, this meant that, first, I searched the material for descriptions of how rebel control materialized, such as in the form of events (e.g., attacks, abductions, occupation) and

the institutional infrastructure (e.g., rules, distribution of civilian labor, ideological training, chain of command). The analysis was thus grounded in the identification of emerging themes for theory development (Charmaz 2014; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Secondary material, including academic research, news articles, and reports from international organizations, were important sources of “within-method” triangulation (Denzin 1978, 301), and added information and context.

Second, I analyzed individuals’ narratives regarding their own engagement with Boko Haram. As already touched on, these accounts cannot be taken as objective facts, raising questions about their reliability. While this is generally true for qualitative research, cross-checking and controlling for accuracy is much more difficult in conflict zones where “access to informants is restricted and one has to depend on whom one can get close to” (Helbardt, Hellmann-Rajanayagam, and Korff 2010, 258). On the one hand, I tried to mitigate these concerns during the data collection process by relying on multiple networks to recruit informants as well as by establishing rapport to elicit honest responses. I also triangulated my interview material with narratives published elsewhere. I did not take the narratives at face value but analyzed them to identify “patterns of meaning” and “logics” (Fujii 2011, 42) that reveal how respondents made sense of their own and other people’s behavior. Rather than treating their statements as exact reflections of the truth, I analyzed their narratives to gain a contextualized understanding of their conflict involvement. I explored how respondents discursively positioned themselves in the rebel landscape, how they interpreted Boko Haram’s rules and norms, and how they phrased their relations to insurgents, status in the organization, and acts of resistance.

Comparing narratives of respondents shed light on both the heterogeneity and similarities of civilian experiences. Additionally, by comparing different parts of the same informant’s account, it was possible to track changes in their wartime trajectories over time, both in terms of their roles within the organization and their perceptions of their own behavior as well as that of the insurgents. Teasing out these similarities and differences across and within narrative accounts gradually revealed patterns of cooperation dynamics. By disentangling underpinning factors and social processes in the search for causal mechanisms, I could trace these patterns back to variation in Boko Haram’s governance practices. It was thus the careful resolving of tensions created by contradictory narratives that drove the inductive, iterative theorizing process. The single case study design allowed to identify and leverage such sources of variation (George and Bennett 2005), as I

could examine different rebel-civilian relations across time and space while holding group characteristics (e.g., ideology, resources, leadership) and political, economic, and cultural factors at the macro-level constant. While this design comes with inevitable trade-offs in terms of representativeness and generalizability (Gerring 2016), the findings that link micro- and meso-level dynamics provide “partial, situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988; Murray 1983) that can bring us closer to the larger picture of how civilian cooperation and insurgent war-making interact in conflict zones.

TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL PATTERNS OF THE INSURGENCY AND CIVILIAN CONTROL

Boko Haram became notorious for its violence against civilians that spread across territories and demographics. The kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in the town of Chibok, a record-high employment of female suicide bombers, and the killing and forced conscription of thousands of boys have shaped the image of the group internationally. Despite having been called defeated numerous times, the rebels have managed to wage a violent campaign against the Nigerian state and the people in the Northeast for over a decade. Boko Haram has proven to be adaptable and persistent. It has leveraged its polymorphous existence as a religious movement, guerrilla and terrorist organization, and conventional insurgency, responding to challenges and capitalizing on opportunities that have emerged over time and across different locations.

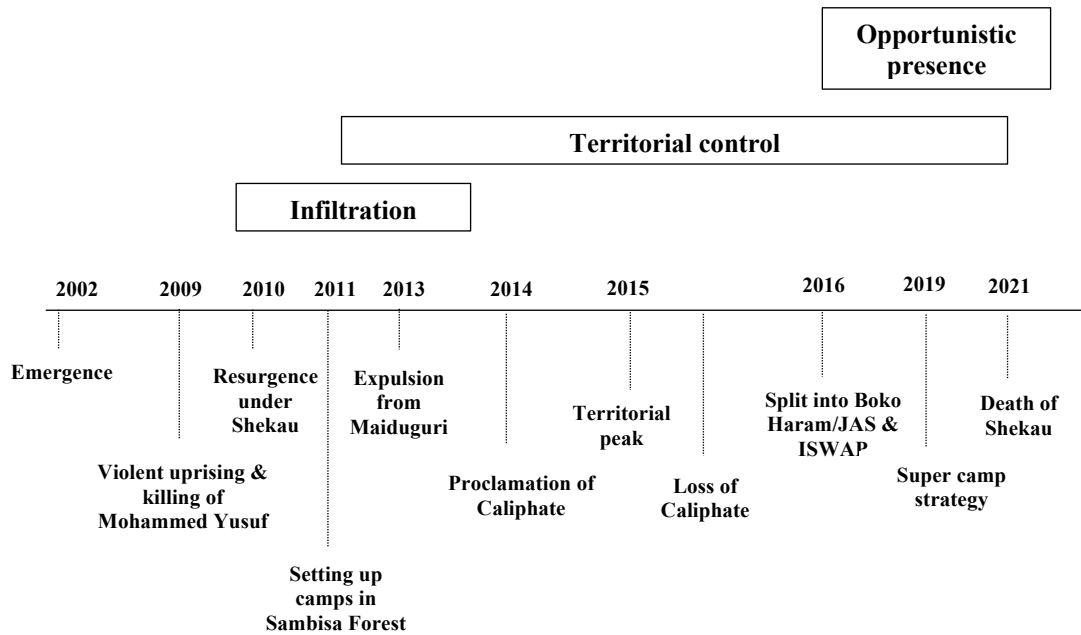
Scholars have analyzed the origins, drivers, and development of the sect from various angles. They have examined its historical, political, and ideological roots in the context of the region's tradition of Islamic reformist groups (Abubakar 2017; Iyekekpolo 2016; Last 2009, 2014; Loimeier 2011; Walker 2016) and contemporary intra-Muslim and intra-religious dissent (Mustapha and Bunza 2014; Mustapha and Ehrhardt 2018). The group's strategic responses to an escalating war with the Nigerian state, international partners, and civilian vigilantes have also been the subject of study (Agbibo 2013; Comolli 2015; M. Smith 2015; Thurston 2018), as have its fractionalization (Kassim 2018a; O. S. Mahmood and Ani 2018a) and connections to global jihadist movements (Mahmoud 2018; Nwankpa 2020; Zenn 2014c, 2020c). Others have demonstrated how social, economic, and political marginalization have helped to fill Boko Haram's ranks (Meagher and Hassan 2020; Mustapha 2014; Onuoha 2014; Varin 2016), as has state violence (Faluyi, Khan, and Akinola 2019; de Montclos 2020; Sanda 2020). Violence against the civilian population, especially

the victimization and weaponization of women and girls, have also been explored (Bloom and Matfess 2016; Matfess 2017; Okoli and Nnaemeka Azom 2019; Oriola 2017; Pearson 2018).

Clearly, all these factors have had an impact on the relationship between the insurgents and civilians in one way or another. A look at statistical trends in Boko Haram's patterns of violence reveals that the force against civilians, relative to other targets and forms of violence, has remained fairly consistent. Between 2014 and 2019, about 40 percent of recorded violent events have been violence against civilians, 52 percent have been battles with security forces, and 8 percent have been remote violence, according to ACLED data (Matfess 2019). Violence against civilians, just like other forms of violence, grew and shrunk as part of fluctuations in overall activity and within-year seasonal spikes and lulls. This suggests that there was no major shift in its policy of civilian targeting.

However, broadening the view beyond violence, this chapter demonstrates that Boko Haram's warfare was associated with different strategies of population control and engagement. As its capacity changed, so too did its approach toward territory and people living therein. The group flexibly employed different strategies in response to external and internal conditions. Against this backdrop, the aim of the chapter is threefold: First, it contextualizes civilian-rebel relations within the general arc of the insurgency from its inception to the present. Second, it argues that Boko Haram devised different, localized strategies to gain power over civilians by leveraging geographical and social spaces, namely through infiltration, territorial control, and opportunistic presence. These strategies were not mutually exclusive but existed alongside each other (see below). Third, it demonstrates how the power dynamics between the insurgents and other armed actors defined Boko Haram's scope of governance. The chapter draws on primary and secondary sources, including interview data, academic literature, reports, news articles, public statements from Boko Haram, and violent event databases.

FIGURE 4: TIMELINE OF INFILTRATION, TERRITORIAL CONTROL, AND OPPORTUNISTIC PRESENCE



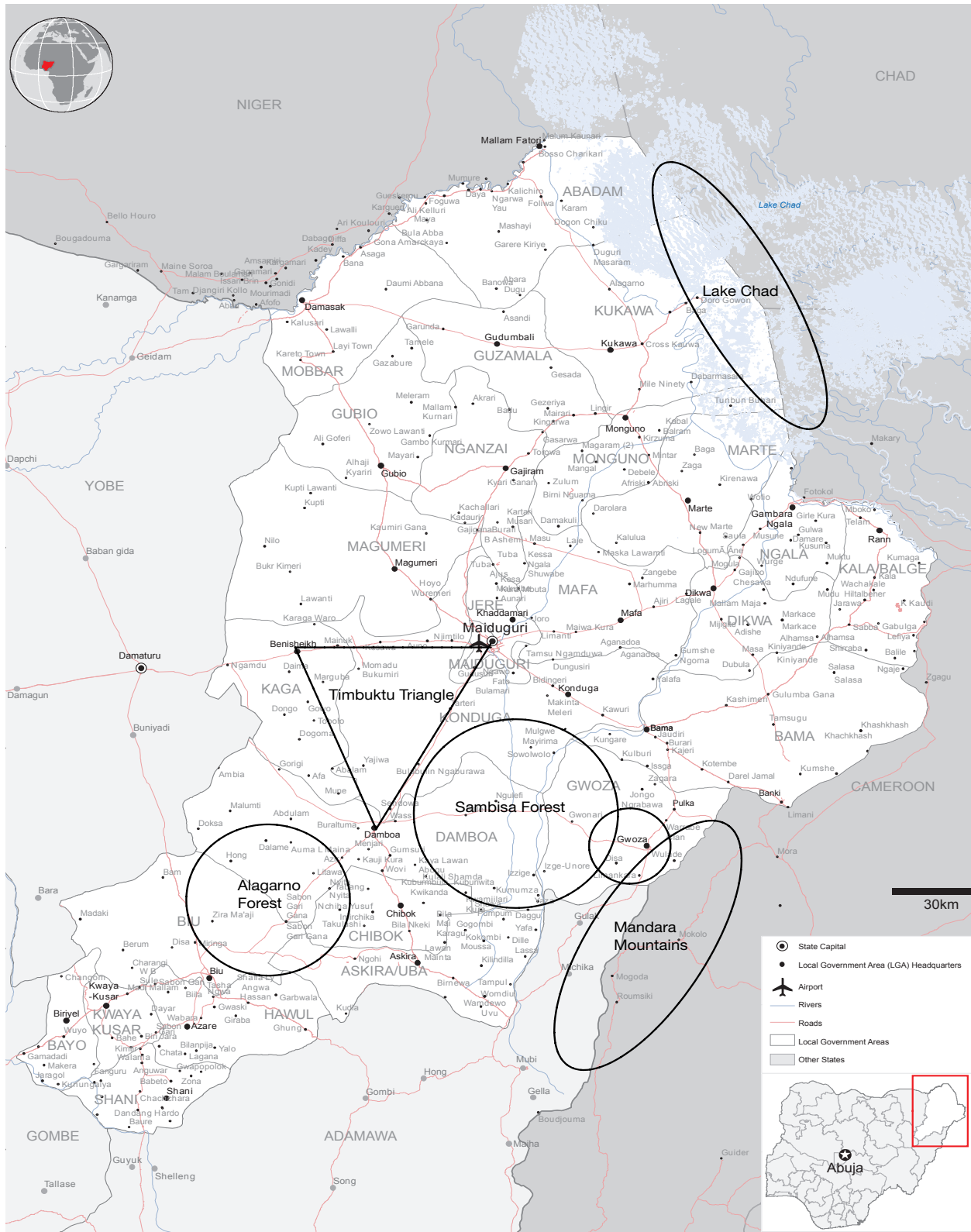
To lay the foundation, the chapter begins with a summary of the movement’s emergence within the context of socio-economic conditions, intra-Muslim dissent, and contentious politics in Northeast Nigeria. Boko Haram’s infiltration strategy under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau between 2010 and 2014 and highlights the initial subtle approach that the group used to create clandestine networks and progressively establish their authority. As the sect grew, Boko Haram increasingly and openly challenged the authority of traditional and religious leaders, settling in and meddling with communities. The rise of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) as Boko Haram’s primary opponent during this period is also examined, along with the consequential spatial, tactical, and ideological shifts within the insurgency. By delving into the cooperative and antagonistic dynamics between the insurgents and the communities they aimed to control, this chapter illustrates the impact of Boko Haram on the social fabric and local governance, even in the absence of official territorial control.

In 2014, Boko Haram underwent a significant shift, evolving from an informal presence to actively vying for territorial control to impose its rule. This chapter outlines the transition from guerrilla warfare to conventional military confrontation in a bid to establish an Islamic state. The struggle for power was largely defined by the interaction between national and regional militaries and the

insurgency's state-building efforts. Despite the rise and fall of their short-lived caliphate, Boko Haram consistently maintained control over strongholds, especially inside Sambisa Forest, which served as indispensable bases of operation and destination for recruits and supplies throughout the conflict. By providing an overview of the geographic context of the group's territorial expansion and retreat, this chapter lays the groundwork for subsequent chapters to scrutinize governance and civilian roles within these spaces.

The analysis centers on Boko Haram's adaptation to constrained capacity by employing a strategy of opportunistic presence based on freedom of movement, enabling the group to exert control over communities without investing in governance structures or risking military backlash from other armed actors. This discussion underscores the pivotal influence of internal logistical and organizational struggles and the emergence of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) on Boko Haram's tactics since 2016, as well as the ramifications of Nigerian security forces' inferiority for both insurgents and civilians. Moreover, this chapter investigates the ways civilians in affected regions have sought to coexist with Boko Haram amid its opportunistic presence and the challenges it presents.

FIGURE 5: MAP OF BORNO STATE WITH BOKO HARAM STRONGHOLDS



SOURCE: UN OCHA (2018); edited by author

Building the foundations

“This guy Muhammad Yusuf, he did a wonderful job – assuming this thing didn’t happen, that boy could have been a hero, you know”, said Aisha Wakil, also known as Mama Boko Haram due to her connections to young members of the group (Pulse Nigeria 2016). The Salafi preacher started the social movement in 2002 in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state in Northeast Nigeria, where he established the Ibn Taymiyyah Mosque near the town’s railway station. He became popular in the Railway Quarter and beyond by providing social and economic services in a country that has not managed to turn its rapid economic growth into poverty reduction and employment generation. Neither the democratic transition in 1999, nor the implementation of Sharia in twelve Northern states between 1999 and 2001 brought about the awaited improvements in public goods provision and good governance (Kendhammer 2016). About 83 million Nigerians continue to live in poverty – more than 40 percent of the population (World Bank 2022). A disproportionate number of them are located in the North, where access to education, provision of health services, and standard of living are significantly lower than in the South (OPHI 2022). Literacy rates are at 14 percent in Borno compared to 92 percent in Lagos (NBS 2010), and maternal mortality rates in the Northeast are twice the national average (WHO 2018). Such horizontal inequalities compared to Southern zones are as much a legacy of colonial Indirect Rule policies and the result of the relatively limited spread of Western education as they are the product of liberalization and global economic integration (Meagher 2013). Against this backdrop, “The community perception about [Boko Haram] was that ... they are a new sect that is coming in peace because at the beginning they showed love and concern, and [they] provided things to needy people of the community”, recollected a young woman from Borno (Mercy Corps 2016, 14).

Additionally, Yusuf’s responses to the challenges at the time, from intra-Islamic debates to power struggles in the political marketplace, appealed religiously and politically to a wide population. According to Thurston (2018), who has written extensively about Boko Haram’s ideological roots and evolution, Yusuf’s preaching contained a core doctrine of religious exclusivism that has hardened over time. “Yusuf not only advocated a singular interpretation of what he considered true Islam; he also demanded that Muslims choose, immediately, between Islam and a set of allegedly anti-Islamic practices: democracy, constitutionalism, alliances with non-Muslims, and Western-style education” (Thurston 2018, 106). His rejection of democracy, that justified the fight against

the Nigerian government, and his rejection of Western-style schooling, which earned the group the name Boko Haram (Western education is forbidden/sinful), became his most famous positions. He based his political messages on interrelated doctrines of Salafism, which is a branch of Sunni Islam that is puritanical and literalist in its interpretation of the Quran and hadiths.³⁰ The style and content of Yusuf's preaching excited people. He attracted crowds because "the Islamic teaching with Yusuf was really very excellent", according to a young woman from Banki who joined Boko Haram (Matfess 2017, 16).

Yusuf's ideological views and their appeal can be seen in the context of both a long-lasting history and a recent manifestation of religious dissent in Northern Nigeria that revolves around the question what it means to be a Muslim. "The Boko Haram incident follows a pattern that goes back at least 200 years in Northern Nigeria", states Last (2009, 11). In 1808, Dan Fodio's jihad against the Hausa rulers who were not Islamic enough led to the establishment of an expansive Islamic state, the Sokoto Caliphate, for whose restoration radical Salafi-jihadi groups are still calling (Abubakar 2017). But Boko Haram's ideological roots in contemporary Salafism, which was "profoundly shaped by the massive social and intellectual upheavals of colonization and decolonization" (Kendhammer and McCain 2018, 51), also link it to a twentieth century phenomenon. Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, tremendous changes in the social, political, and religious landscape took place. In the South, ethno-religious tensions escalated in a civil war from 1967 to 1970. In the North, a fragmentation of sacred authority set in where the traditional emirs' system of control and power began to weaken, Sufi-Salafi conflict arose and dissident sects emerged (Kane 2003). Among those dissidents were movements such as *'Yan Izala* in 1978 and the *Maitatsine* sect, with the latter often described as a direct precursor to Boko Haram due to ideological similarities and brutal government responses (Mustapha and Bunza 2014). While Yusuf's mutually beneficial connection to Ali Modu Sheriff, the then-candidate and later elected governor of Borno state, meant that the government turned a blind eye to the violence Boko Haram carried out against critics, this changed as their alliance eroded and the sect escalated its activities. President Yar'Adua authorized a military crackdown in 2009, resulting in the

³⁰ It advocates the return to and emulation of the purest form of Islam practiced by the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-sālih*), believed to be the first three generations of Muslims, beginning with the prophet Muhammad and his companions (Maher 2016)

extrajudicial killings of approximately 800 suspected group members in door-to-door raids, including Yusuf while in police custody. Police brutality, which continues to be a source of deep-seated frustration among citizens as seen in the 2020 “EndSARS” protests (Ojewale 2021), fueled some sympathy for Boko Haram and distrust toward the government, allowing Yusuf’s ideas and followers to outlast his death.

Infiltration

Boko Haram resurged on the scene in 2010 under the new leadership of Abubakar Shekau, who transformed a repressed religious movement into a full-grown jihadist organization with a “wartime ideology” (Thurston 2018, 142). Over the next four years, it unfolded its repertoire of violence and capacity to infiltrate urban and rural areas. Despite the 2009 crackdown, the group still had a grip on Maiduguri and maintained “its own institutions, including a shura council to make decisions and a religious police force to enforce discipline” (Walker 2016). In addition to targeted assassinations of political and religious opponents, the network of members and informants in the town altered community relations. A former resident explained:

They were living among us, and information was circulating. That was why people stopped talking to each other. There was no trust anymore, not even between family and friends. I remember one incident where a son shot his mom and dad because the parents had confided to a friend that he had joined Boko Haram. I am telling you...everything changed. People didn’t help each other and were not hospitable anymore, but just stayed inside. During *ramadan*, one person usually cooks for everyone in the evening (*iftar*), but no one did that anymore because it could have attracted attention. It was all hidden. There was no clear communication about all of this.³¹

Boko Haram thus created a pervasive atmosphere of fear, distrust, and social fragmentation, with residents becoming increasingly isolated and fearful, refraining from customary practices. This pattern was not restricted to Maiduguri. Boko Haram was perceived as a predominantly urban phenomenon back then, despite its presence in rural areas at that time, which received less attention. Thanks to Yusuf’s preaching, the movement already had a network in the countryside, but the upheaval in Maiduguri echoed across the entire Northeast. People who had sought

³¹ Interview with Sini, February 2020.

employment in the city returned to their home communities for safety and spread the word. This created fear among many, but also sympathy among others. “In 2012, I heard that a new religion had emerged. They would come to teach us how to fight the government and that they would not hurt us. My cousin had gone to Maiduguri to join them and told us these things”, Asabe, a young woman from Ngoshe remembered.³² Shekau initially continued Yusuf’s approach of offering economic opportunities, which helped the sect grow. By giving loans to start businesses, they created ties with community members who then tried to get other relatives, friends, neighbors, or colleagues involved (Botha and Abdile 2019; Mercy Corps 2016). Umar, a young man from Kukawa recalled that “so many of [his] friends joined the group. They started to distance themselves from [him] after they noticed that [he] was not interested”.³³ Recruitment was accompanied by “silent killings” or *kashe mutane a gida gida* (“killing people home by home”). As the name suggests, the targets, especially religious leaders, Christians, government workers, and students, were murdered in their homes at night.³⁴ Because of its hidden violence and subtle approach of gaining a foothold in communities, Boko Haram was said to be “invisible”.³⁵ This allowed the sect to expand its presence until the media reported in April 2013 that ten of 27 LGAs in Central and Northern Borno state were “grounded” by the sect, especially at village and district levels (The Nation 2013).³⁶

In response, the 2013 state of emergency covering Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe deployed a military Joint Task Force (JTF) of 8,000 soldiers to urban strongholds. Its troops from all over Nigeria compensated for a lack of local knowledge with brutality, mass arrests, and extra-judicial killings (Amnesty International 2015b). Not only did this approach incur a heavy cost on the population, but it was also ineffective in confronting the insurgents who blended in with ordinary people. Against this backdrop, in May 2013, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) was formed by a group of predominantly young men who sought to take the protection of their communities into their own hands. The “youths with sticks” (*yan gora*) effectively, but not uncontroversially, supported the military with their understanding of the local terrain and their own communities that enabled them

³² Interview with Asabe, February 2020.

³³ Interview with Umar, February 2020.

³⁴ Interview with Sa’adatu, February 2020.

³⁵ Interview with Laraba, January 2020.

³⁶ Affected LGAs were Marte, Magumeri, Mobbar, Gubio, Guzamala, Abadam, Kukawa, Kaga, Nganzai and Monguno.

to identify and capture Boko Haram members that lived among them or entered localities.³⁷ In light of the grassroots development of the civilian vigilante movement and the local support it enjoyed, Shekau started to see a large segment of the civilian population as working against him. He adopted a stricter “us vs them” version of *takfir* that declared every Muslim who did not side with Boko Haram an unbeliever, and thus a legitimate target to be killed (Kassim 2018a). Due to the heavy-handed counterinsurgency by the JTF and CJTF, Boko Haram lost its urban strongholds in mid-2013. This caused a geographical shift towards rural areas of Central-East and Southern Borno (Mohammed 2020, 190),³⁸ described by a Nigerian security source as “the toothpaste effect: squeeze one end and it comes out the other” (Brock 2013).

The insurgents settled in villages where they now very visibly and aggressively preached, recruited, kidnapped, stole, and carried out full-scale attacks. Sympathies were no longer hidden but became clear and divisive:

After a lot of battle with the security forces in Maiduguri, some of them moved to our village [in Gwoza LGA] and shared their ideology with us. They gathered young people and preached. They said this is the work of *allāh*. Those who wanted to join discussed among themselves. Those who didn’t want to join were scared and didn’t come outside anymore.³⁹

Boko Haram members dominated communities by controlling markets, deciding who was allowed to go to the mosque, arranging marriages, and challenging the authority of religious and traditional leaders.⁴⁰ Due to the successful establishment of clandestine networks, many women married into the sect voluntarily or were offered as brides to insurgents by their families (Oriola 2017, 105).⁴¹ Where they had no permanent presence, “[t]hey kept going in and out unexpectedly. Sometimes

³⁷ Scholars have examined the CJTF from different perspectives, including its emergence, development, and success (Agbiboa 2020; Bamidele 2017; J. T. Omenma and Hendricks 2018). It has been studied as an expression of youth activism (Agbiboa 2015) but also as a source of human rights abuses (Amnesty International 2015b; United Nations Security Council 2019) and risk to post-conflict recovery (Hassan and Pieri 2018; Ibrahim and Bala 2018; International Crisis Group 2017). Civilian perceptions of the CJTF have been assessed as well and reflect the mixed track record (Center for Civilians in Conflict 2018).

³⁸ Especially in Bama, Banki, Gwoza, Damboa, New Marte, Kirenowa, and Gamboru Ngala.

³⁹ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

⁴⁰ Interview with Sabo, February 2020.

⁴¹ Interview with Blessing, November 2019.

up to three times per week”, said Yusuf, a 33-year-old carpenter from Ngoshe who left the community when attacks grew in frequency.

To summarize, Boko Haram’s infiltration strategy played a pivotal role in expanding its sphere of influence, even prior to officially claiming territory. Developing clandestine networks and embedding themselves in communities enabled the insurgents to subtly and progressively interfere in civilian affairs. This approach affected the social fabric of localities, causing an environment of distrust and fragmentation, especially where affiliations of community members were unknown. While some were drawn to the sect, others took matters into their own hands to fight back. Grassroots efforts proved more effective than the military’s indiscriminate violence. These opposing yet interconnected dynamics fueled the growth of the rebel ranks – both out of sympathy for the group and out of resentment of the government – while the CJTF forced Boko Haram into a tactical and geographical shift, from urban centers to rural areas and from Central-North to Central-South Borno state. It also led Shekau to adopt a more aggressive stance toward the local population, which reverberated through its ideology and tactics. Consequently, Boko Haram’s infiltration strategy made use of spatial and social opportunities but also brought to the fore the complicated power dynamics between insurgents and the communities they sought to control.

Territorial control

In 2014, Boko Haram transitioned from informally establishing a presence to openly contesting territory. National and regional militaries became the main players to define the insurgency’s state-building project. Borno’s then-governor Kashim Shettima acknowledged that the insurgents were “better armed and motivated” than government forces, making “it absolutely impossible for us to defeat Boko Haram” (VOA News 2014). Several high-profile attacks confirmed this impression. Among those were an attack on the heart of the military establishment, the heavily fortified Giwa Barracks, in February to free fellow fighters and the abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok in April. Further emboldened, Boko Haram started a month-long fight over Damboa, a major trading center and strategic garrison town about 85km South of Maiduguri, in June and July 2014. The insurgents first drove the military and civilians out of surrounding villages (Reuters 2014). Then they chased the security forces out and appropriated their equipment, leaving the town protected only by the CJTF. In a final assault, they fired rocket-propelled grenades, threw bombs into homes,

displaced around 15,000 people, and killed over a hundred who tried to escape the burning town (The Guardian 2014). Black flags, like the ones they raised over the traditional ruler's house and villages in Damboa, soon waved over most of Borno and Adamawa state. In August, the group took control of Gwoza town. The attacks followed a standard procedure. Chants of “*Allahu Akbar*” and the sound of real and audio-taped gunshots harbingered death and destruction. Knadija, a 40-year-old woman who was pregnant and about to start her National Diploma when Boko Haram invaded Gwoza town and killed her husband, gave a typical description of events:

They arrived like a jet – it was so unexpected. They wore military uniforms, so we first thought they were soldiers, but they had rubber shoes, which is not the right footwear for soldiers. They had vehicles and horses, long new battle knives, and different kinds of guns. They threw bombs. When they attacked, the soldiers had no chance. They even put on civilian clothing to escape. It looked like there were more Boko Haram fighters than inhabitants of the town. When they came in, they split into groups. Some burnt churches and buildings, some went into houses. When you are a boy above ten years old, they kill you. They take young women away and lock up the middle-aged women they like.⁴²

Shekau declared Gwoza the headquarter of the Islamic state (*dawla Islamiyyah*) that no longer belonged to Nigeria: “All praise be to Allah who granted victory to our brothers in Gwoza, where they established an Islamic Caliphate. ... We do not have anything to do with Nigeria. In this land of ours, we govern by Allah's Book and the Sunna of the Prophet” (Kassim, Nwankpa, and Cook 2018, 322–23). In contrast to the Nigerian soldiers who lacked local knowledge, manpower, and weaponry,⁴³ Boko Haram operated in familiar turf with local networks and was on a winning streak. The insurgents took over LGA capitals in South-Central Borno such as Mubi, Chibok, and Bama, the second largest town in Borno, as well as Madagali, Gulak and Michika in Adamawa state. Northern LGAs at the shores of Lake Chad and the Nigerien border followed, where they seized Baga, Abadam, Mallam Fatori, and Damasak (Mohammed 2020) and carried out massacres of up to 2,000 civilians in CJTF-heavy towns (The Guardian 2015). At that point, the group's territorial control peaked. It reached from Southern Borno up to the Lake Chad and comprised 20

⁴² Interview with Knadija, February 2020.

⁴³ After the military defeat in Gwoza, around 40 soldiers refused orders to deploy. They argued that “soldiers are dying like fowl” without being given enough weapons and ammunition (BBC News 2014a).

out of 27 LGAs in Borno, including the main access roads in and out of Maiduguri, as well as parts of Yobe and Adamawa state (News Express Nigeria 2014).

In 2015, the tables started to turn. The upcoming presidential elections raised the national political stakes, and Nigeria's neighbors became impatient in light of Boko Haram's increased transnational attacks. The border areas had already been an easily accessible source of supply and recruits since 2012,⁴⁴ but regular raids and bombings in Niger's Diffa region and Far North Cameroon regionalized the warzone. Boko Haram overran Baga, the base of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), leading the African Union's Peace and Security Council to agree in February to deploy 8,500 soldiers and move the headquarters to the Chadian capital N'Djamena. The MNJTF was further backed by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom (M. Smith 2015). Chadian forces retook border towns as joint airstrikes and ground assaults by soldiers from Cameroon, Niger, Chad, and Nigeria pushed the insurgents further back.⁴⁵ As the group saw its fighters dying and its caliphate crumbling, Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State's leader al-Baghdadi (*bay'ah*) on March 7. Ahead of elections on March 28, the Nigerian military first cleared Adamawa, then Yobe state, and ultimately Borno by recapturing Bama and Gwoza (BBC News 2015b; Ibeh 2015). Although some towns remained contested, falling in and out of government control, the insurgents had to resort to guerrilla tactics against security and civilian targets, with increasing use of female suicide bombings (Pearson 2018). In addition to these deadly attempts to cling on to power, Boko Haram decided to go down in flames where loss was inevitable. On retreat they looted, abducted, killed, and burnt, leaving an uninhabitable path of destruction behind when they moved back to their bases in and around Sambisa Forest, the Timbuktu triangle, and the shores and islands of Lake Chad (Amnesty International 2015a).

While Boko Haram's caliphate rose and fell within less than a year, control over the Sambisa Forest has been a constant throughout the conflict. Sambisa has been the group's headquarters, home of high-level commanders, and destination for thousands of recruits, abductees, and supplies.

⁴⁴ "When you go to border villages, all you see are women and children and old people. Young [men], between the ages of 10 and 45 are no longer there. They are across the [Nigerian] border with Boko Haram militants", said Colonel Joseph Nouma of the Maroua Defense Regiment in the Far North (The New Humanitarian 2015).

⁴⁵ Chadian and Cameroonian soldiers were feared by the insurgents: "They are not afraid and don't run away like the Nigerian soldiers. They are harsh and finish everyone off, even women and children" (Interview with Musa, November 2019), which some explained with their use of juju (Interview with Ynusa, March 2020).

It is a former colonial game reserve with dense vegetation about 60 kilometers Southeast of Maiduguri. Its area of approximately 60,000km² reaches Askira in the South, Damboa and Konduga in the Southwest and West, and Gwoza LGA with the Mandara Mountains bordering with Cameroon in the East. In a spirit of anticipation and adaptation, the group began to set-up bases in the forest in mid-2011. They significantly expanded them into a web of camps and Ibrahim Tada Nglayike, an influential local Boko Haram unit leader in Gwoza, set up another enclave in the Gwoza hills at the foot of the Mandara Mountains after they were expelled from Maiduguri (Zenn 2014a). The group also stretched to the West where they created camps in the Alagarno Forest about 150km south of Maiduguri; however, these camps were more exposed and vulnerable to air strikes than those in Sambisa (M. Mahmood 2022). Alagarno falls within the so-called Timbuktu triangle in South-Central Borno in which Boko Haram made use of wastelands and the forest belt to establish hideouts and to control nearby main transport routes.⁴⁶ Settlements on the shores and islands of Lake Chad along the borders of Nigeria, Niger, and Chad were established in mid-2015, granting even wider geographic flexibility. These enclaves offered natural barriers to counterinsurgency operations and served as vital lifelines, despite being repeatedly hit by ground and air offensives under the command of “Operation Lafiya Dole” (O. S. Mahmood and Ani 2018b, 12–13).⁴⁷ Sambisa in particular has been essential to the group’s trajectory, functioning as a sanctuary from which Boko Haram cyclically expanded its reach and to which it retreated when necessary.

Opportunistic presence and freedom of movement

The fall of the proto-state was followed by internal struggles that hampered the further pursuit of territorial ambitions. First, the insurgents suffered from a food shortage that not only left Boko

⁴⁶ It broadly covers the axis from Maiduguri to Benisheikh in Kaga LGA, southwards to Damboa, and northwards again to Maiduguri. In addition to hide-outs, it also gave Boko Haram access to main transport routes, such as the Maiduguri-Bama-Gwoza, Maiduguri-Damboa-Biu, and Damaturu-Buni Yadi-Biu Road on which they mounted checkpoints and killed travelers, such as during the massacre of Benisheikh in September 2013 (Agbibo 2022a, 116).

⁴⁷ On December 24, 2016, Buhari announced that the military had driven the militants out of Sambisa after a two-week-long offensive, marking “the final crushing of Boko Haram terrorists in their last enclave in Sambisa Forest” (The Guardian 2016a). According to an army spokesman, they had arrested 1,240 suspected Boko Haram members and had found Shekau’s personal copy of the Quran in his headquarter “Camp Zairo”, which used to be a military training camp for the National Guard under military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. The next day, Shekau released a statement assuring that Boko Haram was “safe” and had “not been flushed out of anywhere” (Kingimi 2016).

Haram hungry, but also about 6.9 million people in the BAY states. As a result, dozens of fighters along with women and children surrendered to military officials begging for food while others tried to raid supplies in Northern Cameroon (Searcey 2016a). Second, Shekau's ruthless approach of targeting Muslims and his autocratic leadership style caused internal frictions that were in the making for a while but escalated in mid-2016. Shekau resisted IS' and internal demands to reduce Muslim civilian casualties and stop the use of children as suicide bombers; Mamman Nur, a charismatic and educated former ally to Mohammed Yusuf, Yusuf's son Abu Musab al-Barnawi, and likeminded critics of Shekau left and took over the Lake Chad bases as the new IS-recognized leaders of ISWAP. The military setback, supply shortages, and the split into two factions curtailed Shekau's territory and manpower from 2016 onwards.

The altered power balance prompted the reorientation to guerilla warfare. From Sambisa they hit communities in South-Central Borno and along the Cameroonian border close to Mayo-Sava and Mayo-Tsanaga in the Far North Region and, from 2019, also targeted areas around Lake Chad.⁴⁸ The militants carried out suicide bombings against soft and military targets, hit-and-run attacks, and ambushes. While high-profile attacks on urban centers and IDP camps were attempts to flex muscles, rural insecurity became a persistent and defining feature. In their well-established manner, the insurgents continued to raid communities that remained the main supply source, making regular looting of foodstuff, fuel, and other basic goods a necessity for sustaining the movement. Boko Haram also continued to rely on coercion as a main pillar of its recruitment strategy (J. Omenma, Hendricks, and Ajaebili 2020), which also targeted children. According to a Security Council report (United Nations Security Council 2020), Shekau's faction abducted 1,385 children between 2017 and 2019, of which 415 were girls and 969 were boys. Punitive killings for "un-Islamic" behavior aimed to enforce basic cooperation. Those also included retaliatory attacks against CJTF members, their communities, and others alleged of spying for the military or militias, often farmers, hunters or people fetching firewood outside of settlements. Villagers in Konduga reported that fighters went on a rampage, killing people for allegedly having provided information to the military about the movement's whereabouts that had led to an airstrike on hideouts in Damboa (Abubkar 2017). The retaliatory throat-slitting of 110 rice farmers in Koshebe village in

⁴⁸ Bakura expanded the group's capacity in Northern Borno. The Lake Chad-based faction was first associated with ISWAP but then shifted allegiance to Shekau in 2019 (Zenn 2020a, 2020b).

Jere LGA in November 2020 followed the same logic (Paquette 2020). Although the general patterns were not new, they differed from infiltration and occupation in that the insurgents created an opportunistic presence in the countryside, while formalized civilian governance was limited to base camps. They moved in and out of communities relatively unhindered to get supplies, recruits, and obedience as needed. These sporadic disruptions became a regular part of everyday life for villagers who did not live among insurgents or within seized territory. According to a security and counterterrorism expert, “Boko Haram is no longer interested in seizing territory but in freedom of movement”.⁴⁹

The Nigerian government’s 2017 policy of gathering soldiers and displaced civilians in garrison towns, such as in Bama, Dikwa, Gwoza, Monguno, and Pulka, has contributed to Boko Haram’s freedom of movement (Carsten and Lanre 2017; Kurtzer 2020). Inside these barely rebuilt towns surrounded by trenches, civilians trade their independence for alleged security (Carsten and Lanre 2017). Unable to fish, farm or move beyond a small security perimeter, they rely on humanitarian aid to survive (Kurtzer 2020). The 1.2 million people living outside these towns continue to be inaccessible to humanitarian actors (Baret 2019). These so-called “super camps” were supposed to allow troops to respond quickly and flexibly to militant threats. However, the strategy has been criticized as a mere attempt to halt the overpowering of soldiers and military barracks that left Boko Haram “better armed than ever” (Searcey 2019). Soldiers being re-tasked to support the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic made the situation worse (Bukarti 2020; J. Campbell 2020). Both ISWAP and Boko Haram have made use of the available space. They have moved around even more freely than before, bolstered their supply chains, and increased their authority over areas where the military has been de facto absent (Samuel 2020b). In addition to the usual ambushes along transport routes, they have established permanent checkpoints in their areas of influence.⁵⁰ Although the military may have reduced the risk of more battle deaths and

⁴⁹ Interview with security and counterterrorism expert, December 2019.

⁵⁰ The roads east of Maiduguri past Mafa and Konduga as well as south of Damboa have been considered unsafe by humanitarian personnel already before 2019 (O. S. Mahmood and Ani 2018a). Permanent checkpoints were erected by Boko Haram on several roads in Borno, including those leading through Konduga, Damboa, and Kaga LGA. Since many of these roads connect markets, people have to continue using them nevertheless (Samuel 2020b).

theft of military material,⁵¹ it has also given both factions free rein over large parts of Borno's countryside (Zenn 2019).

Consequently, insurgents managed to project power beyond their bush camps, forcing civilians, particularly in South-Central Borno near the edges of Sambisa, to coexist with Boko Haram while facing persistent threats of raids, abductions, and retaliatory assaults. Instead of pursuing resource-intensive governance efforts, the insurgents opted for a fluid approach, exploiting and enforcing basic cooperation among villagers through their sporadic and opportunistic presence. Initially a reaction to diminished capacity and spatial opportunities, this strategy proved effective in rebuilding organizational strength. Given the military's inability to counter this development, it is uncertain whether the opportunistic presence became the preferred governance approach. However, it is plausible that it was an attempt to avoid retaliation from the stronger ISWAP faction. This endeavor ultimately proved unsuccessful, as Shekau detonated a suicide vest during negotiations with ISWAP, who had stormed the Sambisa stronghold in May 2021 (Adebajo and Abdullahi 2021). This event underscores that the most significant constraints on Boko Haram's power during this period arose from within its own ranks. While Shekau's death has marked the beginning of a new era with ISWAP expanding and consolidating its control over rural Borno, remnants of Boko Haram are struggling to persist.⁵² What this means for civilians remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Much has happened since Mohammed Yusuf preached against Western-style education, secular institutions, and "un-Islamic" practices in the early 2000s. By linking old grievances and new political developments to simple doctrinal solutions, he amassed a following. Thereby, he laid the foundations for the movement to morph into a jihadist organization under Shekau's leadership.

⁵¹ Nevertheless, successful attacks on the MNJTF and associated national armed forces have likely left Boko Haram with "millions of rounds of ammunition, thousands of assault rifles and assorted firearms, and hundreds of military vehicles, including armored tanks and self-propelled artillery" in addition to petrol, communications gear, and uniforms (Berman 2020).

⁵² "Since Shekau's death, ISWAP has absorbed several JAS fighting groups into its ranks, but it still faces resistance from other pro-JAS units, notably the Bakura group encroaching upon the marshes, banks, and islands of northern Lake Chad. At the same time, many JAS elements have opted to surrender to Nigerian authorities rather than submit to ISWAP, while some may have fled to other parts of northern Nigeria" (International Crisis Group 2022, 2).

Civilians were the backbone of the insurgency from its inception, providing a pool of recruits, wives, worshippers, servants, informants, and suppliers. The abuse, extortion, and violence against them are, paradoxically, a manifestation of both the organizations' fear of and reliance on them. As the success of the CJTF demonstrated, the local population was initially a more challenging adversary than the Nigerian security forces, making a "with or against us" approach a matter of militants' endurance. Simultaneously, without civilians, the group's ranks and resources would have been depleted a long time ago, which made the effective multinational counterinsurgency and subsequent group-internal challenges particularly threatening. Aware of this tension, Shekau adapted his use of geographical and social spaces to military realities. Although violence against civilians, killing, abduction, and raiding were consistent elements of its campaign, strategies to exert power shifted from infiltration to territorial control to opportunistic presence. To conclude, while venturing beyond the scope of this project, this chapter has acknowledged the influence of rebels on social and political community dynamics outside controlled territories. Additionally, it has recognized the significance of evolving power relations among the insurgents, the state, non-state armed actors, and civilians in determining the scope of Boko Haram's governance. It thus provides a broader outlook on the insurgency's pursuit of power over time and space, which sets the stage for the more focused analysis that follows, which zooms in on civilian realities inside controlled territories.

CIVILIANIZED GOVERNANCE AND STABLE COOPERATION

In a settlement just beyond the perimeter of the Bakassi IDP camp, Zahrah sits on the floor. She came to Maiduguri after the military had chased Boko Haram from her village in Gwoza and now lives with her uncle, whom she asks to step outside for a bit. Zahrah talks about how she never thought Boko Haram would take over her village. The insurgents had come many times before, and some local youths had willingly joined their ranks, but they usually left after their attacks, taking foodstuff, fuel, and sometimes villagers with them. Her detailed description of the invasion echoes numerous other accounts: gunfire in the streets, systematic house-to-house searches, executions, abductions, and rampant looting. Afterwards, the insurgents gathered the villagers in one place, claiming they wanted to teach them more about Islam. They preached about jihad and Boko Haram. They told them about the rules and that they were not allowed to leave. Zahrah paused. When asked what happened next, she said, “nothing”. While things did happen, her comment reflects the semblance of normalcy that marked daily life under Boko Haram control.

At the height of the insurgents’ territorial conquest in 2015, the group seized control of about 30,000 square kilometers – an area the size of Belgium (Onuoha and Oyewole 2018). Most analysts agree that Boko Haram’s governance in this territory did not exhibit signs of state-building and civilian administration (Comolli 2015; Hassan 2022; Kendhammer and McCain 2018; Ladbury et al. 2016; Thurston 2018). According to Thurston (2018, 227), “Boko Haram could not consolidate governance” and “made little effort to institutionalize Islamic courts and schools, or to distribute humanitarian relief”. Along the same lines, Kendhammer and McCain (2018, 123–24) found that “Boko Haram made relatively little effort to govern its newfound state or to win over a majority of local hearts and minds”. This resonates with Ladbury et al. (2016, 1), who note that the insurgents “established little in the way of a civilian administration” or “to a project a vision of a

future society or concrete benefits of the envisaged caliphate”. Instead, Boko Haram pursued a strategy of violence and destruction with little regard for civilian protection and provisioning.

Theories regarding the role of group capacity (Kalyvas 2015b; Kasfir 2005; R. M. Wood 2010) align with explanations for Boko Haram’s lack of social service provisioning. Following the rationale that rebels resort to coercion when unable to entice loyalty, Boko Haram’s limited state-building efforts have been traced back to various capacity constraining factors. First, a relatively small number of fighters – about 7,000 to 10,000 in February 2015 – were not able to effectively administer a territory of such size while simultaneously facing opposition from several militaries (Dörrie 2015; Kendhammer and McCain 2018, 124; Thurston 2018, 227).⁵³ Additionally, these efforts were complicated by insufficient coordination among factional leaders controlling different areas (Nasrullah 2014) as well as the territory being not clearly defined but rather a cluster of towns, dozens of rural villages, and key access routes (Kendhammer and McCain 2018, 124). Pieri and Zenn (2018, 668) further point to commanders’ limited experience with administration compared to some Islamic State leaders in Syria and Iraq who drew on their expertise from the Iraq war and Afghanistan.

In addition to challenging unitary descriptions of Boko Haram’s governance, I argue that the absence of institution-building in specific areas was a strategic preference. In other words, the insurgents opted for neglect in territories with limited military value. This chapter demonstrates that Boko Haram civilianized the countryside, deliberately minimizing their engagement and extracting rather than investing resources. This strategy served two purposes: First, it supported the war effort by transferring material and human resources from these communities to where they were most needed militarily. As already implied, villagers were not assigned roles of significant organizational importance but instead provided basic, sporadic services to insurgents and maintained local infrastructure to sustain themselves. Second, this approach reduced the strategy’s risk potential. By disempowering communities through looting, killing, and institutional destruction, Boko Haram limited their capacity for collective resistance, which laid the foundations for Boko Haram to safely disengage. This refines rather than contradicts arguments about rebel

⁵³ This number is an approximation. Estimates of the number of fighters in 2014 and 2015 vary significantly, ranging from a few hundred to up to 50,000, as summarized by Warner & Hulme (2018, 23–24).

capacity, recognizing that even when territorial control is secured, resource-constrained groups must decide where and how to invest. Moreover, it demonstrates that neglect is not always the result of lacking organizational capacity. Reno (2015) notes that violence should not be mistaken for non-governance but can be the preferred choice, as with the NPFL's predatory rebellion in Liberia. The case of Boko Haram suggests that it can also serve as a preparatory stage for insurgents' subsequent governance of neglect.

Low rebel control has been associated with unpredictability, violence, and chaos for civilians (Arjona 2016; Breslawski 2021; Kalyvas 2006; Reno 2015). Breslawski (2021, 456) contends that when rebels destroy pre-existing institutions without building their own and rely on violent coercion, "life becomes paralyzed and chaotic". While this mirrors common portrayals of life under "Boko Haram's reign of terror" (Amnesty International 2015a), informants' narratives revealed that it is only part of the story. After the initial violence and chaos, some normalcy returned. That the ordinary resurfaces in warzones has been documented in anthropological (Lubkemann 2008; Maček 2007; Nordstrom 1997, 2004; Shah 2018; Stoll 1993) and historical (Alexievich 2017; Bourke 1999; Browning 1998) literature. War, it argues, does not suspend normal social processes but instead becomes the normal "social condition" (Lubkemann 2008, 1). But war does not permeate everyday life everywhere equally, raising questions about the conditions under which the "old" rather than the "new" normal is more likely to prevail.

In this chapter, I provide evidence that civilianized areas with low social control can provide such conditions. They enabled continuity in the nature and environment of civilian roles, even if partially eliminated or deprived of their original material and social meaning, which demanded limited adaptation. The low strategic importance of rural communities positioned them away from military operations, command, and attention. Local civilian authorities were appointed, reporting to *amirs* of the wider area, which in turn minimized daily interactions with combatants that were fraught with uncertainty and could cause disruption. Moreover, it granted civilians some flexibility to take care of their own affairs; in the absence of constant oversight, they maintained everyday practices that reproduced normal and familiar moments, despite imposed restrictions. Consequently, I argue that low civilianized control facilitated the preservation of mundane tasks, daily routines, and communal networks, which were structurally accessible, desirable for civilians, and strategically advantageous for insurgents. These dynamics not only stabilized cooperative

interactions, they also fostered resilience, preventing people from getting roped into or crushed by the insurgency. This perspective helps reconcile civilian accounts of both rebel violence and everyday normalcy.

Chapter 2 described that civilianized and militarized governance unfold along two distinct spectrums. In locations of greater strategic significance, such as certain towns and LGA capitals, these two power modes overlapped. Boko Haram not only displayed heightened brutality during its invasions, but both its military and civilian personnel subsequently interfered more intensely in local affairs. In such hybrid settings, civilians were confronted with the demands and operating logics of both modes of governance, which made these sites particularly difficult to navigate. While the insurgents kept parts of the administrative infrastructure and civilian institutions intact, interactions with fighters who were either stationed in town or were in transit posed regular risks, particularly for women of marriageable age and men of fighting age. Individuals therefore often used their local knowledge to engage in covert forms of everyday resistance, even though it was dangerous and regularly punished. In civil-military towns, the upheaval of Boko Haram's governance did not yet translate into outright turbulence, but could bring civilians to the brink of it, as is briefly shown in the second part of this chapter.

The following evidence and analysis stem primarily from the interview data I collected and reports by human rights organizations, leveraging comprehensive documentation of civilian experiences, although mostly of violence and abuse, following the collapse of Boko Haram's Islamic State. Particular emphasis will be placed on data from Gwoza LGA, for several reasons. First, Gwoza played a pivotal role in Boko Haram's rule, serving not only as the headquarters of its Caliphate but also as one of the longest-occupied LGAs during the group's brief reign. Second, analyzing civilian experiences in both rural and urban locations within the same LGA helps mitigate concerns about varying governance styles across leaders and cells as an alternative explanation. Data from other locations are also included to demonstrate that Gwoza is not an outlier, but rather an exemplar of cooperative patterns across rebel territory. The chapter is structured as follows: I explore changes and continuities in civilian roles, marital and community relations, and rules and religion, assessing the extent to which Boko Haram's violent interference and governance laid the groundwork for stable cooperation in civilianized villages. Subsequently, I examine individuals' maneuvering of these institutions, revealing how noncooperation simultaneously fostered stability

and resilience. Finally, I build on this analysis by providing a shorter overview of Boko Haram's governance in civil-military towns, civilians' forms of everyday resistance, and their joint production of instability.

Neglect in civilianized villages

Change and continuity in civilian roles

As Boko Haram began to seize territory in mid-2014, their predatory behavior towards conquered populations intensified, rather than subsiding. They established a system of governance that served their interests at the expense of the local populations. This approach resulted in widespread destruction and deprivation as the insurgents appropriated resources, supplies, and livestock that communities had managed to retain. What happened when Boko Haram arrived in Fadagwe, a village along the Gwoza-Dambova road about 14km east of Gwoza town, was a paradigmatic experience:

When Boko Haram came to Fadagwe in 2014, they forcefully gathered all of us to pay attention and said, "All your belongings are ours and whatever you have is converted to us because you're in our territory". If anyone has cows, goats, sheep, or other animals, he had to bring them out because they were going to collect all of them. They explained that everything we owned belonged to them now because we were *awam*, which means we were their captives and slaves.⁵⁴

This account aligns with descriptions from other informants who recounted Boko Haram's systematic plundering of resources, stating that "they packed and took away everything that was useful".⁵⁵ As a consequence, villagers like Sabo from Magar in Madagali LGA were left with no choice but "to collect leaves or eat something that you had stored at home".⁵⁶ The explicit reference to civilians as slaves unequivocally revealed their status at the bottom of the hierarchy, exposing the insurgents' unwillingness instead of incapacity to provide services.

Loss, destruction, and restrictions also extended to people's means of livelihood as Boko Haram created the conditions for subsequent disengagement. In contrast to rebellions' usual reliance on

⁵⁴ Interview with Audu, March 2020.

⁵⁵ Interview with Halima, May 2018.

⁵⁶ Interview with Sabo, February 2020.

the rural population for food production, Boko Haram had a policy against farming. It had a particularly negative impact given that between 65 and 80 percent of the population in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa work in the agricultural sector, which contributes to over half of the regional GDP (UNDP 2021b, 23). Varied accounts of farming prohibitions suggest that there were regional and temporal differences, with more restrictive practices starting in 2012 and a relaxation towards the end of 2015.⁵⁷ Men outside of fighting age either faced farming bans or were compelled to cultivate staple crops for the insurgents, retaining only a small portion for themselves. A 51-year-old farmer from Warabe, a village along the Gwoza-Pulka-road, explained:

They completely stopped us from farming on our land. They told us that whoever wants to farm should join them in Sambisa or else they will kill him. They killed so many of our people! They took up the entire Gwoza LGA and made us their captives. I felt very bad when we were stopped from farming because that is our major source of income. ... I had specialized in farming sugar cane and rearing animals. It was from the profit of these multiple sources of income that I built a house, got married and had nine children, although two died of diseases. Life was good and sweet then. I was happy, energetic, and full of hope and pride because of my farm produce, but Boko Haram destroyed everything we had. ... When the battle with the military got tough, everybody ran for their life and hid. After the situation calmed down, Boko Haram gathered us again and were given the responsibility to farm corn, maize, and beans. When the produce was ready, they came with long lorries and counted the harvest. If you were able to get ten bags, they would take eight bags away and leave two for you.⁵⁸

The drastic reduction in farming opportunities thus not only undermined their main source of income but also men's ability to fulfill gender-stereotypical responsibilities and norms of masculinity that are linked to their status within families and communities. Boko Haram's farming regulations were even more stringent for women, essentially barring them from the fields altogether. This stands in contrast to usual gender dimensions in Nigeria where women provide 70 to 80 percent of the agricultural labor despite about 90 percent of land being owned by males (FAO 2022). While some women saw the ban as a liberation from arduous farm labor (Matfess 2017, 110), a more commonly expressed view was it being a severe infringement on their economic autonomy. A 70-year-old woman from Bama explained that "[u]sually in the village, we older women have small areas of farmland where we grow beans and okra to get a little extra money.

⁵⁷ Interview with researcher, May 2018.

⁵⁸ Interview with Ismael, March 2020.

[Boko Haram] told us to stop all these things” (Amnesty International 2020a, 24). Particularly in rural settings, older women contribute to their households by cultivating vegetables, fruits, and other crops, thus playing a vital and active role in families. Boko Haram stripped them of their ability to remain productive members of society. The insurgents’ view of the elderly as dispensable and unproductive thereby became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Beyond the economic repercussions, Boko Haram hence eliminated many civilians’ avenues for recognition and self-realization and obstructed access to alternative opportunities for self-actualization within or outside the organization.

The erosion of jobs and livelihoods did not begin with the occupation. It unfolded gradually, necessitating adaptation even before the takeover. In 2013, for instance, insurgents issued death threats to civil servants in Gwoza and Bama, demanding their resignation and the destruction of their employment records (Audu 2013). Targeted killings of government employees, teachers, and religious leaders instilled fear, prompting many to abandon their professions. The targeted killing of government employees, teachers, and religious leaders spread fear and led many to stop practicing their jobs. In fact, between 2012 and 2015, 17,000 farmers from the Northeast fled to the South, according to the National Emergency Management Agency (Aziz 2015). The Northern states’ economy predominantly relied on small-scale agriculture and, to a lesser extent, formal sector state employment (Mustapha 2014, 172) – two of Boko Haram’s main targets. In addition to the exodus of workers, those who stayed either curtailed their farming and pastoral activities to minimize risks or ceased them entirely. As a result, between 2010 and 2015, sorghum production in the Northeast plummeted by 82 percent, rice by 67 percent, and millet by 55 percent (UNDP 2018, 41). Livestock production was equally severely affected (UNDP 2018, 41).⁵⁹

These changes were undeniably disruptive and dominate depictions of Boko Haram’s governance. However, it is often overlooked that life in rural communities still went on. Instead of acquiring skills and being streamlined into official ranks, civilians maintained the day-to-day infrastructure in their villages. They continued with permissible labor and were occasionally tasked with ad hoc jobs based on insurgent need. Such duties included household chores like cleaning and fetching of

⁵⁹ In fact, cattle rustling, and fishing were among Boko Haram’s largest sources of financing, an estimated a multi-million-dollar business (O. S. Mahmood and Ani 2018a), which insurgents also used for personal enrichment (Interview with Musa, November 2019).

water.⁶⁰ They were sent to neighboring communities to pack and carry loot.⁶¹ “When leaders visited our community, we were supposed to cook for them”, said a farmer from Warabe.⁶² Women continued to perform domestic labor by taking care of their households, cooking, cleaning, and child rearing (Matfess 2017, 109).⁶³ Some served individual insurgents during their visits while others, especially assigned community leaders who were answerable to the Boko Haram leadership of the wider area, helped to coordinate activities.⁶⁴ While Higazi (2020, 203) found that civilian authorities were newly appointed and forced into the position, informants also mentioned instances in which the previous traditional leaders stayed in power.⁶⁵ Mampilly and Stewart (2021, 24–25) refer to them as subjugated leaders who are co-opted to enforce rules, especially in relation to security and mobility, but without constant oversight.

When asked about a typical day in a controlled village in Gwoza, Zahrah provided the following account:

In the morning, we woke up and took care of our small children who were allowed to stay with us. We then brought goods of people who had run away to the *amir*, like beds, food, and other properties. We got some money or food in return. When the Boko Haram [fighters] sometimes come in the morning and you say that you don’t have food, they allow you to dig for tuber to cook. When your husband joins them in the bush, they will bring food for you. But since my husband is handicapped, he fetched water for them two or three times a week. Unless they took us to the *amir*’s house for preaching, we did not have to do anything, but Boko Haram was in the area patrolling to make sure that no one can escape. We just did normal things; nothing special.⁶⁶

Others concurred with her assertion that did not have fixed, assigned obligations. “Men who they considered to be weak were laborers doing their normal jobs. But no one had to work regularly”, said Sabo.⁶⁷ Despite variation in individual circumstances, descriptions suggested that life was not fundamentally different from what it used to be. Informants’ accounts conveyed a sense of normalcy and simplicity in terms of their day-to-day responsibilities, which is supported by

⁶⁰ Interview with Istipanus, February 2020.

⁶¹ Interview with Haniya, May 2018; Hamdiya, January 2020.

⁶² Interview with Ismael, March 2020.

⁶³ Interview with Sara, February 2020.

⁶⁴ Interview with Ismael, March 2020; Istipanus, February 2020.

⁶⁵ Interview with Blessing, November 2019; Ismael, March 2020.

⁶⁶ Interview with Zahrah, May 2018.

⁶⁷ Interview with Sabo, February 2020.

Matfess' findings. For example, Zainab, one of her respondents, made clear that she and her husband "were having a normal life, doing normal chores" in the village Walasah (2017, 26). This corresponds with the description of internal video material of controlled communities analyzed by Pieri and Zenn (2018, 655):

The footage, for example, tends to show an arid desert landscape where men travel around mostly by motorcycle and in which oxen pull carts, and camels are sold in markets. Women who appear in the footage (often in the background) are dressed in colourful chadours but appear free to walk around the town without a male guardian (mahram) [...].

In sum, despite the loss of livelihoods and material deprivation as *awam*, the lack of organizational integration into military structures, the persistence of civilian authorities, and the ordinariness of individuals' roles, whether in self-sustenance, community support, or sporadic logistical assistance to Boko Haram, facilitated the continuity of local affairs in a familiar manner. As a result, villagers developed weak yet stable ties to the movement.

Change and continuity in community and marital relations

While the conflict had already changed the social composition of communities, Boko Haram further reshaped their demographic profiles. Insurgents left behind those deemed of limited utility and risk, such as young children, middle-aged women, the elderly, and those considered unfit for work. Older people were thus disproportionately represented in villages and lived there for extended periods of time (Amnesty International 2020a, 22).⁶⁸ "You don't touch old people, not out of respect, but because they have no power or strength. Even if you leave them, they can't do anything", explained a former *amir*.⁶⁹ A 70-year-old man from a village in Bama LGA recounted that after Boko Haram killed his grandson, the insurgents told him, "Your boy, the one taking care of you, he's dead. So you'll stay here and die" (Amnesty International 2020a, 23).

Eliminating and displacing individuals thus served a dual purpose for the insurgents: it bolstered their capacity in high-value areas while simultaneously diminishing the potential for resistance in

⁶⁸ Reports confirmed that the military, after having regained control over the seized territory, mostly found small children, groups of women, and older people (BBC News 2015a; The New Humanitarian 2015). While this generally confirms what informants described, it should also be noted that Boko Haram killed and abducted younger people when they lost control and had to retreat, as reported in Damasak in March 2015 (The Irish Times 2015).

⁶⁹ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

less strategic locations. The prevalence of young children and older people, particularly women, in villages highlights the dramatic demographic shifts caused by Boko Haram in a country with a median age of eighteen. “There were dead bodies all over the place”, said Laraba, describing the situation when Boko Haram attacked her village in Madagali. “They shot everyone who tried to escape. They mostly killed men and boys and took women and girls. They killed my father right in front of me”, she continued.⁷⁰ Such accounts illustrate how the group’s attack and recruitment patterns created feminized spaces. Women often bore the responsibility of burying the dead: “I buried 78 men myself”, said Knadjia. “My neighbor buried my husband for me. Boko Haram burnt my house and shop and took all of my cattle. I was pregnant at that time. My heart hardened”.⁷¹ A report by Amnesty International (2015) corroborates the similarity of attack patterns across locations based on witness accounts, satellite images, and news reports.

Prior to Boko Haram’s occupation, displacement decisions had already placed considerable strain on relationships. While social immobility has driven especially urban youth into the arms of Boko Haram (Agbibo 2022a; Last 2012, 2014) and other radical Islamist movements in Africa (Kane 2003), physical immobility had the same effect for different reasons. Due to various vulnerabilities, families were often unable to flee together, leaving behind the elderly and people with disabilities (Amnesty International 2020a). Additionally, during attacks males often ran away without their families. Sakinah recounted that her husband and cousin “left [her] behind” because they would have been killed if the insurgents had caught them, whereas they “just kidnap us women” (Bauer 2016, 88). Mothers frequently stayed behind to protect their children and “could not run away like men did”.⁷² While many women expressed understanding for their husbands’ decision to escape without them, the issue was evidently a sensitive one. This resonates with Lubkemann (2008, 189), who notes in the context of the Mozambican civil war that “relocation did not always, or for everyone, engender the sentiments and social conditions typically invoked by the term ‘displacement’”. Instead, it was the “forcibly immobilized”, predominantly made up of women, children, and the elderly, who experienced the negative effects of military efforts to control the rural population.

⁷⁰ Interview with Laraba, January 2020.

⁷¹ Interview with Knadjia, February 2020.

⁷² Interview with Comfort, February 2020.

After having killed or abducted the majority of people of marriageable age, those who remained were considered too old or young to marry, were already married, or were prohibited from doing so. As a villager recalled, “They said that even if you want to marry a girl, you have no right to speak to her because you are a slave, and if you are found doing that, you would be killed”.⁷³ Boko Haram did not want villagers to participate in the creation and growth of its envisioned ideal Islamic society through marriage and reproduction – a privilege and source of empowerment granted solely to its in-group, to which captives did not belong. This impeded people’s access to the socio-economic status that marriage typically confers, as well as alternative means for social security and mobility. Boko Haram’s approach of social containment, rather than integration, marginalized civilians in this regard. However, it also shielded them from institutionalized sexual abuse, forced marriage, and social regulations centered around marital obligations within militarized enclaves (Amnesty International 2020a, 25). The absence of pressure to marry into the rebel movement thereby averted further social and material entanglement.

For married couples who managed to remain together, maintaining continuity in their marital relations and day-to-day household activities had a stabilizing effect. Zahrah, who stayed in her house with her children and husband, asserted that “nothing had changed” in her marriage. “He had to obey because, if not, they would have killed him”, she explained, emphasizing that despite her husband’s decision to declare his loyalty to the group, there was “no change in his thinking” and that “they were in this together”.⁷⁴ Several women whose husbands had joined the sect, sometimes without their knowledge, denied noteworthy changes in their marital relation or their status in the community. Although individual experiences varied, with some noting improved care from their husbands (Matfess 2017, 26) or increased harshness,⁷⁵ the continuity in marriage partners, responsibilities, and status offered stability. This held true even for women whose experiences were highly turbulent upon relocating to Sambisa, as exemplified by Fatima’s case in the introduction.⁷⁶

⁷³ Interview with Audu, March 2020.

⁷⁴ Interview with Zahrah, May 2018.

⁷⁵ Interview with Haniya, May 2018.

⁷⁶ Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

Change and continuity in rules and religion

Boko Haram introduced its regular religious practices and intertwined rules. They included the regulation of movement, dress codes, prayers, and property as well as the criminalization of offenses such as drug abuse, theft, and adultery (Amnesty International 2015, 15).

They told us that we were now fully in their kingdom and all our actions would be guided by their doctrine. ... They instructed that it's optional for you to either follow them or not, but whatever you decide, you would be harmed if you refused to comply.⁷⁷

The ease with which violence was perpetrated was illustrated by expressions like “as if it was a joke, they killed people who went against their ideology” or “[t]hey will slaughter you like a chicken if you don't obey”.⁷⁸ Stated rules, disciplinary measures, and the ideology taught were consistent across territories. However, the strictness and consistency with which they were practiced were not. In villages without a permanent presence of Boko Haram, law enforcement was weaker. Unlike in locations with greater control where Sharia tribunals showcased flogging, amputations, and executions, punishments in villages often occurred away from the public eye:

It is prohibited to rape, steal, or to go out with your neighbor's wife. If the *amir* finds out, soldiers come and take you to his house for judgment. They tie you in front of your family and take you away. The *amir*'s house is not in the community, but about 5km away, so we did not see what happened to offenders.⁷⁹

Informants like Zahrah mentioned that they had heard about men who raped women being killed publicly, but she had not witnessed it herself. “A friend told me that they would dig a hole, put your body in, burry you, and stone you to death!”, she said wide-eyed. Although rumors can create a climate of fear, they likely have a weaker deterrent effect than the gruesome spectacle of public punishments.

Quranic education and the attendance of prayers and sermons were compulsory. Given the limited efforts to integrate civilians and transform them into productive members, Boko Haram's efforts to spread its ideology may come as a surprise, raising the question of whether it had performative rather than transformative objectives. Audu recounted, “[t]he leadership came for preaching every

⁷⁷ Interview with Audu, March 2020.

⁷⁸ Interview with Dawo, March 2020; Hamdiya, January 2020.

⁷⁹ Interview with Zahrah, May 2018.

week, and it was expected of us to attend the sermons and pay close attention”.⁸⁰ Moreover, everyone was required to participate in Quranic classes, with children, men, and women being taught separately. As noted by Higazi (2020, 203) about Lemu village, “[s]ect members taught Quranic recitation and *tawhid*, about the oneness of God, and the hadiths. The subjects were things many of the villagers already knew from their existing Quranic education”. Nonetheless, Boko Haram’s indoctrination efforts appeared sporadic and of limited success. Respondents described their religious duties as externally imposed obligations, alongside other restrictions and regulations: “We were preached at to accept their ideology and interrogated to know if we were working with the military”, continued Audu.⁸¹ A similar passivity conveyed Zahrah’s account saying, “[w]hen they wanted to teach or preach to us, they took us to the *amir*’s palace. They came with their cars and motorcycles to pick us up. His house looked like a king’s house. They did this to us one to three times per week”.⁸²

Civilians, particularly the older generation, not only resisted adopting alterations to their beliefs, but also mourned the loss of their religious and cultural heritage. They expressed a sense of rejection and incomprehension regarding the changes that Boko Haram imposed. A 65-year-old trader and farmer from Bama LGA stated:

Boko Haram always forced us to follow their interpretation. They stole our animals, our crops, our wealth. If you weren’t following them, you were maltreated. It got worse over time. The religion we know, the one our forefathers gave us, it’s not this. ... [Boko Haram] said our prayers were wrong, the way we practiced our religion was wrong. They said we couldn’t stay with non-Muslims – we had been for so long, why couldn’t we now?⁸³

Being denied the ability to engage in their own interfaith practices and being told their religion was “wrong” fueled grievances among the population. This not only further distanced them from the insurgents’ propagated ideology but also meant that older men in particular could no longer receive the recognition and respect they used to earn for their religious proficiency:

The Boko Haram boys were chased away from Bama [town], so they came to our villages. They told me I didn’t know anything about religion, [even though] I’ve

⁸⁰ Interview with Audu, March 2020.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Interview with Zahrah, May 2018.

⁸³ Amnesty International (2020a, 30)

mastered the Qur'an. It was very painful to be told by children [I didn't know how to pray]. Only on judgement day will it be decided.⁸⁴

The suggested lack of ideological support should be considered in the context of prior recruitment efforts. Studies have emphasized that religion, among other more prominent factors, played a role in individuals' decisions to join the sect (Botha and Abdile 2019; Mercy Corps 2016). Particularly among people from Gwoza, where many Muslims were relatively recent converts, Yusuf gained a following upon which Shekau later built (Thurston 2018, 225). "They kept teaching and preaching to the youths. Most then carried the gun willingly and didn't need to be forced", said Zahrah about the period of infiltration that preceded rebel control.⁸⁵ Mercy Corps (2016, 14) found in former members' narratives that protecting religion and improving governance were seen as complementary objectives, noting that "[a]bout half of former members said their communities at some time supported Boko Haram, believing it would help bring about a change in government". However, many of those who decided to join the sect left their communities. "Boko Haram convinced my younger brother. He told them he would join them in the forest and left our community at night", said Jamilah.⁸⁶ This aligned with other accounts describing the relocation of supporters, with interviewees stating that "those who joined went to the bush".⁸⁷ In addition to Boko Haram's modifications to the social composition, this process contributed to the presence of individuals in communities who had decided against voluntary association. This reduced the uncertainty about sympathies and affiliations that had caused distrust in previous years leading up to Boko Haram's reign, as explained in Chapter 4. Moreover, it defies the often-held assumption that only supporters stayed, which informed the military's approach of mass detention and extra-judicial killing in recaptured territory (Amnesty International 2015b, 40).

Due to both limited civilian loyalty and presence of military personnel, the insurgents could not unconditionally trust villagers to be reliable enforcers of the imposed order. Boko Haram was aware of this issue. A former commander mentioned a shift in civilian behavior when the MNJTF's counterinsurgency weakened the group:

⁸⁴ Amnesty International (2020a, 18)

⁸⁵ Interview with Zahrah, May 2018.

⁸⁶ Interview with Jamilah, May 2018.

⁸⁷ Interview with Hamdiya, January 2020.

Some people had stayed with us or had mingled with us in LGAs, but now they started sharing secrets. The official order was to kill them. Before, these people were afraid and under Boko Haram control, but now we were distracted and weakened, so there were openings for people, and they started to run away and talk to the military. The new order was to take food and then destroy and burn down every village we had access to. ... When the MNJTF attacks became too heavy, we had to withdraw from the LGAs. We transported everyone back to Sambisa.⁸⁸

Thus, compliance remained contingent on the level of oversight throughout. Civilians had to adapt to the limitations and alterations that Boko Haram imposed both prior to and during the takeover of their communities. Although they encountered violence and exploitation in the process, it was mostly omissions rather than action that they had to get used to – loss of opportunities, traditional practices, and dear ones that required them to adjust to what was no longer possible or available. That which remained intact provided a sense of stability.

Resistance and resilience

Not having rebels in each and every village at all times made Boko Haram's presence periodic. The neglect created space for civilians to maneuver. The insurgents came to villages when they wanted to preach, but "otherwise, they would not come to us", said Zahrah and continued:

Before they arrive, you can go visit your friends and neighbors. You can talk and go about your day. People moved around, sat outside, and women left their houses without a veil. But once they [Boko Haram] are in the community, it is restricted.⁸⁹

Although likely an understatement, it generally aligns with other accounts suggesting that communities planned their days and used the time without guards to leave the house, socialize, and to take care of chores.⁹⁰ In doing so, they regained moments of normalcy. Despite the underlying discontinuities discussed earlier, descriptions of everyday life before and during Boko Haram's rule did not appear radically different. Rather than engaging in confrontational "unilateral" (Masullo 2021) collective action, everyday individual resistance consisted of a return to familiar daily routines. Dornschneider (2023, 132, 134) found similar patterns among Palestinians living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories where "persevering" by "maintaining

⁸⁸ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

⁸⁹ Interview with Zahrah, May 2018.

⁹⁰ Interview with Ismael, March 2020; Maryamu, May 2019.

daily life, and protecting private space” constituted a form of resistance. And so did emotion-focused coping through self-soothing activities, “limiting the effect of the oppression and, by extension, regime control over individuals”.

While this is not the usual image of resistance, it highlights four points: First, escape or other forms of overt resistance were still risky undertakings. Villages were nestled within a closely controlled network of towns and patrolled main transport routes (Amnesty International 2015a, 16). This made direct confrontation and escape costly and undermines assertions that neglect stemmed from lacking territorial control or coordination. Second, people yearned to regain their lives, during both occupation and subsequent displacement to IDP camps. Rather than embracing Boko Haram’s rules and vision for society, villagers reverted to their previous lifestyle whenever possible. Third, having these regular breaks and creating emotional escapes alleviated the hardship of predation through self-help while simultaneously working as a bulwark against Boko Haram’s attempts at creating ideological and behavioral conformity, even if they were half-hearted. As Koloma Beck (2012, 12) observes about everyday life during Angola’s civil war, “perceptions or actions, which appear as normal or familiar, are anchor points of orientation and sources of resilience”. Fourth, these subtle forms of everyday resistance – of literally preserving the everyday – stabilized cooperation by making life under Boko Haram and the inescapable demands more bearable and, ultimately, normal. One may put into question whether such everyday activities can be considered as forms of resistance. After all, these acts were not primarily deliberate efforts to obstruct Boko Haram’s rule. Yet, by circumventing it, these actions represent a tacit refusal to accept the insurgents’ impositions and attempts to alter civilians’ way of life. They effectively worked against the spread and normalization of the group’s broader social and political vision while underscoring civilians’ resilience. Maintaining daily routines became an act of subtle defiance; a strategy of psychological and cultural survival, effectively sustaining the community’s identity and cohesiveness against Boko Haram’s sporadic attempts at ideological domination and behavioral control.

The insurgents became acutely aware of the power of the familiar. Boko Haram typically refrained from deploying fighters to their home communities, as the aforementioned *amir* explained. He noted that people in one’s community might be aware of their association with Boko Haram, but not the “gravity” of their involvement. Fighters would prefer to keep it concealed, for if

circumstances changed in the future, they might need to return.⁹¹ However, as the MNJTF advanced and the group started losing territory, a tactical adjustment was required. The leaders dictated that fighters should guard their communities of origin, leveraging their intimate knowledge of the locale. Consequently, 30 fighters were removed from the *amir*'s unit and replaced with recruits native to his village. This led to an unforeseen problem:

I didn't like the strategy because people got lazy back home. They fell back into old habits and did not want to do the work anymore. When they see their parents, they just want to stay home and hang out. I had to encourage them all the time to go out on attacks, but they were not motivated.⁹²

This further speaks to the continuity in community life that villagers were able to sustain, as well as to the stickiness of the familiar. If even fighters were reabsorbed into old routines, it is no wonder that everyday activities fostered resilience among civilians, that is, emotional and behavioral patterns that worked against further involvement with Boko Haram.

Instability in civil-military towns

Instability in civilian roles and relations

Governance in many controlled towns straddled a combination of civilianized and militarized governance, depending on their strategic importance. Small and mid-sized towns leaned toward the former, whereas LGA capitals hosting major military barracks, especially Bama, Damboa, and Gwoza town, leaned slightly toward the latter, with some variation over time. In many regards, this was similar to the approach taken by the IS, which set the ground rules for governance without “micro-managing” some towns (Weiss and Hassan 2016, 210), while in others, like Raqqa or Mosul, pursuing a comprehensive military and political campaign under a hierarchical top-down administration (Caris and Reynolds 2014; Revkin and Ahram 2020). Although Boko Haram's version of the latter was rudimentary at best, Shekau made Gwoza town with its 275,000 inhabitants the official headquarters of his Islamic state. It served as a regional command center, operational base, and transit hub (Hayden 2017; Sieff 2015b). The proximity to the Sambisa Forest stronghold in addition to access routes into Cameroon made it strategically well-located. It was

⁹¹ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

⁹² Ibid.

supposed to serve as a flagship town – a haven for Muslims as propagated by Shekau and advertised in a one-hour long video after its seizure (NBC News 2014). That it was not more turbulent for civilians was arguably the result of its function as a transit hub, which meant that many insurgents and civilians only passed through, in addition to Boko Haram’s short control of the town between August 2014 and March 2015.

After the insurgents drove the Nigerian Army’s 192 Battalion out of town and appropriated the military materials, equipment, and infrastructure, they shot people in the streets who tried to escape.⁹³ “Captured men were asked whether they want to join. When they said ‘no’, they were killed”, said Faiza, “but sometimes they were just killed instantly”.⁹⁴ The feminization of civilian spaces was not only a phenomenon in villages. Leaving men in towns where they had home-turf advantage would have posed a risk, especially in CJTF strongholds like Gwoza. However, they needed men to run businesses, drive supplies, fix vehicles, and keep the town’s infrastructure that had not been destroyed operational for the 600 fighters that moved into the homes of former residents (Sieff 2015a). They hence relied on a limited number of males who had previously joined and “lived peacefully with them after the others ran away or were killed” or, in some cases, on those who volunteered to do so then.⁹⁵ Many markets and shops were closed or taken over by Boko Haram. Men who had joined the insurgents and whose businesses were beneficial to the group could trade and enjoyed greater freedom of movement:

My husband had agreed to join them when they came to Madagali. He went to Maiduguri and operated normally. He bought vegetables, pepper, and corn. Men like him were allowed to work, move, and do business, but you cannot just move freely; there are boundaries. You need permission, and there must be Boko Haram contact people in the place you go.⁹⁶

Buying and selling informally, whether from one’s home, on the roadside, or elsewhere, was prohibited. A woman from Bama explained that “[i]f they see you have bought something, they will ask if you bought it and tell you to go and show them the place where you bought it and they will beat the seller and beat you” (Amnesty International 2015a, 16). These restrictions

⁹³ Interview with Kadi, November 2019.

⁹⁴ Interview with Faiza, February 2020.

⁹⁵ Interview with Sa’adatu, February 2020.

⁹⁶ Interview with Habiba, January 2020.

exacerbated the domesticity of women's daily lives. Food and water were brought by insurgents so that women did not leave their houses, explained Sara, a 49-year-old woman from Bama town who used to be a food vendor before Boko Haram stopped her from working.⁹⁷ Variation in descriptions of food availability was likely the result of people having different access depending on their status both before and during occupation. Some said that "food was hard to come by" (UN OCHA 2016) in Gwoza whereas others indicated abundance:

We ate stored grains that we took from abandoned shops and houses. We were allowed to do so because there was an understanding that we had to eat, but we were not allowed to sell it. Many of us were farmers in Gwoza, so we were blessed. We had a lot of food and despite Boko Haram taking a lot to the forest, we still had more than enough left. They even set a whole shop with grains on fire when the town was about to be recaptured and Boko Haram couldn't take all the food with them.⁹⁸

The food distribution system did not appear to be centralized, leaving it up to individual commanders to arrange it.⁹⁹ However, when major towns were recaptured in February 2015, many civilians were underweight, malnourished, and in need of medical attention (Amnesty International 2015a, 17).

"Some women were trusted", said Faiza, who had spent several months in Gwoza.¹⁰⁰ "Strong women who came to town with their husbands were given guns to guard the other women. Ordinary women were responsible for cooking and cleaning", she continued. Others confirmed that wives of commanders became *amira*, although insurgents and their families fluctuated, with some coming in and others leaving.¹⁰¹ Military actors could thus move temporarily into towns, underscoring the porosity of boundaries. Rather than focusing on governing marriageable women in towns, Boko Haram prioritized relocating them from or through Gwoza to Sambisa. Initial attempts to persuade women to marry fighters in Sambisa Forest by "saying that our husbands are unbelievers and that they [Boko Haram] will take good care of us there"¹⁰² quickly gave way to force. They were either immediately married to insurgents or locked into abandoned houses,

⁹⁷ Interview with Sara, February 2020.

⁹⁸ Interview with Sa'adatu, February 2020.

⁹⁹ Author's field notes, February 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Faiza, February 2020.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Hamdiya, January 2020; Regina, February 2020.

¹⁰² Interview with Tina, February 2020.

sometimes by the hundreds, as in makeshift prisons in Ngoshe or Bama. In fact, imprisonment was a central feature of civilian experiences in towns. Estimates suggest that Bama had more than 30 houses, each with about 70 females (Amnesty International 2015a). The reported conditions could hardly be more indicative of Boko Haram's disregard for the population in its towns:

They gathered all the females in a huge warehouse outside of the community [in Bama]. There was no space to lie down because of the dirt. If a person died, you just used the body as a pillow. Early in the morning at around 5:00am, they would ring a bell for the first prayer of the day. After that, they gathered us in one place to remove the dead bodies. They brought us water for the ablution, but the water was smelly and made you sick. They brought us millet to cook. It was like eating clay, but we did not have any other option because we were starving. We stayed there for six months.¹⁰³

Treated as parked goods that had yet to be distributed, they were left in a heightened state of fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability to rape.¹⁰⁴ Kadi was back home for two weeks after her first semester in college in Maiduguri when she was captured together with other young women during the invasion of Gwoza:

We were brought into a house with a lot of women and children. Some tried to comfort me, but I kept crying. They brought food but I did not take it. The women told me 'Take it! You will not leave here'. They took me to another house when I refused to get married. We were eight girls in one room. Every time they brought us food, they insulted us and said they would bring husbands for us. First, they took five of them, then they came for another one, another fell ill, and then there was only me. After a few days, four Boko Haram came in and raped me.¹⁰⁵

Several informants recounted such experiences that often ended in marriage and relocation, as was the case for Kadi, who agreed to become the wife of a Boko Haram messenger in Sambisa, or in escape or death for others. Some informants passed through several transitory camps before they were ultimately brought to militarized enclaves, experiencing turbulence first vis-à-vis their conflict trajectories and then vis-à-vis their relation to the organization. The focus on women's experiences in this chapter is because those of civilian men are hard to come by. Thousands were conscripted, instantly killed, or imprisoned in towns where they either died in cells or were executed, if they did not manage to escape. In Bama town alone, an estimated 700 men were

¹⁰³ Interview with Maryamu, May 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Blessing, November 2019; Faiza, February 2020; Kadi, November 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Kadi, November 2019.

detained in a prison. In addition to propaganda videos showing executions in September 2014, a survivor recalled that “[t]here were more than 200 dead in the cell and the well was full of bodies” (Amnesty International 2015a, 62) – an incident reminiscent of the Giwa Barracks massacre committed by the Nigerian military only four months earlier (BBC News 2014b). Extended periods of incarceration highlight the ambiguous relationship that insurgents maintained with civilians in urban areas, neither fully neglecting nor integrating them. This reveals their indecision about whether to govern the population strictly as civilians or to incorporate them into their military structures. Such tension between civilian life and military involvement led to increased instability. The closer civilians were drawn into contact with military actors, the closer they approached the brink of turbulence.

Refuge and resistance

Kabiu was 13 years old when his mother told him to run to the mountains during Boko Haram’s invasion of Gwoza. “I was there for three weeks. I buried myself in the sand to hide and protect myself from bullets, but there were also snakes. Many men got bitten and died”, he recounted.¹⁰⁶ Gradually, more men escaped during rain and prayer times to seek refuge in the nearby Mandara mountains. Civilians developed various resistance strategies, primarily focused on women shielding men and children who were trapped in the town and at risk of execution or forced recruitment:

I hid 18 men in the ceiling of my house. Boko Haram checked under mattresses and other places, but they didn’t find my child, who I hid in a Ghana-must-go bag. We also collected bras, hijabs, and niqabs to disguise men as women. We left in groups of four women and six disguised men. We accompanied them to the mountains to hide and then brought the clothes back for others. All 18 men escaped this way, but many others were also killed.¹⁰⁷

These acts of resistance capitalized on civilians’ comparative advantage. Unlike the insurgents, they were familiar with the local terrain, routes in and out of the community, their neighbors, and hiding places. Such local knowledge enabled them to respond quickly and collectively. However,

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Kabiu, February 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Knadija, February 2020.

success was not guaranteed. Kadi recalled how her brother was discovered and executed after she had tried to hide him in the ceiling:

We gave him *garri* [cassava] to eat, water to drink, and a bowl to pee and stool. But after some days, he got tired of it and came down to escape. Boko Haram found and executed him together with three males they found at our neighbor's place. My mother and I buried his corpse behind the house.¹⁰⁸

The insurgents managed to catch up with civilian tactics. Kawu, a 31-years-old motorbike rider who hid in the mountains when he saw the infamous Hiluxes that Boko Haram is known to drive when approaching the town, said: "At the beginning, women were bringing us food, but then Boko Haram realized what they were up to, and they stopped".¹⁰⁹ As time went on, the insurgents began to adapt to these civilian tactics. The insurgents stationed guards to block access to the mountains and imposed restrictions on women's movement. Initially, they allowed women to leave town, assuming they wouldn't get far, or permitted it only if they left their children behind.¹¹⁰ The insurgents also employed more aggressive measures, such as throwing bombs and teargas canisters into mountain caves or shooting into ceilings during daily patrols (Amnesty International 2015a, 37).¹¹¹ As a result, as the insurgents' knowledge gap narrowed and their power consolidated, so too did civilians' room to maneuver. Escape seemed to have peaked during the first days and weeks of rebel rule and towards its end when oversight waned.¹¹²

Meanwhile, civilians adapted their daily routines of noncooperation. For instance, the basic needs of those in hiding needed to be taken care of without them leaving the safety of their hideouts. Some endured for months in ditches dug inside houses and compounds, hidden in attics and under beds, covered under piles of clothes or hay, or in Ghana-must-go bags so that "[w]hen the town [Gwoza] was reclaimed, people were surprised where males and children had hidden and survived".¹¹³ While some thereby lived through Boko Haram's rule without any direct encounters with insurgents, those who harbored them bore the responsibility. For example, Hamayaji, who hid her daughter in a hole in the backyard for the entire nine-months-occupation of Madagali, faced

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Kadi, November 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Kawu, February 2020.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Mariam, February 2020; Sa'adatu, February 2020; Tina, February 2020.

¹¹¹ Interview with Kabiu, February 2020; Kadi, November 2019.

¹¹² Author's field notes, May 2018.

¹¹³ Interview with Sa'adatu, February 2020.

constant interrogation and punishment for her lack of cooperation. “I swore to those fighters that I had no daughter, but they wouldn’t believe me, and they kept beating me up – and looking for her.” Pretending to be a “madwoman” by taking off her clothes and walking around town naked, she managed to keep the fighters away, as they feared being cursed (NCPR 2017). People learned how to deceive insurgents for others and their own protection. Clara, for instance, deliberately made mistakes while reciting the Quran, having been advised by older women that Boko Haram married off girls who knew it well. Also, she added, “I cannot betray Jesus” (Bauer 2016, 116). Just as her tactic ultimately did not save her from marriage, these acts of noncooperation often did not go unnoticed. Residents reported that public punishments, such as executions, floggings, and amputations, were regularly carried out in response to these and other offenses. In extremely restrictive environments, inconspicuous non-collective resistance may often be the only remaining option due to its low visibility (Scott 1985). However, when comparing the situations in Gwoza town and its surrounding villages, it becomes apparent that higher levels of oppression were not necessarily associated with more individualized forms of resistance; rather, the opposite was true. Greater control and interference raised the stakes for the local population, prompting residents to engage in minimally coordinated and high-risk acts of noncooperation, particularly when it came to protecting the lives of others.

At the same time, individuals avoided unnecessary risks. Indicative of the more restrictive context, they stayed indoors as much as possible to avoid insurgent contact. Their homes became the main settings of resistance. As in villages, resistance was not about contesting their relationship with the armed group, but about “immediate, de facto gains” (Scott 1985, 33) such as securing physical, material, and emotional integrity. Confinement to their homes (UN OCHA 2016), especially domesticizing women’s lives, was part of Boko Haram’s restriction on movement and perceived as a severe restriction of their freedom. But staying home also served as a barrier against the insurgents’ reach and reduced unpredictable interactions. In this sense, civilians’ homes acted both as their cage and refuge. “We were always indoors”, said Amina who lived in Bama town, explaining:

When Boko Haram came to town, they announced that men should come outside and that they would only be killed if they hid – but then they took them, tied them up, and killed them at the riverside. After that, I stayed home all the time because

I was afraid. I did not even go out to get food. Fighters patrolled outside. When they see you, they take you for sure.¹¹⁴

To mitigate the costs of confinement, people used the privacy to support each other, be it by sharing food, grief, or prayers. Girls who were locked-in together reported similar dynamics as they tried to comfort and calm each other, sing and pray quietly, and strategize escape plans.¹¹⁵ Occasionally, residents sneaked out at night for emotional and material support within the still partially intact social network that was nevertheless far more fragmented and spontaneous than the “mutual support network” (Malseed 2009, 379) or “supportive subculture” (Scott 1985, 35) found in other contexts.¹¹⁶ While for the thousands who fled towns, “home was no longer a place of safety but had instead become the mouth of a shark” (Abiola 2022, 12), for those who stayed, homes were more than physical continuities. They provided protection, privacy, and familiarity that civilians who were able to do so used to evade Boko Haram’s governance. However, these attempts at maintaining normalcy were significantly riskier and further pushed back from public into private spaces.

When towns were eventually retaken, the insurgents burnt food, buildings, records, vehicles, and everything else they could not carry. Many people managed to escape during lengthy firefights or were rescued by soldiers. For others, however, this marked the beginning of more extensive turbulence as they were either taken or chose to join the insurgents in their hideouts. These fluctuations highlight the porosity of categories that, rather than being static, pushed people and places in and out of governance modes and, consequently, in and out of stability. “Anywhere can be declared the caliphate. It doesn’t mean anything”, said the then chairman of Gwoza Saeed Salusi Sambo (Hayden 2017). It arguably *did* mean something for civilian realities on the ground, but his statement alludes to the point that it was not rooted in the location itself and, as such, emerged and moved along with the insurgency.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Amina, February 2020.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Comfort, February 2020; Samsatu, March 2020.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Amina, February 2020; Hamdiya, January 2020.

Conclusion

Amidst destruction and violence, continuity easily evades our attention. Indeed, it is easier to discuss visible institutional changes than to capture the subtle dynamics of the uneventful, such as preparing food, staying home, or talking to neighbors in the streets, which sometimes even seemed too ordinary for informants to bring up. It requires identifying what *did* happen as much as what did *not* happen. By doing so, this examination has revealed that ordinary tasks and routines simultaneously facilitate cooperation with insurgents and cultivate resilience against deeper involvement. The establishment of and adaptation to civilianized governance produced patterns of cooperation that ranged from stability in neglected villages to degrees of instability in more controlled civil-military towns. Rebels' neglect and perception of civilians as captives, despite being the cause of suffering, also allowed for limited engagement. This made basic cooperation both necessary and sufficient. As civilian and military authorities intensified their involvement in the local affairs of strategically more important locations, the constraints on local populations grew correspondingly. In these hybrid environments, where governance was shared between different authorities, expectations were often somewhat vague and encounters with military personnel more commonplace. Such increased interactions elevated the risk of civilians becoming enmeshed in the war economies or dragged along by militants passing through towns. This chapter thus demonstrates that Boko Haram strategically adjusted and co-employed modes of governance at varying levels of social control within its territory, presenting a complementary perspective to recent research that explores rebel governance in the absence of territorial control (Cunningham and Loyle 2021; Loyle et al. 2021; Waterman 2023).

Civilians' everyday resistance was contingent on institutional constraints and, paradoxically, could contribute to stability. In contexts where rebels were absent, the continuation of prohibited practices was woven into daily routines, preserving community norms, networks, and normalcy. As Scott (1985, 281) aptly states, “[i]f routine compliance avoids unnecessary risks, so does routine resistance”. Routine alleviated the material and emotional strains of Boko Haram's rule, the need for contesting it, and the adoption of its societal values and visions, keeping relations to the organization lose yet stable. It created resilience against rebel violence by cooperating when needed, and against further adaptation by disobeying when possible. In more oppressive contexts, where reproducing the “old” normal became increasingly difficult, forms of noncooperation

entailed more high-risk and coordinated behavior like hiding relatives or facilitating their escape, with potentially destabilizing effects. These findings enrich current scholarship on collective noncooperation by identifying individual and understudied forms of everyday resistance, linking them to variation in degrees of rebel control and outlining their effects on cooperation. Ultimately, this chapter sought to advance our understanding of everyday civilianism in rebelsapes, examining how civilians manage varying pressures to cooperate, the factors shaping resilience, and the coexistence of normalcy and coercion.

Reno (2015, 266) notes that “predatory rebellions practice rebel governance according to a logic and a history peculiar to their circumstances”. Boko Haram’s engagement with civilians reflects the government’s approach towards the region that has been characterized as one of neglect, corruption, deprivation of socio-economic opportunities, and violent oppression of dissent (Meagher and Mustapha 2020). The former Governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, stated that “over a period of thirty years the ruling establishment abandoned the common people. ... Nobody bothered about their education and health, and nobody cared how they made their living” (Vanguard 2012). Describing Boko Haram’s approach vis-à-vis its population, Mercy Corps’ (2016, 14) study on youth mobilization into Boko Haram notes that “[i]n the context of a government perceived to be largely absent from community life – with no or very few services cited by all respondents – negligence, on the whole, characterized the relationship between government and constituents”. Even donors of stabilization efforts in 2015 and 2016 found that bypassing the government and providing services directly to communities was more effective due to people’s deeply seated mistrust toward the government (Brechenmacher 2019). Consequently, just as the insurgents’ governance took on its logic from this wider political context, so did the ways in which civilians responded to it. They navigated survival informally by drawing on their local knowledge and communal resources for self-help rather than by going through the rebel system. Respondents talked about how they had always relied on mutual assistance to address challenges and how they would only turn to state authorities “if it is beyond our community’s ability to take care of it”.¹¹⁷ The social infrastructure and network therefore served as a safety net before the insurgency and continued to do so during it as far as possible. From this perspective,

¹¹⁷ Interview with Hamsatu, February 2020.

authorities – whether the government or rebels – can be understood as actors moving in and out of civilian lives, which contextualizes people’s efforts to maintain the everyday.

Stable cooperation holds different chances and challenges for different actors. For insurgents, it has ambivalent implications. On the one hand, they can benefit from it. When faced with resource constraints, they can maximize utility by exploiting and neglecting deprived communities with low risk of collective resistance. On the other hand, the stickiness of civilianism means that a more comprehensive effort would be needed to gain popular support – an investment Boko Haram decided not to make. As a result, when the balance of power tipped in favor of the military, civilians who neither benefited from Boko Haram’s rule nor felt attached to the group had little incentive to side with the insurgents, apart from fear of military reprisal. In this regard, stable cooperation has different implications for the Nigerian authorities and military. On the bright side, it is emblematic of the insurgents’ failure to win loyalty. This could offer the chance for civil-military cooperation in counterinsurgency efforts, under the condition that people feel cooperating is safe – a condition that is not met when they face mass arrests and extra-judicial killings (Amnesty International 2015b, 2016; Human Rights Watch 2019). Furthermore, when the area is secured, another unmet condition, community resilience that underpinned stable cooperation, grounded in familiarity with the people, the place, and one’s role in it, suggests that a transition to normal civilian life is feasible. Being home allows individuals to tap into emotional, social, and economic resources, to which the uprooting of displacement removes access. In fact, the majority of IDPs in the Northeast, especially in Borno and Adamawa state, wants to return home, according to survey data by IOM (2021). Although security is by far the most reported factor driving the decision of whether to go to an IDP camp, people are aggrieved by their inability to be self-reliant and their dependence on aid. More and more civilians therefore decide to return home despite insecurity. They are leaving fortified “super camps” and garrison towns that are supposed to be islands of security amid a largely unsecured countryside, but turned out to be congested camps that fail to meet even basic humanitarian standards and lack agricultural livelihood opportunities (Kurtzer 2020; Zenn 2019).

On the downside, as above mentioned, stable cooperation speaks not only to a lack of loyalty towards Boko Haram, but also towards the government. When people continue to feel responsible for securing their own survival, other actors may quickly fill the power vacuum, as exemplified by

the rapid spread of ISWAP influence in Northern and by now also Southern Borno (International Crisis Group 2022). People are leaving “super camps”, saying that “they are now just tolerating the presence of militants” (Searcey 2019), while the government has embarked on a hasty and aggressive process of closing down IDP camps, pushing people to relocate to unsafe areas (International Crisis Group 2023). In an environment in which the military is incapable of providing security, humanitarian assistance is insufficient, and the government is not trusted, one may have to grapple with the uncomfortable reality that civilians opt for stable cooperation in order to carry on with their lives. As a beacon of hope, by maintaining everyday routines, civilians may bolster community capacities that are needed to withstand more-than-necessary involvement with insurgents, at least under civilianized governance.

MILITARIZED GOVERNANCE: THE SOCIO-ORGANIZATIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF TURBULENT COOPERATION

The Sambisa Forest has become synonymous with terror and home to Boko Haram, acquiring a near-mythical reputation across Nigeria as a place from which no one returns. However, people have returned from the insurgent stronghold. Between 2016 and 2018 alone, 30,000 women and children were rescued from Sambisa by the Nigerian troops (The Nation 2018), not to mention the boys and men recruited at even higher rates (Hinshaw and Parkinson 2016). Their places were filled by new arrivals, and some returned to their lives in the forest, creating a cycle of individuals who have passed through the insurgents' "safe haven" that was anything but safe for civilians. Although individual stories have been told, especially those of female returnees (Bauer 2016; A. C. Hoffman and Ibrahim 2018; Nwaubani 2018; Searcey 2018), civilian experiences are still poorly understood. The lack of a systematic analysis may be the result of not only data availability, but also the assumption that there is not much to understand about "Boko Haram's rape camps" where "[t]housands of girls and women were held against their will, subjected to forced marriages and relentless indoctrination" (Sieff 2016). Reports about impregnated and weaponized victims (Nossiter 2015; Searcey 2016b) and radicalized Boko Haram wives who miss their captors (BBC News 2017; Busari and Jones 2016), though not inaccurate, neither adequately account for the turbulent trajectories of both females and males outlined in the introduction, nor for the social and organizational context in which these emerged.

The description of Boko Haram's violence by the former UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien as "heinous, barbaric and unconscionable" (BBC News 2016b) further exemplifies the revival of simplistic and gender-stereotypical portrayals of wartime violence and victimization. As argued by Jackson (2007, 409) following the 9/11 attacks and the global war on

terror, Islamic terrorism has been characterized in public discourses as “fanatical, religiously motivated, murderous and irrational”. Such depictions build on understandings of violence as “tribal” hatred and mindless “barbarism” (Huntington 1993; R. D. Kaplan 1994) that dominated explanations for the rising number of civil wars in Africa and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. Scholars who listened to the lived experiences of perpetrators and victims challenged these assumptions. They painted a complex picture in which pre-war grievances are connected to wartime opportunities as much as coercion to a dynamic and militarist social landscape (D. Hoffman 2011; Keen 2005; Richards 1996). As Richards (2005, 125) wrote about the civil war in Sierra Leone, “[i]f we want to understand the behaviour of wild RUF abductees we shall have to look at the way their social worlds were pulled apart by social exclusion and capture, and put together again through initiation and subsequent social control”.

The literature on child soldiering (Beber and Blattman 2013; Denov 2010; Gates 2017; Vermeij 2014) and combatant socialization (Checkel 2017; D. K. Cohen 2017; Hoover Green 2016; Vermeij 2014; E. J. Wood 2008; E. J. Wood and Toppelberg 2017) unpacks these social and organizational processes. Building on military sociology, scholars have identified a set of interlocking formal and informal mechanisms that rebel groups employ to transform civilians into violent members. Specifically, coercion begins with the act of forced recruitment, a strategy relied on by one-third of all African rebel groups (Eck 2014) and widespread in armed conflicts around the world (UNODC 2018). Military training not only prepares recruits for their role in combat through boot camps and drilling (Arkin and Dobrofsky 1978; E. J. Wood 2008), but it also teaches them about their position in the organizational hierarchy, ensuring that they pursue group goals instead of private ends (Siebold 2007). Ideological training further aligns the reasons for fighting with behavioral norms and expectations to create legitimized forms of violence (Bloom 2005; Maynard 2019; Thaler 2012) while restraining personalistic ones (Hoover Green 2016; Oppenheim and Weintraub 2017). Strict rules and disciplinary institutions reinforce control from the top, while informal practices, such as initiation rituals and collective rites, shape norms, social ties, and beliefs about the group and oneself through peer-to-peer interactions (D. K. Cohen 2017; Holmes 1985; Whitehouse et al. 2014). What remains underexamined, however, is how armed groups create cohesion among noncombatants within its ranks, especially when relying on thousands of abductees who need to be integrated against their will.

The objective of this chapter is therefore to scaffold the institutional landscape within Boko Haram's military strongholds. Rather than making tangential contributions common in civilianized areas, as described in the previous chapter, civilians were operationally and socially streamlined into centralized military command chains and a well-diversified military apparatus that not only structured the division of labor but also social and personal affairs. Informants' accounts revealed that they found themselves in new or modified operational roles, in altered relationships, and subjected to a distinct legal and religious belief system, all geared toward the movement's functioning as a military, political, and social entity. Their integration into the insurgency was thus implemented through social control that penetrated every aspect of life. Building on the scholarship on wartime socialization, as well as gendered literature that has explored women's roles in armed groups (Baines 2018; Cragin and Daly 2009; Hedström 2022; Loken 2022), this chapter aims to advance the systematic study of how armed groups militarize civilians – without turning them into combatants.

The chapter focuses on the camps in Sambisa Forest as cases of hyper-militarized governance, given their status as the group's primary and most established stronghold. It lays out the institutions and practices employed by Boko Haram to transform citizens into militarized noncombatants. In the first section, I outline the chain of command and division of labor, under which civilians provided logistical services at the front and the rear. I develop a categorization of civilians that differentiates between enslaved, marginally integrated, empowered, and elite civilians and shows how women's and men's roles and status shifted in relation to their proximity to military power. The second section demonstrates how rebels militarized the domestic sphere, regulating and employing social and sexual relations to further group objectives. By drawing on the reciprocal nature of institutions, such as marriage, family, and community, that entail rights and responsibilities, insurgents made individuals hold each other accountable at the household level. The final part discusses the complementary role of religion and rules in setting negative and positive incentives that sought to not only make civilians comply but also enforce the moral and legal order. This chapter thus contextualizes civilian cooperation within the structures deep inside the military support apparatus. It also highlights the constraints and vulnerabilities faced by noncombatants inside the insurgency and how organizational pathways to mitigate these were linked to greater integration into the rebel system, laying the foundations for turbulence.

Organizing the civilian workforce

The organizational structure

The forest camps were organized into three concentric circles, much like orbits revolving around a central point of gravity, with each circle representing different levels of social control, infrastructural development, and inhabitants' status.¹¹⁸ In total, there were approximately 25 camps, accessible through seven "gates" or entry points. Each camp bore an Arabic name and accommodated at least 1,000 fighters, along with civilians (OnyxNews Nigeria 2020). The inner circle deep inside the forest, closest to the epicenter of power, housed high-ranking fighters, senior commanders, and members of the Shura council, including Shekau in his well-protected camp referred to as *Camp Zairo*, *Sabil Huda*, or *Farisu*. As the nucleus of the organization, it boasted a sophisticated infrastructure. It featured buildings with zinc roofs, well-stocked armories, medical facilities with trained personnel, mosques, Islamiyah schools, and even markets and shops. The camp was powered by generators and had water facilities and filling stations. These amenities led many to compare them to IDP camps or even the city of Maiduguri.¹¹⁹

Debates continue to surround Boko Haram's leadership and command structure.¹²⁰ While Shekau's violent, erratic, and authoritarian leadership style is undisputed, some portray him as "crazy" and "mentally ill" (Freeman 2014; The Guardian 2016b), while others regard him as a smart and strategic leader (Barkindo 2018, 54). His enigmatic reputation echoed throughout the organization, with informants mentioning his ruthlessness first and foremost, but also his protective attitude towards women and alleged magical powers.¹²¹ Scholars hold differing opinions on the group's structure. Some considered Boko Haram a loosely linked umbrella organization (Anugwom 2019; Prieto Curiel, Walther, and O'Clery 2020; Thurston 2018), while others suggest that Shekau's personality dominated the group but failed to translate directly into an effective and

¹¹⁸ Interview with Hon. Judge of the Federal High Court of Nigeria, January 2020.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Deborah, March 2020; Fatima, January 2020; Ynusa, March 2020.

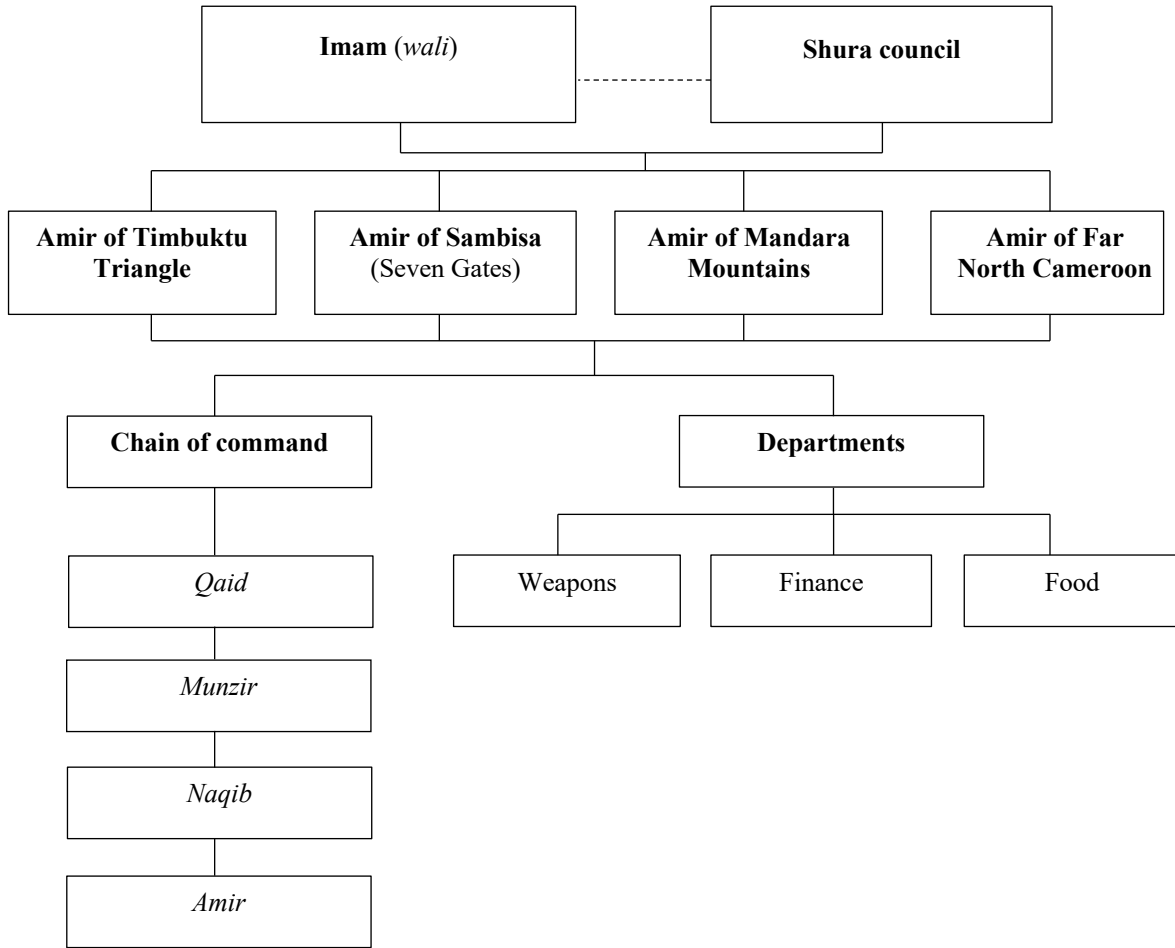
¹²⁰ Some debates revolve around what these structures look like in theory and practice. For instance, while Shekau was unquestionably the leader of Boko Haram, Mammam Nur was considered the mastermind behind key attacks (Zenn 2014b, 23), raising questions about the formal and informal distribution of power. Others dispute the role of the Shura council in advising Shekau, with some reporting that he disregarded it (Comolli 2015, 61) and others that he dissolved it all together (J. Parkinson, Hinshaw, and Akingbule 2018). Another issue of debate has been the extent to which the group was led locally or controlled externally by global jihadist networks (Mahmoud 2018; Zenn 2014c).

¹²¹ Interview with Sadiya, February 2020; Fatima, January 2020; Ynusa, March 2020.

robust command structure (O. S. Mahmood and Ani 2018a, 17). Conversely, it has also been argued for a more bureaucratic structure, characterized by clear departmental boundaries, lines of authority, and formal decision-making procedures (Zenn 2021, 621). The latter matches descriptions of military strongholds whereas more decentralized structures and personalistic authority appeared to be increasingly prominent further away from centers of power. Most respondents had limited knowledge of the organizational system beyond their immediate responsibilities and rarely personally interacted with leaders above their *amirs*. This information control was an intentional strategy to prevent individuals from acquiring extensive organizational knowledge that could be exploited by security forces. Consequently, the below depiction of the organizational structure during its peak between 2014 and 2016 may be incomplete and subject to further investigation.¹²²

¹²² Mahmood and Ani (2018a, 16) identified the same military command chain but, according to my data, the departmental structure they map appears more akin to that of ISWAP than that of Boko Haram.

FIGURE 6: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF BOKO HARAM



Within Boko Haram’s organizational structure, both fighters and civilians were subject to centralized command hierarchies. The chief Imam (or *wali* [governor] under IS), Shekau, was the head of the Shura council, in which various divisions within the group had representatives, including Mamman Nur who was the second-in-command. Shekau exerted vertical power across four horizontal regional commands, overseeing area commands at LGA-level. The fighting units were almost exclusively male. Although some women also fought, there was no female combat brigade (International Crisis Group 2016, 10). The military support apparatus encompassed a gender-mixed workforce. In certain units, men and women worked together, while others were designated specifically for either men’s or women’s domains. Additionally, some units operated with gender-segregated labor in parallel. Based on informant accounts, there were three primary departments replicated in each camp, with each comprising an array of sub-units that covered an

extensive range of logistical, administrative, and social support functions.¹²³ These roles were crucial in maintaining the military infrastructure both on the frontlines and within the organization. Military operations required the acquisition, assembly, and transportation of weapons, as well as the involvement of tactical strategists, recon operatives, mechanics, engineers, drivers, and porters. Medical professionals, such as doctors, nurses, and combat medics, attended to the sick and wounded in camps and on the battlefield. Farmers, cattle herders, traders, cooks, and administrative staff managed the production, procurement, and distribution of essentials in a centralized food system. Communications and information technology specialists, ranging from radio operators to social media managers, backed military and political campaigns. The security apparatus required spies, guards, analysts, and judges for intelligence gathering and law enforcement (*hisbah*). Although the fighting forces and civilian workforce operated under separate commands, they were operationally and tactically intertwined, frequently coming together and collaborating based on the specific mission type and requirements at hand. The following account exemplifies the coordination throughout the preparation, conduction, and aftermath of a combat operation:

There were informants who lived in the target location, but we also sent spies ahead of time to surveil the place and to get us tactical information. There is a department where they prepare a fresh uniform, socks, boots, and a turban for you on the day of the attack. Another one takes care of the guns. An Imam gives you a date (*debino*) and water when you are new; you pray with him and say that “Allah should give us success” and “Amen”. When you go, you have a driver and one mechanic per vehicle. Youths also joined to provide cover, and to supply bullets and guns. They stand in the back and come in when fighters run out of bullets. They carry the loot and wounded back to the trucks. We also had a medical team with doctors. Sometimes, cameramen film the battle for record-keeping. In the back, people carry Boko Haram flags. They cannot touch the ground. When we captured a place, they put up the flags. We celebrated when we returned. We shot in the air, danced, and ate good food that women made; everyone together, even the ones who did not go, small children, and women. But when we returned after a lost battle, everyone was angry. Women and children had to go and pray, sometimes until the next morning, so that we would be victorious the next time.¹²⁴

¹²³ This stands in contrast to a more extensive operational specialization under ISWAP, attempting to emulate IS’ structure with unique departments, including Soldiery, Judgment and Grievances, Public Security, Education, Hisbah, Services, Alms, Da’wah and Mosques, Health, Agriculture, Resources, Media, Spoils and Plunder, and Treasury (Milton 2021; Whiteside 2017)

¹²⁴ Interview with Dauda, March 2020.

Roles were clearly defined and circumscribed and allocated based on the organization's need and individuals' comparative advantage in executing them. Recruitment and abduction criteria focused on a young, capable, and skilled workforce. Insurgents struck a balance between filling military ranks and addressing the requirements of logistics and administration. While men and adolescents were typically enlisted as fighters by default, skilled and educated individuals were sought during attacks or upon arrival at the camps:

Boko Haram came to our village in 2015. They checked your profession to see if they can use you or not. ... Because I am a driver of big trucks, they made me drive for them. I drove food items. Sometimes they raid a village and then I go and pick up the items to bring back to the Sambisa Forest. I do the driving for about three to four days and then they allow me to rest while other drivers take their turns.¹²⁵

There were lots of categories of jobs: manufacturing weapons, mechanics, doctors, assembling cars, shooting, and many more. The *amir* assigns you. They look at your strategies, braveness and understanding of the environment. If you have a skill, this will help you. You can also learn from them, but they always rely on the expert in the area. If you are a new person and you have experience and expertise in some kind of thing, they will introduce you to the expert.¹²⁶

The organization has leveraged the skills and expertise of its members, while also providing opportunities for learning and growth. They trained civilians when their backgrounds did not meet specific needs. For example, doctors taught various aspects of medical care (M. Mahmood 2022).¹²⁷ Others like Godiya were trained to become tailors: "I went through the training successfully! They gave us a sewing machine from the ones they collected from innocent civilians during their operations".¹²⁸ As a violent organization, certain jobs required special training. The suicide bombing unit, known as *amaliya*, consisted of experts who manufactured suicide vests and IEDs, and instructed recruits on detonation: "We were trained on how to make bombs, hide them, and carry out suicide bombing".¹²⁹ A former head of a bomb-making unit said: "When I was in Alagarno, I was taught how to make bombs. It's the riskiest task, but I risked my life for my job

¹²⁵ Interview in Mahmood and Ani (2018a, 17).

¹²⁶ Interview with Dauda, March 2020.

¹²⁷ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020; Musa, November 2019.

¹²⁸ Interview with Godiya, March 2020.

¹²⁹ Interview with Sadiya, February 2020.

and I became an expert”.¹³⁰ Civilians were also trained in the execution of specific punishments, with on-the-job training in amputations or beheadings:

The men showed the burka-clad women how best to wield their knives. I remember seeing a man lean down to one of the victims, pressing her head down and placing the blade on the nape of her neck. One of the Boko Haram women wanted to start cutting at the throat so the captive would die quicker, but the emir forbade her. The women in burkas had to cut from the nape through to the throat.¹³¹

While men were assessed in terms of their skills and ability, women were primarily screened and employed for their marital potential. As wives, they were supposed to cook and clean, bear and rear children, serve their husbands, and perform everyday chores in the household and camps. Boko Haram relied on their emotional, material, and symbolic labor for “militarized social reproduction”, supporting individual combatants and the rebel movement writ large. The military domestic sphere, particularly prominent in groups that engage in abduction, forced marriage, and enslavement (Marks 2017, 442), has sustained alternative societies in forests and jungles across numerous African insurgencies (Baines 2018; Coulter 2009; Vastapuu 2020). This has not restricted women’s roles to the domestic sphere, but it is a key contribution that due to its informality remains hidden in depictions of formal organizational structures. As Turshen (1998, 1) stated, “the enduring wartime picture of ‘man does, woman is’ has depended on the invisibility of women’s participation in the war effort, their unacknowledged, behind-the-lines contributions to the prosecution of war”. Despite Boko Haram’s ideology promoting gender segregation, it did not translate into formalized dual command structures or female brigades, such as the all-female al-Khansaa Brigade employed for law enforcement by the Houthis in Yemen and IS in Syria (Kafanov 2016; al-Tamimi 2018). The organization of female labor occurred through informal power structures that operated alongside formal male command chains.

Categories of militarized civilians

The designation “civilians” was primarily used for populations outside the camps. The lack of a specific term for noncombatants might stem from the fact that it would have said little about their position within the rebel system. Instead, within the camp, distinctions among residents were

¹³⁰ Interview with Zakariya in Mahmood (2022).

¹³¹ Interview with Agnes in Bauer (2016, 142)

primarily based on their status, which was determined by the nature and perceived value of their contribution to the war effort as well as by gender hierarchies. In the militarized pecking order, fighters generally held higher ranks than noncombatants, and men maintained a superior status to women. The degree to which noncombatants were integrated into the military apparatus depended on the skills and physical capabilities of men and the relationships that women had with men, in addition to their own skills. Willingness to cooperate and, to a certain degree, age also factored in for both genders. Based on these criteria, civilians' relations to the organization could be categorized as: enslaved, marginally integrated, empowered, and elite.¹³²

Enslaved civilians found themselves in the most precarious situation, consisting primarily of young boys and girls, along with uncooperative men and women who were forced into the group. Referred to as *awam* [slaves], they were either imprisoned, assigned domestic roles, or given ad-hoc and basic tasks without formal integration into the organization. As a result, they had the least access to resources, power, and protection. Although they could be close to people in power, their relationships to them were asymmetrical, informal, and often violent. A young woman who was abducted during a raid in Damboa described the consequences of not having a husband in captivity:

When they kidnapped us, they told us that those who are not married yet will get married to fighters. If you don't want to get married, they will keep you as slaves. Those of us who didn't want to get married got transferred to a cell where we had to stay for six months until the military rescued us. If you don't have a husband in captivity, you don't get anything!¹³³

Young women of marriageable age who refused to convert and marry were imprisoned for weeks or months to coerce cooperation. Small girls and middle-aged women were more likely to be subjected to forced labor, participation in military operations like luring men into ambush, and performing household chores for commanders and their wives (Human Rights Watch 2014). They washed the clothes of Boko Haram wives, bathed their children, and swept their houses.¹³⁴ Males faced similar expectations, performing various menial jobs such as carrying looted goods, digging trenches, and rearing cattle. Just like girls, boys who were too small to receive weapons training

¹³² This categorization is informed by Marks' (2014) categorization of women's status in the RUF into non-wives, unprotected wives, protected wives, and senior women.

¹³³ Interview with Amina, May 2018.

¹³⁴ Interview with Anatu, May 2018.

performed domestic chores for commanders and their wives. They provided services in camps, such as delivering tea and collecting firewood, and at the frontlines, where they carried petrol drums, resupplied ammunition, or searched dead bodies for jewelry and money (Hinshaw and Parkinson 2016; Topol 2017). Dynamics between those in power and their subordinates varied, but the abuse of slaves appeared to be a common and accepted practice. Commanders sometimes protected women from rape before marriage (Human Rights Watch 2014), but designated sex slaves had no such protection.¹³⁵ The position at the bottom of the hierarchy was often a transitory stage leading to marriage and higher levels of integration. The brutal treatment served as a strategy to push women into becoming (re)productive members of the group. Boys either chose to be more cooperative or grew out of enslavement as they reached fighting age. However, many never escaped this status, dying due to disease, frontline combat, or because they tested the insurgents' patience too far. Slaves thus experienced what it meant to live – and die – at the margins of Boko Haram's society and military apparatus, exploited for labor and left without the material or social means to gain authority.

Marginally integrated civilians had more established but still distant linkages to the organization. In the steep hierarchies of Boko Haram, as in Northern Nigerian society, livelihood opportunities were scarce for those without connections to local “big men”. Boko Haram's assessment of civilians as being of (yet) limited use or trustworthiness put them in a vulnerable position. This category consisted primarily of men and women who cooperated to survive, filling lower ranks within the group's support network. Men performed physically demanding labor or supported logistics and administration as drivers, guards, or teachers, due to their skills or unwillingness to become combatants. They were compensated with basic goods, reflecting their perceived minor contributions to the war effort. They were afforded the privilege of marriage but could typically support only one wife living in modest conditions, unable to access the status conferred by large households. Marginal integration brought some predictability and better provisioning, but due to the nature of their roles for which replacement could easily be found, they remained in a vulnerable position, with fighters wielding significant power over them.

¹³⁵ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020; Fatima, January 2020. Specifically selected groups of women were also sent on “sex missions” outside of Nigeria and returned after a few weeks, explained an informant whose husband had organized cross-border supply chains (Interview with Hadiza, November 2019).

For women, basic amenities such as accommodation and access to food were improved, but this resulted not from formal workforce integration but from marriage to a low- or mid-ranking noncombatant, foot soldier, or junior commander. As low-level fighters significantly outnumbered commanders, numerous women found themselves in this still powerless position. They moved from imprisonment as slaves to marital seclusion in household units instead and were expected to fulfill domestic, sexual, and social responsibilities as wives and mothers. Women's experiences varied depending on their relationships with their husbands. Some described their positions positively, relishing the opportunity to "just stay home, serve [their] husband, and control domestic issues"¹³⁶ while others faced deprivation and personal violence at the hands of their husbands. The relatively low status of husbands offered few avenues for women to improve their situations. Being marginally integrated placed them too close to the military apparatus to evade responsibilities and too far from it to leverage related opportunities. It appeared that a significant number of suicide bombers emerged from this pool of women, who fulfilled the organization's marriage requirements while being easily replaceable.¹³⁷ Extensive ideological exposure through Islamiyah classes and their husbands, who were often their only social contacts and who could reap the rewards of their wives' martyrdom,¹³⁸ further influenced them. This desperate and inflexible position, as reported by informants, could explain the high number of volunteers, as women found themselves unable to move forward or backward.

Empowered civilians rose to a status above foot soldiers, encompassing roles such as mechanics, technicians, and doctors. Males secured their privileged positions through specialized expertise, voluntary enlistment, trustworthiness, or a combination of these factors. Rare and indispensable skills, whether medical, technical, tactical, religious, or otherwise, rendered these civilians integral to the organization's functioning and frontline services. As an informant put it, "[t]hey never kill people with a special skill, like doctors, nurses, engineers and so on. They treat them very well, veery well!".¹³⁹ This comparative advantage manifested in access to women and financial rewards, which was an indicator of power and trust, as it could buy opportunities and reduce group dependency. Within the context of Borno's low adult literacy rate and a high proportion of

¹³⁶ Interview with Idayat, February 2020.

¹³⁷ Author's field notes, January 2020.

¹³⁸ Interview with Musa, November 2019; Fatima, January 2020.

¹³⁹ Interview with Alhassan, March 2020.

uneducated children,¹⁴⁰ educated individuals emerged as valuable assets to the group, which is somewhat ironic given its stance on Western education. For instance, even small literate boys could become *amirs*' personal satellite-phone assistants (Topol 2017), while those fluent in English translated intercepted conversations between control rooms and pilots flying airstrikes (M. Mahmood 2022). Often, it was the combination of skill and trustworthiness that elevated one's value, granting access to commanders and setting them apart socially from others possessing similar skills. This combination also afforded them greater autonomy and safety. "Ahmed was powerful, even though he didn't carry a gun" said Talatu about a boy who had reported escape plans to the amir and was "invulnerable" from that point onwards.¹⁴¹ However, apart from young children, even these integrated civilians received military training. This applied not only to those assigned to frontline service support, but also others "because no matter what you do, anywhere you go, you will go with your weapon".¹⁴²

For women, marrying a commander significantly elevated their status within the hierarchy, as the power their husbands wielded in the military sphere translated to the domestic and civilian realms. These women gained better access to food, goods, and protection and faced a different set of responsibilities. Domestic tasks and household chores were often delegated to servants over whom they exerted power; some did so in a caring way, while others were abusive. Women of this rank were exempt from chores and entrusted with more sensitive tasks: "It is easier if you are higher up in the hierarchy. They only trust a small number of women. They let them clean and store weapons. You are exempt from household chores because you are a helper of the religion".¹⁴³ Women could also leverage their own skills and knowledge for tasks like recruiting and teaching, arranging marriages, or working as midwives. This allowed them to gain respect and authority by fulfilling their religious duties towards the community.¹⁴⁴ Trusted wives of Boko Haram commanders also collected intelligence and provided logistical support, such as transporting concealed weapons or even carrying their husbands' arms into battle (Usman, Taraboulsi-McCarthy, and Hawaja 2020).

¹⁴⁰ Borno has an adult literacy rate of 35 percent and 72 percent of children between six and 16 have never attended school (CITAD 2018).

¹⁴¹ Interview with Talatu in Bauer (2016, 32)

¹⁴² Interview with Dauda, March 2020.

¹⁴³ Interview with Hadiza, November 2019.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

Amiras, the wives of *amirs*, controlled women in their jurisdiction. In particular, women who were married to their husbands prior to joining the group tended to come into these positions of authority that existed outside of the formal command structure, in accordance with Boko Haram’s gendered distribution of power¹⁴⁵ – reminiscent of Nigeria’s military regimes that involved the wives of Babangida and Abacha as a “Commander of Women” (Mama 1998). *Amiras* assigned responsibilities, coordinated activities, convened women for Quranic education and sermons, mediated disputes, and administered punishments. They ensured the cooperation of those beneath them to maintain material and social power, particularly when their husbands were away. When their husbands were away, their reach extended even further. In those times they had de facto commanding authority and were assigned with the military defense of the base, responsibilities for which they received weapons training. “I know how to handle an AK-47. It’s easy”, said a former *amira*, “I even serviced my husband’s gun before he went on a battle”.¹⁴⁶ Many of them also underwent the military basic training¹⁴⁷ and occasionally joined combat units, illustrating that Boko Haram did not refrain from breaking its own gender norms when it was advantageous to the armed struggle (Ahmad 2019; Warner, Chapin, and Matfess 2019). As *amiras*, these women held a position that demanded male insurgents and mid-level commanders to display respect towards them, even if it was not always genuine or willingly given,¹⁴⁸ echoing similar sentiments of resentment observed in other contexts (Luciak 2001, 28). As a former wife of Mamman Nur recalled, these men “always spoke to me with their heads bowed” as a display of deference.¹⁴⁹

Elite civilians, who directly collaborated with top leadership, held positions only a select few could attain. These individuals possessed access to and control over critical group information, such as intelligence officers, IT and communication experts, and weapons specialists, working directly under the top-tier commanders. The potential loss of such insiders to the military would be extremely costly, prompting the leadership to tightly regulate access to this circle while ensuring sustained cooperation through generous compensation and protection. Kadi, who agreed to become a mediator’s third wife, said:

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Fatima, January 2020; Kadi, November 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Sadiya, February 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Sadiya, February 2020; Fatima, January 2020; Hamatu, March 2020.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Aisha in Nwaubani (2018).

We stayed in a nice house in a small compound with a fence around it. It had two rooms with beds, a mirror, wardrobe, and a toilet. He brought home lots of food stuff like fish, meat, and flour. After attacks, there were even more kinds of food. ... Due to his position, senior officers came to our house regularly. There was a lot of fighting over women among soldiers in Gwoza and he was sent to mediate and get the *amir* to stop it. ... He told me that he could not imagine a place where you live more in line with your religion. But he did not like the killing. That was why he chose his position.¹⁵⁰

In addition to material benefits, the position also brought greater respect and autonomy. “My husband was good with ammunition, building bombs, making and fixing suicide vests”, explained Hadiza. “Because he was very versatile, no one dared to bother him. He was very respected.”¹⁵¹ However, the status of senior military officers still surpassed that of powerful noncombatants. According to Kadi, who visited their homes to braid the hair of commanders’ wives, “they had everything you could imagine! Boreholes, big houses with three or more rooms, TVs; everything was big and comfortable”.¹⁵² As referred to in the introduction, Fatima, whose husband had advised Shekau on irrigation practices before becoming an *amir*, spoke of the lifestyle change after his promotion, which made him *oga* and her “the first lady”.¹⁵³ Although the line between Boko Haram civilians and combatants could be confusingly thin, especially in high ranks, it nevertheless existed. There was a threshold of material and social power that could only be overcome by joining the fighting forces.

This threshold was even higher for women. The status of elite civilians appeared not to exist as such because comparable ranks and privileges were only accessible to top-tier female commanders who exhibited “extraordinary bravery” in battle.¹⁵⁴ They were known for their combat prowess and strict, violent behavior, instilling fear even among *amiras*:

Female leaders had different areas of specialty, like cutting hands, beating and so on. There were different high-ranking women, but one was the highest of all. The leader of all the women was very strict. She went on raids and handled two AK-47 at the same time. Sometimes she could even go home to see her family. She changed her husband whenever she got bored. She chose both junior and senior commanders as husbands, whichever she liked. But when she got married to a

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Kadi, November 2019.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Hadiza, November 2019.

¹⁵² Interview with Kadi, November 2019.

¹⁵³ Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

junior commander, he immediately became a senior officer. She only took orders from males, not from any other woman.¹⁵⁵

Though information is difficult to obtain and verify, what is known suggests that the highest positions of female power allowed them to overcome (if not entirely) many of the restrictions that other women faced – enabling freedom of movement, partner choice, and being a full-time fighter. Both their privileges and responsibilities started to align with those of males. Although only a small number of women held these positions, their reputation resounded throughout the organization, demonstrating to other women what was valued and attainable within Boko Haram's ranks.

Mobility in the rebel system

The ways in which status manifested within Boko Haram mirrored many aspects of power dynamics outside the group. For men, power granted access to wealth and women, while for women, it provided protection and provisions. Both gained respect and authority that they could wield over others. There was also continuity in how class and gender intersected in the division of labor, giving men direct access to material and social weight whereas women's roles and opportunities were contingent on their husbands (Matfess 2017; Usman, Taraboulsi-McCarthy, and Hawaja 2020). Women therefore had to gain status through, not outside of marriage. Regardless of the public roles women came to occupy, their role as a wife remained the salient category. Hence, when informants talked about females in the group, they usually referred to their marital status, specified by the rank titles of their husbands (e.g., a soldier's wife; *amir's* wife). In contrast, men were described by their jobs and rank, if applicable. This lends support to Usman et al.'s (2020, 204) argument that female mobilization into Boko Haram was less motivated by a desire to overthrow but to perform gender hierarchies through adherence to their duties toward their husbands, society, and God.

Nonetheless, it is essential to consider that, even when adhering to strictly hierarchical and patriarchal gender norms, the way these norms were practiced created opportunities for socio-economic mobility. As a result, both women and men could access positions that would have been otherwise unattainable in Northeast Nigeria's society. Women from rural and low-income areas

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Hadiza, November 2019.

had the chance to marry men of significantly higher status, granting them access to healthcare services and liberating them from the physically demanding labor they typically performed to support their households from a young age. Furthermore, Matfess (2017) observed that Boko Haram adhered to the Islamic interpretation of giving the bride price (*sadaki*) directly to the women, rather than to their parents as is customary. Respondents' experiences in this regard varied. In some cases, the bride price was higher than what they would have received in their home communities, particularly when marrying commanders. According to multiple accounts, bride prices in the *Sabil Huda* generally ranged between 2,500 and 10,000 Naira, with the highest sum reaching 50,000 Naira, or approximately US\$120. However, when marrying foot soldiers or low-ranking civilians, women often received no dowry, only a prayer, a pair of shoes, earrings, or a carton of chewing gum; some even had to return the money to their husbands.¹⁵⁶ Fatima Akilu, the founder and director of the Neem Foundation, which offers psycho-social support services in the Northeast, highlighted the allure of female empowerment within Boko Haram: "We usually dismiss Boko Haram as anti-women and anti-girls, but they knew that a powerful recruitment strategy was to tell women that, 'If you join our group, you can have whatever role you want'".¹⁵⁷

Men's access to money and women, in turn, needs to be understood within the context of inequality, corruption, and limited livelihood opportunities characterizing Northeast Nigeria. In this region, many young men face pressure and often struggle to marry and provide for their families. Resulting "frustration with inability to meet breadwinner masculinity norms provides incentives for young men to join AOGs" such as Boko Haram (Nagarajan 2019, 11). In this vein, Hudson and Matfess (2017, 28) showed that Boko Haram has exploited inflated bride prices and the economic grievances of young men in the region. Easy and affordable access to women provided them with "a sense of self as 'real men'". While traditional status symbols remained indicators of power and prestige within Boko Haram, attaining them was no longer predetermined solely by age, socio-economic background, or ruling lineage. The group disrupted restrictive models of social organization that inevitably placed young and low-income men and women at the bottom of the hierarchy. By altering the rules of conventional authority, young boys and girls could potentially become superiors to older men and women. Inverting the social pyramid has been

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Grace, November 2019; Godiya, March 2020; Hamatu, March 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Fatima Akilu in Nwaubani (2018)

studied as a factor driving recruitment, but it can also help explain the retention of civilians forcibly brought into the group (Pearson and Nagarajan 2020). That being said, the fact that Boko Haram's power structure allowed for social mobility does not imply that this potential materialized for everyone, as the outlined social categories clearly demonstrate. Class, gender, and military status intersected and created diverse roles and relationships.

By making the benefits of cooperation readily apparent, Boko Haram harnessed the power of social comparison. The group also presented transparent pathways to mobility, grounded in a simple logic of gendered and ideologized militarization. Although the military units possessed more clearly defined indicators and objectives, every informant could outline the actions that would have led to, or indeed did result in, promotion. A more detailed discussion of civilian agency will be presented in Chapter 7. Demonstrating loyalty and bravery could win the leaders' trust. This could be achieved through various means, such as reporting escape plans, recruiting new members, persuading women to marry, or even through small gestures like "jubilating loudly" when fighters returned from battle.¹⁵⁸ As mentioned, making oneself valuable or ideally indispensable by offering needed skills and knowledge could bring protection. Proactivity and strategic thinking were also valued, given that "[t]hey look at your strategies, braveness, and understanding of the environment" when assigning positions.¹⁵⁹ Women had to be good wives and diligent students of the Quran, aspects that will be further examined in the following sections. Nonetheless, committing internal and external violence on behalf of the group was held in the highest esteem and rewarded accordingly due to its contribution to and perceived expression of commitment to the armed struggle. Taking up arms was thus the most direct and effective way to climb up the organizational ladder. Men were encouraged, if not forced, to follow this path, while women were urged to a lesser extent, particularly when married to commanders. In line with this rationale, and as the categories of civilian cooperation have illustrated, becoming embedded within the military apparatus was inextricably linked to accessing power.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Luca, March 2020.

Social bonds: rights and responsibilities

As part of the militarization process, clear demarcations between the public and private sphere dissolved. Boko Haram drew upon, utilized, and restructured social relations to govern even the most intimate aspects of daily life. This was especially evident in the institution of marriage. The group has become notorious for subjecting women and girls to “widespread and severe forms of abuse, including sexual slavery, sexual violence, forced marriages, forced pregnancies and forced conversions” (UN Human Rights Council 2015, 8–9). Its approach to women and girls has been traced back to 2012 when the Nigerian government detained wives and family members of the group’s leaders, prompting the insurgents to initially threaten and then engage in retaliatory kidnappings in early 2013. This has been described as marking “a significant evolution in Boko Haram’s tactics” (Zenn and Pearson 2014, 47). However, abductions and forced marriage of women and girls had already occurred between 2009 and early 2013, especially in the then-strongholds of Maiduguri and Damaturu (Human Rights Watch 2014, 3). The government’s actions may not have caused the tactical shift, but it served as a catalyst for the insurgents to modify religious laws and norms surrounding gender and sexual relations – a heretical innovation (*bid’ah*) that is typically prohibited – to justify their violence (Ahmad 2019).¹⁶⁰ The practice of forced marriage has been connected to the instrumentalization of women. Bloom and Matfess (2016, 109–10) argue that it served the tactical purposes of “increasing group cohesion through the provision of women as prizes, cultivating loyalty through the enhanced status following ‘marriage’ and increasing local fear of the insurgents”. Oriola (2017) similarly emphasizes the use of marriage to create cohesion and solidarity among male operatives and to attract recruits. These explanations concentrate on the benefits of marriage for fighters and their positive impact on the organization, a pattern observed in other contexts as well. Scholars have analyzed the strategic functions that forced marriage can serve in strengthening group capacity and cohesion (P. Donnelly 2018; Kramer 2012; Marks 2013a), territorial control (Asal and Nagel 2021; P. G. Donnelly 2019), and the political state-building project (Ahram 2019; Baines 2014).

¹⁶⁰ In a video Shekau released after the Chibok kidnapping, he justifies slavery by stating: “I will follow the entirety of Quran. The Quran talks about capturing slaves; that is why I have caught them” (Ahmad 2019, 107).

However, from an organizational perspective, marriage was also employed by the insurgents as an instrument to extend social control. It not only allowed for the regulation of sexual relations but also facilitated the delegation of responsibilities and the establishment of round-the-clock accountability mechanisms among members of a household unit. One-sided explanations tend to neglect the unequal yet reciprocal nature of marriage. Even under Boko Haram, husbands and wives had interconnected rights and responsibilities. These were based on traditional gender stereotypes, with a woman as a “good wife, a devoted mother” whose role is “to maintain order, and stability in the home and, by implication, in the society in raising children with the right (religious and moral) values or *tarbiyya*” (Usman, Taraboulsi-McCarthy, and Hawaja 2020, 201). Strict rules related to *purdah* required women to minimize activities outside, cover themselves when leaving the house, attend Quranic education, and serve their husbands domestically and sexually. Simultaneously, the group’s interpretation of Islamic law secured wives specific rights vis-à-vis their husbands, who were obligated to fulfill their masculinized duties as protectors and providers. A Boko Haram commander explained to a group of abductees in Sambisa:

You are no longer in Nigeria. You are now in an Islamic kingdom. Here, women’s rights are respected, not like in Nigeria where women are made to work, farm, fetch water and firewood, and where you have all types of discrimination. This is the reason why we are rescuing Christian women like you. In our Islamic kingdom, there will be no discrimination because everyone will be Muslims.¹⁶¹

Though he omitted that marriage also coerced women into sexual relations, domestic servitude, and a life under the authority of their husbands, his “rights-based approach” reflects married women’s exemption from hard physical labor and, at times, even from domestic chores. Numerous women reported their husbands or even filed for divorce when they were not fulfilling their obligations (International Crisis Group 2019b). As explained by Nenna, who was 15 when Boko Haram invaded Madagali and taken to the bush by her appointed husband “without explaining anything”, spouses would report each other regularly, especially when wives refused to recite or pray, husbands engaged in drug consumption or mistreated their wives, or either engaged in extra-marital affairs.¹⁶² She herself ultimately reported her husband, who was a fighter and trader purchasing staples for the camps from Cameroon, because he “treated [her] poorly and failed to

¹⁶¹ Interview in Human Rights Watch (2014, 1)

¹⁶² Interview with Nenna, January 2020.

provide food”. He justified his behavior by saying that she “was not giving herself to him”. This resulted in her being flogged, which speaks to both the complementary and deeply patriarchal conceptualization of marital obligations. Nevertheless, the observation that “[m]en did not want to get married when there was a food shortage and got divorced so that they didn’t have to provide anymore” suggests that the obligation was taken seriously and not always easy to fulfill in a setting with fluctuating resource availability. They preferred to renounce their privilege rather than be held accountable by their wives and punished by leaders for misconduct.

The dependency ingrained in marital relationships was also used to establish and enforce policies regarding sexual and gender-based violence. Mirroring practices of other rebel groups like the LRA, al-Shabaab, and RUF (Baines 2014; P. G. Donnelly 2019; Marks 2013a), adultery and extra-marital rape were prohibited. Boko Haram’s practice of rape, which has been described as a weapon of war (Bloom and Matfess 2016, 110; Gavin 2015) and a strategy to produce the next generation of fighters (Ogundipe, Obinna, and Chioma 2015; Oriola 2017, 107), needs to be seen in the context of these internal policies. Just as Marks (2014, 74) writes about the RUF, “rape was seen as a threat to RUF cohesion and efficacy as a fighting force, marriage – often forced – was promoted as its antidote. Supposedly offering stability and domesticity, unlike rape, sex within marriage had social and moral legitimacy”. Musa, the aforementioned *amir*, said about his fighters that “one of their weakest points is that they like women too much”.¹⁶³ According to him, marriage and strict laws were effective in preventing rape because “[fighters] have money now, so they can just pay the 5,000 Naira [USD\$11] to marry the ones they like. The punishment for rape is so severe [stoning] that it is not worth the risk”. However, status differences caused frustration in a centralized marriage system that gave commanders the resources and privileged access to selecting brides, he said, not unlike marriage market obstructions in the Northeast (Hudson and Matfess 2017). This may help to explain why rape seemed to be prevalent in the camps despite efforts to prevent it, especially when oversight was low:

When fighters were on attacks, other men came to your house and ask whether your husband was there. When you told him that he was on an attack, he would come back later at night, sometimes even with a knife, to rape you. Even those who have their wives at home did it. One woman, for example, screamed very loudly and people came out and caught the guy. They locked him up in the guard

¹⁶³ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

room until Friday. Then they brought him out, dug a hole and people stoned him until his skull broke. That happened many times. ... After that it is quiet for two days or so; then it happens again.¹⁶⁴

In addition to holding the offender accountable to mitigate immediate and future physical threats and to claim their rights, women were incentivized to report rape for other reasons. Failures to do so could later be interpreted as a sign that it was consensual sex, and thus punishable as adultery.¹⁶⁵ “These things tend to come out”, explained a female informant, “because there is no privacy. People watch closely who hangs out where and gossip or report when a man enters a woman’s place and stays for a long time”.¹⁶⁶ Women did not always go to the leaders directly, although they could, but instead reported instances of sexual assault to their husbands, whose rights were also violated by extension.¹⁶⁷ However, an unintended consequence of the marriage policy undermined the insurgents’ strategy of mutual enforcement. In some camps, men frequently filed for divorce, or were compelled to do so by more powerful individuals, in order to engage in sexual relations with other women within the confines of the law.¹⁶⁸ This made marital relationships even more asymmetrical, pressuring women to keep their side of the bargain while men reneged on theirs when it proved inconvenient.

The coercion into marriage and legitimization of marital rape were counterbalanced by efforts to restrict other forms of abuse. Excessive personalistic violence would have jeopardized the organization’s monopoly on the use of force, the gender-stereotypical ideals of men as protectors, and the objectives of marriage that relied on reciprocal rights and responsibilities. Consequently, under Boko Haram’s law, husbands were prohibited from beating their wives.¹⁶⁹ “Shekau did not want men to abuse women. If you slap your wife in the face, you will be slapped in the face, too”, explained Fatima the implementation of the eye-for-an-eye principle.¹⁷⁰ According to the rules, any transgressions had to be reported to the camp leaders, who would then determine the appropriate course of action:

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Grace, October 2019.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Grace, October 2019; Kadi, November 2019.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Grace, October 2019.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Grace, October 2019; Fatima, November 2019.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Deborah, March 2020; Sadiya, February 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Dauda, March 2020; Fatima, January 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

If you slap your wife, they give the husband 100 lashes. If the wife disobeys, she gets 50 or 100 lashes depending on the disobedience. But if you touch her, the problem will be on you. Ideally, you should report, not punish her yourself.¹⁷¹

Fatima, who spoke from a position of power and had never experienced the bottom of Boko Haram's hierarchy, interpreted these practices as a strengthening of women's rights:

The leaders supported women so much, especially when it came to maltreatment [by their husbands]. Women reported husbands every day. Whether he got punished depended on whether it was his fault. But when you didn't fulfil your obligations, such as wearing a hijab, the husband could do with you whatever he wanted.¹⁷²

Her account is interesting for several reasons. First, that her perception of leadership support could be reconciled with women forfeiting any rights for minor transgressions and allowing a husband "to do with [her] whatever he wanted" demonstrates the deep entrenchment of patriarchal gender norms. Her acquiescence of the latitude men had in disciplining their wives resonates with Barkindo et al. (2013, 10), who note that sanctioned gender inequality and the ambiguity of Islamic law as to what constitutes reasonable restraint of women's freedom "has led to all forms of GBV [gender-based violence]".¹⁷³ The pervasiveness and normalization of domestic violence in the Northeast also helps to explain how experiences of violence in Boko Haram marriages and extensive reporting of perpetrators could coexist in respondents' accounts. It was a matter of group enforcement as much as of women's perspective. Second, the daily reporting of husbands by women implies that violence did occur, but also that Boko Haram's attempt to exercise social control through reporting mechanisms experienced some success. Women appeared to have enough confidence in the process to report, despite the bias toward men's interests. This stands in contrast to descriptions of peacetime norms, such as the following by a woman from Bama explaining the divergence of formal and informal practices about domestic violence in her home community:

Husbands are allowed to beat their wives. Actually, they are not, but it has gradually become part of our culture because women don't report. They only go to the *bulama* when the beating is so severe that it threatens their life. Then the

¹⁷¹ Interview with Adamu, May 2018.

¹⁷² Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

¹⁷³ National survey data shows that 38.3 percent of women have experienced physical domestic violence since the age of 15 in Northeast Nigeria (NDHS 2019, 293). Moreover, 45 percent of women and 34 percent of men agreed that husbands are justified to beat their wives for at least one of the following reasons: burning food, arguing with him, going out without telling him, neglecting the children, or refusing sexual intercourse (NDHS 2019, 293).

bulama questions the husband and advises him to stop. If it continues, he reports him to the king. But he usually doesn't get any punishment.¹⁷⁴

A fighter stating, “You don't shout at your wife because if she reports you, you will be blamed”,¹⁷⁵ even if exaggerated, might therefore suggest a shift in gender norms, as does the fact that his wife reported him for not sleeping with her. It is within this context that Boko Haram's governance of the private sphere – to both prevent and promote specific behaviors with varying degrees of success – and civilian cooperation need to be seen. The group first adapted the social, moral, and legal framework of marriage to align with strategic objectives. It then leveraged the reciprocal nature of marital relationships to ensure that husbands and wives held each other accountable, policed, and reported failures to meet responsibilities that violated the other person's rights.

A prerequisite and consequence of this strategy is that trust in, or fear of, the organization trumps trust between individuals. If it did not, policing would be compromised by personal loyalties. Forced marriages inherently lack a basis of trust when, “[j]ust overnight, you are told that you have to marry someone, so you can't assess that person first”.¹⁷⁶ Just as with marriage, Boko Haram instituted structures aimed at preventing or severing bonds and fostering suspicion and distrust among parents and their children, co-wives, neighbors, and camp residents. While families who relocated to Sambisa together, particularly during the insurgency's early years, remained united, abducted mothers and fathers were frequently separated from their offspring. Dislocation, death, marriage, and new assignments caused further fragmentation of old or new families. In addition, insurgents tried to create divisions. Musa explained that ideology uptake was very high among children who received training from an early age.¹⁷⁷ “Children who were born in the bush did not listen to their parents, but only to leaders. They grow up with the ideology and take it up completely”, he added. According to a mother of four, children were forbidden from disclosing what they were told or instructed by insurgents; an order they followed out of fear or commitment.¹⁷⁸ In response, parents became cautious about their words and actions in their children's presence, fearing they might be reported.¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, these social dynamics were

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Sara, February 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Dauda, March 2020.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Maria, May 2018.

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Maria, May 2018; Habiba, January 2020.

counteracted by great risks individuals took to protect their loved ones. Perhaps the most telling example of attempting to shift unwavering loyalty from immediate family to the movement is the promotion to *amir* for those who killed their own parents.¹⁸⁰ The practice was supposedly also used by other African insurgencies to irreversibly burn child recruits' bridges to their old lives (Vermeij 2014). While evidence in the case of Boko Haram is largely anecdotal, and the group seemingly did not maintain this approach over time, informants nonetheless recounted incidents and rumors that incited fear.

What could break families apart was even more effective in undermining community ties. Dispersing community members within or across camps hindered the preservation of pre-existing networks that traditionally provided economic and social security, as outlined in the previous chapter. Furthermore, Boko Haram cultivated a culture that complicated the maintenance or formation of new friendships. Social interactions were minimized. "They don't like people coming together because they could build trust and turn against them", a researcher explained.¹⁸¹ Except for the most privileged, there were no social gatherings, wedding celebrations, or religious festivities in the camps.¹⁸² Successful attacks were the only cause for celebration, featuring looted food, jubilation, and gunfire in the air. However, most of the time, civilians were discouraged from engaging in casual conversations, a norm they adhered to because "[w]hen three or four people come together, they [Boko Haram] already look at you with suspicion".¹⁸³ In Boko Haram's stratified society, those higher up in the hierarchy, and thus more trusted, enjoyed greater freedom to socialize than those at the bottom.¹⁸⁴ Nevertheless, internal policing practices proved effective in preventing the formation of close ties. Informants consistently mentioned that nobody could truly be trusted, not "even women from your home village. They report you if you say something".¹⁸⁵ It is therefore no surprise that life in the camps was described as one of hardship, fear, and loneliness. Even those who spoke of their time favorably rarely emphasized the comfort, joy, or benefits of a close-knit community. While traditional institutions of marriage and family

¹⁸⁰ Interview with researcher, May 2018; Halima, May 2018; Musa, November 2019.

¹⁸¹ Interview with researcher, May 2018.

¹⁸² Interview with Anatu, May 2018; Esther, May 2018; Nenna, January 2020.

¹⁸³ Interview with Grace, November 2019.

¹⁸⁴ However, prisoners had more opportunities to talk than marginally integrated civilians, who were confined to their households.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Aisha, January 2020.

persisted, Boko Haram altered their essence by aligning their functions with ideological and strategic group objectives. Relationships became a means to socially organize and sustain the rebellion. Intimacy evolved into a tool for intelligence gathering, childbearing for the reproduction of combatants, and trust for manipulation. Militarized domesticity sorted logistical issues of provisioning, protection, and reproduction by delegating authority to households, at a distance but still under central command. Even if enforcement was at times selective and personalistic, Boko Haram's projection of power into "private" homes was effective enough to make civilians assert their granted rights and thereby reinforce the organization's social order.

Religion and rules

The "Boko Haram" religion

In addition to transforming interpersonal relationships, a new moral and legal framework aimed to bring about changes in beliefs and behavior. Although examined separately for the sake of analytical clarity, rules and religion were intertwined and influenced all areas of daily life. This fusion of the sacred and secular realms is not a new experience in Nigeria or traditional African societies more broadly (Olupona 2014).¹⁸⁶ But Boko Haram tried to alter what people considered right and wrong in line with group objectives. Ideology has both normative and instrumental value by creating commitment to the cause, which in turn facilitates control, coordination, and cohesion (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Maynard 2019; Schubiger and Zelina 2017).¹⁸⁷ This is why ideological training is used by rebel groups despite being labor intensive (Eck 2014).

Thurston found that the sect made only "rudimentary attempts to teach its ideology" (2016, 227) in its territory. When civilians recalled the course of a day, it was evident that the insurgents invested in educational infrastructure; however, despite religious practices occupying several

¹⁸⁶ As explained by Olupona (2014, 2), "such a separation is neither desirable nor possible, because religious beliefs inform every aspect of life—including birthing and death, marriage, family dynamics, diet, dress and grooming, health care (including mental health), the spending and saving of money, interactions with one's friends and neighbors, and of course, governance. ... Indeed, religion in Africa remains the pulse of the private and public spheres, placing a strong emphasis on moral and social order in families, clans, lineages, and intraethnic interactions".

¹⁸⁷ An ideology can be defined as "a more or less systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group (a class, ethnic, or other social group), an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group (political change – or defense against its threat), and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action" (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014, 215).

hours each day, they neither featured prominently in informants' explanations for rebel behavior nor could they provide a coherent account of the propagated beliefs. Nenna, who spent four years in *Sabil Huda*, offered an exemplary summary:

They told us that they came for religious purposes and that we should join the jihad. If anybody does not want to follow, he should say it publicly and will be killed. Women should stay home and pray, so that they [Boko Haram] will be victorious. Anybody who tries to go back to Nigeria [territory outside of Boko Haram's *dawla*] will be killed and go to hellfire. They want everybody to follow their religion, the Boko Haram religion. They also said that what the military and the government are doing is not good; that it is against God, and that only they themselves are doing the work of God. On Fridays, Shekau and other people were preaching. We all went to the mosque together. They preached the same things as in class.¹⁸⁸

They teach you the Arabic alphabet, even if you know it. Everyone has to do it, every day. They check all the houses to see whether someone is not attending. There are some prayers, some recitation of the Qur'an. After the preaching, they explain everything about Boko Haram and try to convince you to join the jihad. They only give you small bites at the beginning, little by little, not the whole story.¹⁸⁹

Specific rules and restrictions, the call for jihad, the promise of paradise, and condemnation of the government and “unbelievers” in Nigeria were vaguely recalled by informants, resembling simplistic slogans and directives rather than a comprehensive set of principles and values. When questioned about Boko Haram's objectives, “I don't really know” was a common, albeit somewhat unexpected, response. Many, like Nenna, referred to it as “the Boko Haram religion”, distinguishing it from the Islam they knew or believed in. Boko Haram itself clearly differentiated between prevalent Islamic practices and its own interpretation, as demonstrated by the requirement that even Muslims convert because “before their arrival they had not been proper Muslims”.¹⁹⁰ Those who refused faced threats of death, physical and psychological abuse, and placement at the bottom of the hierarchy (Human Rights Watch 2014). Conversion symbolized submission to Boko Haram's rules and merged religion with group membership.

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Nenna, January 2020.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Fati, May 2018.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Talatu in Bauer (2016, 30)

Both men and women, irrespective of their association, dedicated several hours almost daily to receiving Quranic education. Classes were segregated by gender and age, with children taught separately, and mixed in terms of religious and ethnic affiliation. Depending on their religious affiliation and, among Muslims, the Quranic education they had previously received, informants noted that the reading and recitation of the Quran and *hadiths* did not differ significantly from their prior experiences in Quranic schools back home. Some noted that, although the reading was the same, they left out certain parts or changed the intonation.¹⁹¹ They also taught the Arabic alphabet, “even if you already knew it”,¹⁹² in accordance with the practice in *Izala* schools.¹⁹³ The interpretation, however, was different. As a female respondent put it, “[y]ou recite, they do the interpretation for you”.¹⁹⁴

Teaching methods varied among *mallams* but frequently included verbal abuse, flogging, and “frog jumps” as punishments.¹⁹⁵ Ibrahim was abducted during a raid on his *tsangaya* school where he had gained the knowledge that saved him from Boko Haram’s military service and turned him into a Quranic teacher instead.¹⁹⁶ To prove his competence, he disciplined the children when leaders visited, but also when they misbehaved, chatted, joked, or played around. They had to recite and pray, he insisted. “Everyone who forgot, I had to teach a lesson. There was not much physical punishment, just a lack of food and pressure on those who did not read well”. The limited authority that *mallams* held over small groups of students could be a source of empowerment, mistreatment, and personalistic violence. Umaru spoke with visible resentment about his “wicked” Imam Yabakura who was “very strict and punished people”, using his power to “send [students] to fetch water and get firewood for his wife” while favoring his nephews “who never had to do anything”.¹⁹⁷ The universal obligation to attend classes, in addition to the regular five daily prayers, demonstrates the group’s commitment to spreading its ideology. The considerable time allocated to Quranic education, which could have been utilized for military support, and the authoritative teaching style further imply that it was not merely a rhetorical façade but a genuine attempt to

¹⁹¹ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020; Latifah, May 2018.

¹⁹² Interview with Latifah, May 2018.

¹⁹³ In traditional Quranic schools, students are taught basic ritual obligations and have to memorize the Quran phonetically, whereas in *Izala* schools, they learn Arabic (Masquelier 2009; Renne 2012)

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Grace, October 2019.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020; Ladi, March 2020.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Ibrahim, March 2020.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Umaru, January 2020.

instill the group's beliefs and values in civilians. To induce not only a new moral code but also fear, the Friday *Jummat* prayers were mandatory and staged as dramatic events. Prayers and prolonged sermons by chief Imams and leaders were followed by executions and violent punishments.¹⁹⁸ The symbiosis of rules and religion was established through the implementation of a strict and self-serving version of Sharia law.

Rules: "If you don't obey, they will kill you!"

Where indoctrination alone was insufficient to shape behavior, coercion stepped in. Indoctrination and law enforcement complemented each other in their efforts to influence behavior through both internal and external incentives. By dictating how to pray and dress, or whom (not) to sleep with, Boko Haram's law codified the rules to live by, created behavioral patterns conducive to internal cohesion, and reinforced the moral framework. It was based on Sharia law, which, as of 2001, has been officially instituted in twelve states in Northern Nigeria – as both civil and criminal law – alongside customary law.¹⁹⁹ While Islam in Northern Nigeria goes back to the 11th century in Borno, it was Dan Fodio who laid the basis for the contemporary Islamic legal system with the Sokoto Caliphate in the 19th century (M. G. Smith 1960). It was the desire to “return to the glory of former times”, explains Barkindo (DW 2019), that created support for the reintroduction of Sharia law among many Muslims following Nigeria's independence from British colonial rule. But it was also the hope that Sharia would cure corruption and inequality in the new democracy while also improving public goods provision and good governance (Kendhammer 2013); sentiments that Boko Haram capitalized on, as mentioned in Chapter 4. For many, Sharia is more about politics and community relations than theological doctrine (Kendhammer 2013). It therefore enjoys wide support among Muslims and even some Christians in Northern Nigeria (Mustapha and Gamawa 2018). However, there were substantial differences between the Islamic legal system institutionalized in the Northeast and the one Boko Haram implemented, which was characterized by a self-serving set of rules and stringent, brutal enforcement.

As the laws were deeply interwoven with the religious belief system, they were frequently taught during Quranic education and, as a result, well memorized by informants. There was consistency

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Dawo, March 2020; Esther, May 2018; Hadiza, November 2019.

¹⁹⁹ These are Zamfara, Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Bauchi, Borno, Jigawa, Kebbi, Yobe, Kaduna, Niger and Gombe state.

in the stated rules that left no room for ambiguity, unlike corresponding punishments, which appeared to vary and included corporal *hudud* punishments. As elaborated in the previous section, one area of the law enforced the group's gender policies, which included marital responsibilities and dress codes, with punishments ranging from flogging to stoning. Women were required to cover their bodies and faces in public, while men had to adhere to the Wahhabi-style of long beards, turbans, and loose trousers worn above the ankles (Amnesty International 2015a), but Islamic clothing was often combined with casual Western dressing (Pieri and Zenn 2018). Like inadequate dressing, so did the missing of Quranic classes or prayers result in strokes as punishments. Looting and stealing were considered more severe transgressions: "If someone steals, they cut his hand, if he steals again, they cut the other hand, if he steals again, they cut a leg, if he steals again, they kill him".²⁰⁰ Even if an offender was not sentenced to death, infected wounds from punishments could be fatal, especially after amputations when the arm or leg was put in a pot of boiling oil to stop the bleeding.²⁰¹ Generally the laws conformed to criminal and civil offenses under Sharia, although some were bent to suit the insurgents' needs. For example, drug use was prohibited and punishable by death if consumed individually. However, a former fighter mentioned, regarding the use of Tramadol, that "[w]hen you are going for a military operation you will be given it to take, otherwise if you take it you will be killed".²⁰² Other rules served purely strategic interests and sought to prevent any attempts to undermine or betray the group. These included the prohibition of conversation topics, such as criticism of the movement, "politics", or memories of home.²⁰³ Self-evidently, there was a law against escape and movement restrictions in and out of Boko Haram territory:

We tried to escape but Boko Haram soldiers found us and took us back to the camp. When we got re-arrested, they said they would give us 80 lashes each. It's always 80 lashes for females, but males will be killed.²⁰⁴

Men generally faced higher punishments than women, with a greater risk of being killed and more severe beatings or lashes. The severity of punishments could increase with the number of violations: "[i]f you try to escape to Nigeria, you will get 80 lashes. If you try again and they catch

²⁰⁰ Interview with Habibah, May 2018.

²⁰¹ Interview with Kawu, February 2020.

²⁰² Interview in BBC (2018).

²⁰³ Interview with Christina, January 2020.

²⁰⁴ Interview with Gimbiya, May 2018.

you, it's another 80 lashes, but the third time, they kill you".²⁰⁵ However, depending on the context, some people were also shot while on the run or killed after their first or second escape attempt.

In the Northeast, *hudud* punishments have not been enacted in Borno and Yobe state, where Sharia courts do not handle criminal matters (Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme 2016). In states where criminal cases are adjudicated, severe punishments such as amputation or stoning to death are rarely imposed, and if so, they are not executed. Non-enforcement of certain Sharia provisions is the result of not only inefficiencies, but also a strategic compromise to mediate between Sharia and common law – an important tool in maintaining political stability (Sabrow 2020). This stands in stark contrast to the realities in the bush, where brutal punishments and executions were daily public occurrences. Boko Haram's religious exclusivism precluded any such compromises, and extensive internal policing prevented impunity. The police force, guards, spies, and people observing and reporting each other constituted a relatively effective form of policing that involved civilians in law enforcement and the internal perpetration of violence.

Boko Haram set up conflict resolution mechanisms and Sharia courts.²⁰⁶ Disputes and cases were first brought to the *amir*, who decided on minor or clear-cut offenses that resulted in immediate punishments.²⁰⁷ Reporting to and letting a religious or community leader adjudicate the case according to Sharia principles is a common traditional justice mechanism in the Northeast called *sulhu*. This preferred form of conflict resolution coexists with other Sharia processes and is believed to maintain unity among the *ummah* (Al-Ramahi 2008; Hassan and Tyvoll 2018). In cases involving criminal offenses or mixed evidence, Boko Haram's Sharia courts made binding judgments. For traditional *hudud* crimes, such as adultery, theft, or drug use, witnesses were required, although accounts varied regarding the number of witnesses and the extent to which this practice was upheld. While some described trials as fair, others argued that the cases were decided to suit the insurgents' interests. However, everyone agreed that judicial decisions were respected: "When the judge said, 'you didn't do it', you didn't get punished".²⁰⁸ Rebel legal and judicial

²⁰⁵ Interview with Christina, January 2020.

²⁰⁶ Here, following Lon Fuller in "The Morality of Law" (1964), the rule of law is used to describe a legal system that is characterized by legal certainty and does not imply normative requirements regarding substantive or procedural aspects of the law (see also, Hart, 1965).

²⁰⁷ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

²⁰⁸ Interview with Fara, May 2018.

systems vary in the extent to which they approximate the rule of law or kangaroo courts (Ledwidge 2017; Loyle 2021; Sivakumaran 2009), but evidence across cases suggests that, behind a façade of accountability, individuals are often subjected to both official and personalistic violence and humiliation (Keen 2005, 233; Weinstein and Laudemiro 2005, 177).

Upon conviction, punishments were organized as public events. A former Boko Haram wife who spent three years in Sambisa explained:

If you do anything wrong, they will gather all the people in the camp. If they want to slaughter a person, for example, they gather everyone, young and old, so that they would see it. It's a lesson for them. That happens almost every day. Normally, if they gather people, it's for the purpose of penalty.²⁰⁹

Violent display, which is “a collective effort to stage violence for people to see, notice, or take in” (Fujii 2017, 661), was a regular part of daily life. Organizing punishments as violent displays had effects beyond disciplining the individual transgressor. Leveraging the multiplier effect, these displays conveyed behavioral expectations to a wider audience of witnesses. The performative act of power demonstrated the group's capacity to enforce the law. Not only does it instill fear that may encourage compliance, collectively witnessing violence also creates a form of participation and complicity that can lead to group identification (Fujii 2017).

The law was perceived as clear, and its enforcement predictable. “If you don't obey, they will kill you” was an emblematic and commonly used phrase in interviews followed by, “[i]f you obey, they won't touch you”. They highlight the perceived certainty and violent nature of the legal system. Selective use of violence enables civilians to avoid punishments, making cooperation favorable (Kalyvas 2006). At the same time, all respondents had broken the law in one way or another, and their narratives were permeated with unexpected and excessive violence, even by the group's standards, that could be directed at anyone at any time. On one hand, this disconnect could stem from the discretion commanders had in punishing disobedience.²¹⁰ Differences existed in leadership styles among *amirs*, as well as their propensity for brutality, and among individuals with authoritative power, such as husbands, *mallams*, guards, or *amiras*. On the other, people

²⁰⁹ Interview with Fara, May 2018.

²¹⁰ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020; Mohammed, May 2018; Nenna, January 2020.

might have clung to the belief that abiding by the rules of the game would keep them safe. Yet compliance did not guarantee survival. Acknowledging this unsettling haphazardness could have undermined the conviction that survival was possible, which was necessary to persevere. People's ability to hold on to a sense of controllability and reciprocity between themselves and the organization contributed to the functioning of the system.

Conclusion

In numerous protracted conflicts, isolated military strongholds have been critical in sustaining insurgencies. The RUF retreated to the jungle with leaders, fighters, civilians, and loot to establish “an enclave in both physical and sociological terms” (Richards 2006, 656) after it lost its provinces to the Sierra Leone Army and ECOMOG allies in 1992. Similarly, the Allied Democratic Front (ADF) established well-organized camps in the mountainous DRC-Uganda border areas hosting about 2,000 people (Fahey 2015; Vlassenroot and Titeca 2012). Day (2019, 979) states about the LRA's resilience that “the group's exploitation of regional bush sanctuaries has been its historical comparative advantage, allowing for the development and maintenance of a flexible organizational structure, and the savvy acquisition and use of human and natural resources”. And so has it been for Boko Haram. The geographic location and socio-organizational infrastructure in Sambisa's forest camps have sustained the militants' jihad for more than a decade. What made it an isolated sanctuary for some made it a trap for others who were abducted to support the insurgents' armed struggle.

The intensity of this experience was conveyed when respondents talked about themselves or others, regardless of age, as having been “adopted” [*karbo*] by Boko Haram instead of “kidnapped” or “abducted” [*sace*], which would be the common term to use in such context. The notion of Boko Haram assuming a parental role and them becoming family members speaks to the complex interplay between dependency, authority, and belonging. They also said that they “were joined”, “selected”, and “taken”, all of which connote their passivity in that process, but also describe the act of becoming part of the group. While “Sambisa” on its own evoked associative imagery of a secluded rebel world, having been in “the bush” and “the forest” made similar references to the geographical and social separation from their previous lives. It was through these idioms that respondents shed light on the all-encompassing nature of the governance system.

These word choices convey a different form and quality of rebel governance compared to those presented in conventional analyses of civilian administration or in the preceding chapter. They emphasize that armed groups not only seize control over entire communities, but also “select”, “take” and “join” civilians to areas where their support is needed. Displacement of civilians may thus not only involve “exit” (Hirschman 1970), but also moving to the insurgents’ heartland, be it by choice or force.²¹¹ This option and its effect merit attention, as “the symbiotic relation between mobility and immobility are shown to be at the core (in both positive and negative ways) of insurgent zones” (Agbiboa 2022a, 172). Relocating to Boko Haram’s strongholds was an organizational, social, and emotional dislocation that surpassed the physical one, redefining the relationship between mobility and immobility across all these dimensions.

Making civilians part of the armed project and channeling them into the war machinery requires control and an institutional design that produces respective forms of cooperation. A hyper-militarized governance structure was established to that end, eroding the civilian sphere by subjugating it to the rebellion’s needs. As has been shown, civilians’ diversified labor was organized under centralized command structures and ranged from domestic chores to highly specialized technical tasks that individuals possessed or acquired on-site. These allocated roles determined people’s perceived value to the organization and, as such, influenced their position in the rebel hierarchy. This is reflected in the proposed categorization, which further demonstrates that status and access to resources were not only gendered but dependent on the integration into militarized power structures. These were rooted in the region’s traditional hierarchical, patriarchal, and religious relations and practices. However, to some extent hierarchies were reversible, gender norms adjustable, and religious tenets malleable according to the organization’s political program and its pragmatic approach to accommodate military needs. This created opportunities for upward mobility that were particularly appealing when they tapped into pre-war grievances, but also when they offered a pathway out of enslavement or relief from wartime hardship. The public sphere was fused with the private realm to maintain internal control and cohesion. The reconfiguration of social norms and meanings of marriage and community undermined mutual trust by making accountability the overriding principle of these relationships. Civilians were thereby supposed to

²¹¹ In the context of the Colombian civil war, Steele (2009) identifies moving to one of FARC’s strongholds was one option for those who faced collective violence and decided to leave.

perpetuate the social and moral order as codified and embodied in draconian laws and rigid religious practices.

To conclude, the immersion into the secluded rebel world in Sambisa was more than a change of location. Informants described a social landscape marked by extremes. The civilian workforce executed military support tasks from basic to specialized. They held positions spanning the entire hierarchy, with their actions potentially leading to deadly punishment or rewards of protection, resources, and authority. The opportunity – and threat – of mobility between the system’s opposing poles created a dynamic and fragile environment, marked by the “always potentially antagonistic relation” between combatants and civilians (Shaw 2012, 23). What this meant for civilians will be explored in the next chapter.

TURBULENT COOPERATION: CIVILIAN ADAPTATION TO MILITARIZED STRUCTURES AND RUPTURES

Why did a governance system that imposed total control cause turbulence? Boko Haram brought civilians under military command and hierarchies, which were enforced through strict laws, and guided by a jihadist ideology. Yet, civilians vacillated in the rebel system. They climbed and fell in the ranks, issued and refused orders, and were beaten and armed. To understand these contingent dynamics, we must understand how socio-organizational strategies for creating cooperation were experienced and navigated by individuals. After having described the institutions that Boko Haram implemented in its forest camps, this chapter foregrounds civilian voices to see how these structures came to life. Being a noncombatant in a militant organization poses challenges. Often following Boko Haram's violent attacks and abduction, individuals had to adapt to the constraints of the new social landscape and the demands of becoming active participants. They needed to learn how to survive as a second-class citizen in an environment, where those with military power could protect or harm them. Meanwhile, the unpredictability of war created frequent changes in their roles and relationships, from the death of a rebel husband to new mission assignments. This required continuous negotiation for protection, resources, and a sense of stability, which could either rope individuals further into the organization or push them to its margins.

Against this backdrop, this chapter demonstrates that the concept of adaptation provides a useful analytical lens to examine these dynamics that drew civilians into turbulence. Adaptation is explored as a process that consists of two interconnected dimensions. The first focuses on strategic decision-making and deliberate behavior, analyzing how individuals maneuver the constraints of governance structures to enhance their chances of survival. The second dimension emphasizes the subconscious-emotional aspect, recognizing that adapted behavioral patterns based on compliance

with established practices and norms may become normalized and, at times, internalized over time. As strategies grow more sophisticated and motives for cooperation evolve, individuals may experience changes in their willingness to undertake specific tasks or shifts in their perceptions of responsibilities, relationships with spouses, or living conditions. These transformations can influence an individuals' inclination to cooperate. This resonates with socialization frameworks that differentiate between behavioral adaptation based on rational calculations on the one hand and internalization of associated norms and beliefs on the other (Checkel 2017; Kelman and Hamilton 1989).

However, getting used to life amidst rebels was not a singular or linear process. It will be shown that structures are deeply intertwined with ruptures. That is, even when civilians manage to garner transitory stability in the governance system, unforeseen events can lead to setbacks that make them lose the ground they have gained. These disruptions may involve losing a confidant, a child, the leaders' trust, or their ability to blend in and evade the attention of the powerful. By rupture, I am thus referring to a sudden discontinuity that significantly impacts the ongoing adaptation process. These disruptions can stem from various sources, such as from changes in the military environment (e.g., counterinsurgency attacks or supply shortages) or group-internal structures (e.g., leadership or policies). More often, however, they are triggered by the "normal" functioning of the security apparatus and wartime processes that subject individuals to harsh punishments, strict orders, or interpersonal betrayal. Thus, disruptive events play a crucial role in shaping the overall adaptation process by repositioning civilians in the rebel system and forcing them to readapt to role-specific structural constraints. In this regard, the chapter also explores cooperation as a contested process. Disruptions not only affect individuals but also elicit reactions. Pressure for further integration is often met with resistance, especially when it moves civilians closer toward the military domain. The last part of the chapter explores how civilians tested boundaries, contested roles, and negotiated terms of engagement, shedding light on how resistance features alongside and in relation to cooperation. The chapter thus highlights the importance of understanding cooperation as a dynamic process, shaped by an array of factors that, despite being in constant flux, gradually entangle individuals with the organization.

Introducing adaptation not as a straightforward and linear process, but as one that is interrupted and iterative, advances theoretical discussions in several regards. First, scholars have studied how

rebel and terrorist groups adapt and remain viable in the face of military, economic, or organizational challenges (Day 2019; Jordan 2014; Marks 2013b). Yet we know little about how civilians inside these organizations respond to shocks and how this affects their experience and engagement. The literature on disengagement processes outlines how abrupt and gradual changes can motivate terrorists to reduce their involvement or exit armed groups (Alonso 2011; Bjorgo and Horgan 2009; Chernov Hwang 2018; Garfinkel 2007; Reinares 2011). However, the implications of disruptions remain unclear for individuals who are not allowed to disengage or leave. Second, while grounded in scholarship on combatant socialization that focuses on the transformative effects of military training, disciplinary institutions, and indoctrination outlined in the previous chapter (D. K. Cohen 2017; Hoover Green 2018; Vermeij 2014; E. J. Wood 2008), this chapter explores fragmented adaptation while refraining from notions of conformity and passivity. This choice is informed by anthropological research that provides rich accounts of how people find ways to protect themselves in conflict zones. For example, Suarez (2017) shows how individuals in areas of the DRC not only learned to cope with violent threats, but also deceived armed actors and exploited the circumstances to improve their own security situation. In his work on armed mobilization in Guinea-Bissau, Vigh (2010, 140) explored how youths “navigate war as an event by tactically manoeuvring within the social ties and options that arise in such situations” to improve their life chances. As previously reviewed, ethnographic scholarship on female participation in rebellions demonstrates that the struggle to survive is as much linked to the subjection to power as it is to its exertion (Baines 2018; Coulter 2009; Denov and Gervais 2007; McKay and Mazurana 2004; Utas 2005). By integrating these perspectives, this chapter seeks to understand strategic decision-making, norm-conforming and deviant behavior, and non-linear trajectories in highly constrained, militarized contexts where anything less than obedience is met with extreme violence. It does so by adding ruptures to the usual structure-agency dyad. This triad helps to account for the volatility of warzones generally and the unpredictability of being a civilian in a militant organization in particular.

Adaptation was a recurring theme through which civilians explained and made sense of their own and others’ behavior. They described how “[y]ou could see right away who was new because they

behaved differently. They didn't know the rules and how to recite properly".²¹² Pointing to the role of learning and emulating behavior, another respondent remarked that "to observe other people who have been there for a long time" was "the best advice to live peacefully with them [Boko Haram]".²¹³ As the threat of violence made civilians quickly pick up and adhere to rules and hierarchies that dictated daily life, they subsequently "got used to the place" and "adopted the lifestyle".²¹⁴ The process was accelerated by the hardship that made it "necessary that you got used to being there or else you couldn't handle it".²¹⁵ Informants had their own turn of phrase, referring to the process and its outcome as "overstaying". It was described as having learned "how to play the game to stay alive and get what you want".²¹⁶ Another informant explained it in the following way: "Those who have overstayed have been in captivity for a long time. They have gotten used to them [Boko Haram] and know them well. They are familiar with how they do their things and don't have to think about it anymore".²¹⁷ Adaptation was thus endogenous to informants' thinking and language.

To get a feel for what life was like in Sambisa and for the environment civilians had to adapt to, this chapter features the narratives and personal stories of selected informants. They are all paradigmatic cases of turbulent cooperation but elicit various facets of the phenomenon. One is of Hamatu, a 28-year-old woman from Madagali who spent four years in one of the forest camps until she was rescued by the military. Her account illustrates the transition from enslavement to empowerment as a commander's wife, as well as the opportunities and pitfalls of embracing militarism. Her case is contrasted with that of Deborah, who was also abducted and gained a similar position despite having approached the situation very differently. The story of Ahmadu, who was 11 years old when he was lured into Sambisa, represents children's quest for protection and belonging at the bottom of the hierarchy. Hadiza, a 30-year-old female who was abducted from Potiskum, sheds light on marriage as a source of volatility, as she repeatedly shifted between the status as a wife and widow over the course of two years and exposes the varied experiences and arrangements in marital relations from abusive to loving. Mohammed, a 35-year-old tailor from

²¹² Interview with Aisha, January 2020.

²¹³ Interview with Ynusa, March 2020.

²¹⁴ Interview with Aisha, January 2020; Hadiza, November 2019; Hamatu, March 2020.

²¹⁵ Interview with Grace, October 2010.

²¹⁶ Interview with Mohammed, May 2018.

²¹⁷ Interview with Anna, March 2020.

Damboia, exemplifies men's ruptured attempts to avoid frontline fighting, and how even relatively short periods of association could be marked by strategic maneuvering and emotional adjustment. Finally, Fatima, whom I have introduced earlier in this thesis, showcases how embroiled and powerful individuals are not spared from turbulence. These varied stories of engagement presented by my different informants are organized into thematic areas that follow the structure of the previous chapter, while their trajectories over time are also traced. In doing so, I highlight that adaptation and ruptures are neither evenly paced nor homogenous, yet produce similar dynamics. Ultimately, the chapter's objective is to demonstrate that collusion and escape, the pursuit of affective and material aims, and fear and empowerment were not mutually exclusive, but the product of individuals' responses to the circumstances in Boko Haram's militarized microcosm.

From slaves to commanders

It was market day when Boko Haram attacked Ngom in 2014. Deborah, a 30-year-old food vendor, was one of the women corralled by the insurgents while they went on killing and looting the village.²¹⁸ Another battalion arrived to load the spoils and villagers onto trailers, in which they travelled through the night. Upon arrival in the camp deep inside the forest, the abductees were locked into small sheds. They were scared and started talking through scenarios of what might happen to them. The insurgents did not return until the next day. One of the women that Deborah knew had died over night. When insurgents commanded the abductees to step in front of a group of men, they started pleading. Deborah told them that "they had already become a victim, so they might as well do what they have to do". A former fighter explained the tenuous position of new arrivals, saying that "[w]hen you are new, you are basically on death sentence. Any small mistake and you get killed. If you move and you take the wrong step, they kill you. But when you overperform, they trust you and then you are safe".²¹⁹ Deborah quickly understood this:

Immediately after I arrived, I took the fear in my hand. I replied to their questions and acted on what they wanted. I observed and understood that once you are jittering, you will be picked upon. Once I realized that, I told myself to be strong. There is no other way to get out of this, so let me show them that I can also be of

²¹⁸ Interview with Deborah, March 2020.

²¹⁹ Interview with Dauda, March 2020.

help. Due to my boldness and braveness, I got the position of female commander of 60 women.

Due to her displayed proactivity, she was not only trusted with a leadership position, but also divorced from her low-ranking husband after only two weeks, as she had caught the attention of a senior commander. “Men like women who show that they don’t want to leave the place”, she said, explaining a strategy to attract a powerful husband. Though her cooperation had already garnered her some authority, becoming a commander’s wife further solidified her standing. She took charge of distributing food and clothes among unmarried women, delegating chores, arranging marriages, and enforcing compliance. She used her understanding of how power is distributed to reduce her own vulnerability, exercising control over those whose fate of abduction she shared. Through the reassertion of her position, she thus reinforced the rebel hierarchy.

Many interviewees stated that it took around two to three months to feel less anxious and to get used to the new environment. “Initially, I was scared”, said Deborah, who was constantly on the lookout for opportunities to escape during the first weeks. While the experience of abduction itself was traumatizing, the separation from family and friends also removed access to coping mechanisms that are known to mitigate fear (Van Maanen and Schein 1979). Adapting thus became not only essential for survival, but also for regaining a semblance of stability and control, however illusory it might have been. As Deborah came to terms with a situation that seemed inescapable, she “told [her]self ‘whatever’ and got used to it”. She even took pride in her work and enjoyed the respect it brought her. It was not uncommon for women and men to find meaning in their roles and to appreciate the skills they gained, whether in terms of handling weapons or policing the behavior of others (Nagarajan 2019, 11). Deborah described herself as a “faithful leader” who out of principle never misused her position for personal gains. She added, however, that the instructions were clear and that no one would risk their lives stealing or fighting over food portions. As the most powerful woman in her area, Deborah had an assistant and reported directly to the *amir* on all women’s affairs. “But I did not show the other women that I was more than they were”, she assured. Fully aware of the precariousness of her position, she took her duties very seriously, knowing that any mistakes made by her subordinates could lead to dire consequences for both them and her. She thus urged her group: “You should understand that if you make a mistake, they will not only kill you, but also me, so let’s do this together!” That was why the women listened and respected her, she believed, making her a leader trusted by her subordinates

and superiors. Regarding misbehavior or escape attempts under her watch, Deborah confirmed they were rare and then swiftly changed the subject. In Boko Haram's patriarchal hierarchy, she held authority over women but would not have dared to challenge the insurgents treating them "like animals". Many of the women got depressed, Deborah said, either because they wanted to go home or because they felt rejected when they were not chosen as wives. She told them, "Don't be discouraged. One day you will get out of here", which she herself prayed for every night. Though forced into the group, Deborah's comprehension and willingness to do what was necessary to secure protection led her down a path of high-level involvement. She referred to others who were equally strategic and adept at brokering power as "people who understood the place". The initial fear that drove her cooperation gradually gave way to additional motives. However, neither her proactive leveraging of opportunities for both survival and self-actualization, nor her passive normalization of the circumstances conflicted with her desire to return home. This complicates our view of how and why people rise in rebel ranks. Neither motivated by ideology nor materialism, some use the tools at their disposal to navigate an extraordinarily challenging situation.

Similar to Viterna's (2006) findings that women followed multiple paths into the FMLN guerrilla army, various paths could lead to similar participation outcomes in Boko Haram. Hamatu was also abducted by the rebels.²²⁰ However, unlike Deborah, she refused to marry when the insurgents approached her after two days of isolation and neglect. She was locked into a room with 15 other women who had similarly decided to stand their ground and were turned into sex slaves, as indicated by the systematic rape she described:

Fighters came in and raped us. Every night, several groups of about ten fighters would come, pick one of us, and rape her. It happened to me that I was picked twice by two different groups in one night. They do it in front of each other. The other men and women in the room were watching. The men were talking to each other, but I did not listen and was just lying there because they shout at you if you do. I don't know why they did it ... maybe it's a punishment? They were from all tribes, Kanuri, Marghi, Arabs, and there were always new ones coming. Sometimes, they had just slaughtered someone before and were still full of blood. This torture went on for one month. Then I got very sick, and they removed me from the group.

²²⁰ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

Though not a common practice, it appeared to be a gray area tacitly condoned by some leaders, helping fighters to evade the marriage policy while keeping the destabilizing effects of unorganized rape at bay. When Hamatu recovered, the *amir* wanted to marry her. She understood that this would pull her out of enslavement, but she still initially declined, not wanting to become a “Boko Haram wife” – a status synonymous with membership. Threatened to be killed and persuaded by other women, she reluctantly agreed, feeling “there was no other way”. As one of the *amir*’s wives, Hamatu held a privileged position. But she was still under the authority of a higher-ranking female leader who “was very harsh and beat you when you joked a little”. Leadership styles varied among women; some advocated for the needs and protection of their subordinates, while others used their authority to abuse, harass, and exploit the girls and women under their command. Hamatu assisted in distributing food and loot in the camp, tended to household chores, and cared for her baby boy who died at only five months old. She mentioned it as a side note, reflecting the prevalence of death, distress, and disruptions in Sambisa. After the turmoil of the first few months, during which her survival instinct began to override moral principles, “things started to feel more normal”. She explained that “[t]hat’s what happens when you overstay”. Her story, alongside Deborah’s, illustrates the extremely arbitrary ways in which some women gained power while others were enslaved. Deborah had skillfully strategized and manipulated her way to the top, while Hamatu occupied a similar position despite her resistance. Their stories also highlight how suddenly circumstances could change for better or worse.

Within Boko Haram’s gendered division of labor, women were directly assigned civilian status and faced pressure to marry, while men were expected to become fighters. Mohammed, a 35-year-old tailor who was abducted from his village in Damboa, recounted his efforts to avoid being turned into a combatant.²²¹ After witnessing numerous killings during his first week, he refrained from outright refusing to cooperate. Instead, he attempted to “negotiate and plea”, a strategy that Zürcher (2019, 210) identified as being employed by communities dealing with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Mohammed recalled:

When they asked me, “Will you kill a person?”, I said “I can’t do that”. They asked, “Will you go to the jihad?”. I replied, “Yes, I will go to the jihad with you. I will follow you, but I can’t kill. They then said, “What will you do if someone

²²¹ Interview with Mohammed, May 2018.

attacks you? What are you going to do then?”. I said that if someone attacks me, I can protect myself, but I cannot kill someone just like that, just to eliminate a person. They then tied me up for three days without food.

When the leader was informed about his profession as a tailor, he agreed that Mohammed could make uniforms resembling those of the Nigerian army and the CJTF, which Boko Haram used to deceive people. “Because of the work I was doing, they didn’t kill me. There was no one else who could do it as well as I did”, he said. His skills kept him safe and financially compensated. More than that, he settled in, was compliant, diligent in his work, and attempted to establish friendly relations with fighters. Occasionally, he would sit down with them for tea and conversation. “After I had been with them for several months, they trusted me. They no longer had security watching me and even let me go out with a bicycle. I had freedom. I was not afraid of them anymore”, he said.

Ahmadu adopted a different strategy after he was abducted from Dawashe village in Kukawa LGA.²²² At just eleven years old, one of his friends, whose father had joined the sect, lured him into accompanying him on a ride on his new motorcycle – a journey that ended in Sambisa. Ahmadu’s experience exemplifies the search for protection among the approximately 10,000 boys whom Boko Haram abducted and integrated into daily operations between 2016 and 2014 alone (Hinshaw and Parkinson 2016). Upon arriving in the forest, Ahmadu and other new captives were presented to the camp leader. They were told that, whether they liked it or not, they would be fully integrated into the group’s operations. Everyone who disobeyed would be killed instantly. “When we saw how harsh and serious they were, we agreed to comply with their instructions and to do whatever they wanted us to do”, he said, “because I realized that this place was dangerous”. Despite their willingness to cooperate, they were locked in a room and beaten every day for a week. Ahmadu interpreted this as a method “to create fear in us to make us strictly comply with their instructions and do whatever they want”. For several months, Ahmadu, along with other boys, was taken to commanders’ farms to grow corn. He was used to the agricultural labor because, back home, he had worked on his parents’ farm instead of attending school. His and others’ responsibilities in the camp followed a rigid daily schedule:

²²² Interview with Ahmadu, March 2020.

When we woke up in the morning, we started prayers around 4:00am and read the Quran until 6:00am. Farmers went to farm and other stayed home to do domestic work. Food was made ready by women and served by 6:00am for everybody to eat and go out. We came back, ate porridge, and started prayers and Quran classes by 1:00pm and ended around 3:00pm every day. We went back to work and dinner was ready by 6:00pm. In that camp, we took food three times a day because we had lots of food and had been farming. Everybody slept around 8:00pm and movement was completely restricted after those hours, except for the fighters who were guarding the camp from enemies. If you're caught walking at night, you were flogged and, in some instances, even killed if they suspected you were working against them.

As Shekau deemed agricultural production un-Islamic and increasingly replaced it with the looting of supplies, the boys were relocated to another camp and assigned new roles. This proved to be a pivotal moment, as many of them were considered ready to become fighters. However, Ahmadu was appointed as a servant to a *naqib* named Goigoi. Because of my nature, they thought I would run away and would not join the fight for *Allah*", he explained. Ahmadu's duties involved carrying out domestic chores for the leader, his three wives, and their children. Describing the relationship, Ahmadu stated, "He was my master while I was his slave", which unambiguously brings out the coercion and power asymmetry inherent in his position. Nevertheless, the placement within the household altered Ahmadu's perception of his status within the family and, consequently, his motivation to comply:

They loved me like their biological children. They included me and gave me an opportunity to blend in as if I was born in their house. Because I was obedient, they treated me with respect. But there were also bad moments like when the children told me that I was not their father's child. I felt very bad but because I couldn't change anything about my position, I just cried and accepted it as the will of God. One time, we fought so much that the case was taken to the *naqib*. He then told his children that I was also his son. I was given the opportunity because I worked hard and always did my duty with complete commitment. The *naqib* never beat me. He always encouraged me to be a good person, so that I can become a fighter and work for *Allah*. But this was not my dream at all. I wanted to become a businessman to control the resources. That was why he used to give me money when I impressed him by doing something special. ... Even though they treated me like their own child, it didn't change my status as a slave.

While there is a lot to unpack in his narrative, it is particularly revealing that he discursively linked his social recognition within the family to his work ethics, seeking affection in exchange for obedience. After the upheavals of abduction, beatings, and new assignments, it was the feeling of

rejection that drove him to excel in his role as a servant in order to regain a sense of belonging – a need created by the insurgents themselves. Denov and Maclure (2007) similarly found that child soldiers in the RUF developed positive bonds and fealty to their captors, which made them more accustomed to following orders. Ahmadu not only adhered to orders, but began to develop aspirations within the group, which the leader supported. However, he also recognized the limitations that left his desire to transcend his status as a slave unattained. His cooperation, which was decreasingly driven by coercion, secured him rudimentary protection but it could not outweigh his expendability from the organization’s perspective that defined his roles. It became evident how illusive the stability he found in the household was when he talked about his recurring role as a human shield. The insurgents sent abducted boys, “many of them barefoot and unarmed” (Hinshaw and Parkinson 2016), to confront the military at the frontlines or during assaults on camps.²²³ “They used us as war shields to die first”, said Ahmadu, who had learned how to stay back and hide behind the other boys to survive the hail of bullets. The intersection of age, gender, and civilian status kept him at the bottom of the hierarchy, subject to being deployed throughout the organization as needed. Although the scholarship on child soldiering emphasizes children as easy targets for rebel socialization, because they tend to internalize norms and develop strong allegiance (Annan, Blattman, and Horton 2006; Beber and Blattman 2013; Gates and Reich 2010; Vermeij 2014), Ahmadu’s story highlights not only the noncombat labor children provide, but also their struggle to adapt to shifting vulnerabilities.

In sum, several factors influenced role assignment and upward mobility, including gender, age, skills, physical ability, and cooperativeness. While some of these factors were fixed, others were more malleable, allowing civilians to change, contest, and leverage their roles in different ways. During the first weeks within the group, they experienced frequent disruptions and challenges. Through trial and error, they tested and became familiar with the organization’s internal workings. The heightened need for stability and safety during this period drew them closer to the organization. Individuals who voluntarily assumed high-level roles for strategic or ideological reasons naturally evolved into more active participants. In contrast, those who resisted anything beyond minimal compliance remained in subservient positions, performing basic logistical and

²²³ Interview with Ahmadu, March 2020; Kabi, February 2020.

domestic tasks. Over time, even these individuals could grow accustomed to life in Sambisa and gradually become more embedded in the group. However, Boko Haram ultimately controlled role allocation, leaving individuals with limited room to maneuver within the tight institutional boundaries. This underscores the organization's dominance in shaping individual trajectories, even as civilians sought to navigate their positions and adapt to the circumstances of their new surroundings.

From abuse to affection

Managing the private sphere posed its own set of challenges. As discussed in the previous chapter, Boko Haram turned interpersonal relationships, and marriage in particular, into a tool for resource distribution, surveillance, and control. Despite many women's efforts to garner stability through marriage, the institution itself as well as the unpredictable nature of the militarized environment created disruptions. While domestic violence and reporting of spouses were sources of instability within marital relations, divorce or the death of rebel husbands could plunge women back into insecurity. It could free them from abuse, but it could also mean the loss of a protector, confidant, or beloved husband. The volatility of civilians' positions and diversity in marital relations became especially evident in interviews with Hadiza, who was married to four different men within two years.²²⁴ Her experiences tie into those of other female and male informants, reflecting the turbulent nature of private roles and relationships.

"They treated us like slaves, as if we were animals", said Hadiza about her arrival in Sambisa. She and her friends, who had been abducted as a punishment for their husbands' CJTF affiliation, tried to reason with the insurgents on religious grounds, arguing that it was un-Islamic to marry off other men's wives. The insurgents dismissed their plea, claiming that they had already killed their husbands. Like many others, Hadiza initially resisted marriage, hoping that the insurgents might eventually relent. Instead, they "called strong boys with canes to beat [her] up". Afraid of getting killed, she succumbed to the pressure, as most women did sooner or later. Only women like Fatima, who entered the group with their husbands, avoided the ordeal of forced marriage and were more

²²⁴ Interview with Hadiza, November 2019.

trusted from the outset, even if they had been abducted by their spouses.²²⁵ This was not the first time Hadiza agreed to marry a man she had never met before. As Nordstrom (1997, 1) states, “Looking at the actual lives of girls, it becomes difficult to draw easy lines between wartime and peacetime. What people tolerate in peace shapes what they will tolerate in war”. Boko Haram’s treatment of women and girls does not break with prevailing norms of early marriage, marital seclusion, and economic dependence on men that shape women’s lives in Northern Nigeria (Matfess 2017; Nagarajan 2019; Usman, Taraboulsi-McCarthy, and Hawaja 2020).²²⁶

Men are mostly regarded as profiteers of the regions’ patriarchal social order and of Boko Haram’s gender policies, in particular those that grant and reward them with access to brides (Oriola 2017). However, the inclusion of male noncombatants into the centralized marriage system was not necessarily considered a privilege among forced recruits. The tailor Mohammed talked about the pressure to marry, despite having a family back home:

One of the major challenges I had with them [Boko Haram] at the beginning was when I was told to get married, and I refused. I told them that I am not interested in marriage. They told me to think about it and get back to them, but I maintained my ground. They warned that if they come back for the final time and found out that I would not get married, they would deal with me. I got disturbed. How could I get married when I fully knew that my wife and kids were praying for my escape and freedom? I felt very bad about the idea to stay with a woman under compulsion and fear.²²⁷

He was not subjected to the same physical abuse as women when he continued to object, but summoned before a judge:

Fortunately for me, the Imam gave me a fair hearing. I knew all the rules, so I did not say that I missed my family but that I needed some more time to settle. I promised to get a woman as soon as I would be able to provide for her. The Imam read a Quran verse that stated that a man can stay single if he is not sure whether he can fulfil his marital obligations. The fighters got angry but accepted the decision.

²²⁵ Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

²²⁶ Although Boko Haram made headlines for marring off girls and young women, child marriage is prevalent in Nigeria. In the Northeast, 48 percent of girls were married by age 15 in 2015 (FMWASD 2016, 19).

²²⁷ Interview with Mohammed, May 2018.

Men had thus more room to maneuver the space between bendable norms and stringent rules. However, for most individuals, the risk of getting killed outweighed the fear of getting married. When the pressure on Mohammed intensified again a few weeks later and his excuse lost credibility, he “took the cover of marriage”. Whereas even basic protection and provisioning for women was contingent on their attachment to men, men used compliance with social regulations to signal cooperativeness and deflect attention.²²⁸

The first insurgent Hadiza married was “difficult”, as she put it. “He was always beating me and reported me when I said that I missed home. Boko Haram was building trenches at the time, so they made me dig as a punishment.” Mohammed’s wife also reported him. Because he “did not feel comfortable with the woman”, he avoided interacting with her as much as possible, which prompted her to file a complaint against him:

My wife was adopted, too. I was so surprised when the leaders interrogated me because she had reported to them that I never relaxed my face, that I was always thinking, and that I didn’t sleep with her. I realized that this could go badly for me and that I could lose their trust. I was even thinking that the leaders might have planted her in my house as a spy to test my commitment. I was afraid of her. She was very harsh. I decided that it would be better for me to cooperate. I behaved normally, had intercourse with her, and told everyone what a great wife she was. Shortly after, she got pregnant, and they added another wife.

The accountability mechanism at the household level extended the organization’s reach into the domestic sphere to control private and sexual relations; when spouses denounced one another, the rupture prompted behavioral adjustments. These could take the form of subsequent self-enforcement of obligations, or informal measures to evade them. Hadiza’s husband was a bomb maker, “that’s why he received lots of goods”. When there were leftovers, like clothes or body lotion, he gave them to her, “[b]ut [she] kept [her] distance from him because he wanted sex from [her] whenever he came close”. Marital rape and sexual abuse were part of most women’s everyday life in the forest, as has been widely documented. Informants would mostly bring up extra-marital rape, taking their conjugal responsibilities that perpetuated peacetime norms as a given. Attempts to circumvent them by keeping their distance, pretending to be on their period, begging, or feigning

²²⁸ Interview with Benjamin, March 2020; Mohammed, May 2018.

illness could buy some time but were ultimately of limited success.²²⁹ For Hadiza, her husband's death brought short-term relief: "Lucky for me, he was bitten by a snake in the bush and died. I cried so that others would not see that I had been secretly praying for his death".

However, the insurgents brought another husband only one month later, contravening the Islamic prescription of three months of celibacy (*Iddah*), which IS similarly ignored (Ahram 2019). He was of higher rank, which made Hadiza the assistant to the female leader Ya Falmata. She conscientiously took on her responsibilities. "I always completed all of my work and never got tired of it", she said. She not only found contentment in her new roles, but also in her marriage:

I quickly realized that he was a little bit kind. When we met, I asked him how I could be sure that he had no diseases or anything, but he did not call the boys to beat me for speaking my mind. We met as husband and wife. I enjoyed staying with him. He was different. Other men were ready to die but he wasn't. He joined Boko Haram after they had killed his siblings in front of him. He traded himself in for his father to be spared.

A number of informants revealed that they had developed feelings for their spouses, similar to Amina Ali Nkeki, one of the abducted Chibok schoolgirls, who stated after her liberation that she missed her husband in Sambisa (BBC News 2016a). Like Hadiza, who described her spouse as "different", respondents would justify their affection by highlighting their husbands' positive qualities in contrast to their roles as fighters. They found them to be "personable", "gentle", "kind", "devoted", or "humorous", despite being fighters "who go out to kill other people". In these cases, informants frequently noted that they lived together "peacefully". Their word choice separates their private experiences from the larger context of war and implies a contrast with the alternative of conflictual and violent relationships. Consensual sexual encounters were referred to as "meeting as husband and wife", an expression that suggested a sense of equality within the relationship. Halimah, another informant, had travelled to Sambisa to find her abducted daughter when she was captured and married herself.²³⁰ Her account similarly highlights how even forced marriages could turn into caring relationships, offering normalcy, at least temporarily:

My husband treated me well to convince me because I was not cooperating with him when we initially met. I then discovered that he was very personable despite

²²⁹ Interview with Deborah, March 2020; Hadiza, November 2019; Samastu, March 2020.

²³⁰ Interview with Halimah, March 2020.

the fact that he was a fighter. I was agitating for divorce first, but his attitude won me over and I calmly stayed in his house. He treated me nicely and I cooked twice a day for him. We were living in peaceful conditions and things were fine and good. I gave birth at home without any complications. They slaughtered a goat for me to eat after delivery. We did a naming ceremony, and we named our daughter after my husband's sister. But when my husband was killed in a battle, everything changed for me.

Similarly, Hadiza's husband was shot on a raid, illustrating the fleeting nature of stability. "I honestly mourned him. I was happy with him", she said.

A few days later, they brought another fighter. At this point, she had already been with the group for a year. She "got used to being there and even forgot about home", about which she had stopped talking. Having learned that the insurgents were uncompromising, she appealed to her new husband directly:

I made him understand all the trauma I had been going through after losing my husbands. I told him that I would accept him as my husband but that he should give me some time to recover. He agreed. He confided in me that he was actually a soldier from the Nigerian military and a Christian but got captured as a war slave. He pretended to be a Muslim out of fear of being killed. He offered not to sleep with me and protect me like his sister if I also protected him and kept his secret. We made a deal. Because he didn't know how to pray, I taught him basic Islamic prayers at night. We lived peacefully and discussed issues but never met as husband and wife.

Such arrangements that undermined the group's policies on reproduction and mutual surveillance were not uncommon. A male informant described a similar dynamic. After marrying a widowed "Boko Haram wife", he requested that she sleep outside with the unmarried women.²³¹ He was afraid of her, interpreting her previous marriage and length of association as a sign of commitment. Marital vulnerabilities were gendered in that women faced direct physical threats, whereas men feared that their wives would indirectly kill them through accusations, spying, and reporting.²³² Instances of husbands being shot or poisoned by their wives were rare exceptions.²³³ She first refused his request, warning that "If they find out about it, they will kill both of us. We have to cooperate on this". He agreed that they could sleep in the same place but tried to stay awake at

²³¹ Interview with Ynusa, March 2020.

²³² Interview with Benjamin, March 2020; Ismael, March 2020; Ynusa, March 2020.

²³³ Interview with Deborah, March 2020.

night and insisted that he would not have sex with her. “We can try”, she responded, “but once they realize, we will have a problem”. After he told her about his abduction, she agreed to the provisional arrangement. “I studied her and the way she talked to me seemed honest”, which made him feel more comfortable. Not only did he no longer fear her, but he also grew “to like her so much because of the strategy, direction, and advice she gave [him]”. She had been with Boko Haram for three years, so “she knew the system better and knew how to behave”. This highlights how in pairings of new and long-time associates, spouses could serve as social referents, providing guidance on how to navigate the social terrain. More than that, he asserted that he made every effort to protect and provide for her, even persuading the leaders to send doctors when she contracted malaria. They decided that they would marry “for real” if they managed to escape. Thus, coercion and fear transformed into strategic accommodation and, ultimately, into genuine affection. Fulfilling marital responsibilities was no longer perceived solely as an obligation to the organization but also an act of self-interest.

Even in the absence of emotional attachment, the self-interest of maintaining material and social power was a strong driver for protecting marriages. While Utas (2003, 176) emphasizes women’s agency in choosing “to cling to a fighter with enough power to protect them”, women under Boko Haram, rather than having the ability to choose a protector, held on to strong or caring husbands. After having experienced exclusion from the marital protection scheme as a sex slave, Hamatu became determined to maintain her status as an *amir*’s wife.²³⁴ Initially, she “was not comfortable with the arrangement” and found her husband “not very friendly”, “but as time went by, [she] was getting familiar with the situation”. Furthermore, in her transactional assessment of their relationship, she described it as “a good deal” because he “treated [her] well”, which mainly referred to refraining from excessive violence and distributing food equally among his wives. Her account was devoid of any emotions, until she recalled an instance in which another woman tried to “befriend” her husband. “Of course, we went crazy!”, she exclaimed, referring to herself and the other co-wives with whose support she confronted the woman and started a fight. It was not jealousy that drove her behavior because, as she explained, sharing her husband with his other wives was “*no wahala*” [no problem]. Both adultery and the risk of divorce threatened her. To

²³⁴ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

protect themselves, women were protective of coerced but beneficial relationships, claiming their rights and enforcing gender norms that strengthened in-group cohesion.

Yet, control over any aspect of life was rudimentary and short-lived at best. This was again exemplified by Hadiza's experience with her third husband, whose mistake in leading a prayer prior to battle raised suspicions among the leaders. "He made up excuses, but they set up a panel for him to confirm if he was truly a Muslim", she recalled. "Fortunately for him, we worked out his escape before they made a final decision", she said, mentioning her aiding role in his escape, which meant that she lost her status yet again and had to go back to digging trenches. She felt sick because she was pregnant from her second husband. Some women had compassion with her and dug her part, but others reported her for "pretending". The commander flogged her until she fainted. "The child died in my womb that night", she said, "that's how they knew I was not pretending. The memory of losing the child still pains me". Other informants reluctantly expressed relief over miscarriages and abortions in military detention that prevented them from having a fighter's child who carries the stigma of "bad blood" (International Alert and UNICEF 2016).²³⁵ Many women, however, gave birth during their time in the camps, which further embedded them in the group and made escape even more difficult. Three weeks later, the insurgents arrived with a new husband for Hadiza. "Because of the way they do their things, I just agreed right away", she said indifferently:

He was a tall and fat Kanuri man from Cameroon. People in the community didn't like him very much because he was lazy and not dedicated. Sometimes he didn't go for patrols for which they tied him up and beat him. I advised him: "We are already here, so just do it". But he was tired and didn't want to live. He was kind to me and asked me how to escape but I didn't know.

She ultimately ran away during a military attack on the camp in 2016.

Hadiza's and other informants' accounts comprise the wide spectrum of civilian experiences and are telling in many regards. They illustrate Boko Haram's successful control over human, sexual, and reproductive resources. Hadiza's trajectory highlights the limits of women's influence over their positions and bodies, with nearly no say in whom to marry. Their dependence on husbands

²³⁵ Interview with Amara, March 2020; Hamatu, March 2020.

in a volatile warzone further meant that their status was fragile and rarely long-lasting. At the same time, their accounts also reveal how the intersection of the rebels' governance of gender relations and interpersonal dynamics shaped experiences of marriage for both men and women. This resulted in diverse and multilayered marital dynamics, spanning from abusive to transactional to loving. Within these evolving relationships, spouses complied with their reciprocal obligations for reasons beyond coercion. Some even subverted the institution's intended policing function when loyalty towards each other superseded allegiance to the group. Couples found arrangements of co-existence, convenience, or comfort that are lost when one focuses on the extremes. Whether individuals perceived their relationships as beneficial for material, social, or emotional reasons then affected how willingly and extensively they supported the militarized domestic sphere. Furthermore, Hadiza's narrative exemplifies that despite constant interruptions and calamities, women came to accept the rules and norms that governed the private realm. Over time, they became more experienced in approaching ephemeral opportunities and challenges of marriage, even if they were not able to control them. While the patriarchal system gave men more power and thus room to navigate marital and insurgent relations, their accounts have demonstrated that marriage could also be a coercive and intrusive experience for them. However, the risks they faced were of a different intensity due to women's physical and social inferiority, and ruptures were less frequent, with women not being killed as frequently as male fighters. Marriage was therefore not a source of turbulence to the same extent for men as it was for women, but it was part of a more complex process through which men became socially entangled, contrary to what one-sided narratives of reward, privilege, and assertion of power suggest. The stories I have gathered thus tell not only of rape, exploitation, and domination, but also the different functions and meanings ascribed to marital bonds, which can only be understood in the context of civilians' adaptation to their shifting social positioning. They tell of agency but also of constraints and unpredictability that contoured possible choices.

From divinity to brutality

Boko Haram's implemented version of Salafi-jihadi ideology and Sharia law relied on the combined power of belief and violence. Or in the words of Shekau, "The disease is unbelief, and

as Allah says, ‘Disorder is worse than killing’” (Thurston 2016, 16).²³⁶ In practice, this translated into time-intensive, yet relatively ineffective, ideological training and brutal law enforcement that delineated the parameters of ideal behavior and minimal expectations. Civilians were compelled to maneuver within the confines of these upper and lower institutional constraints. Religious activities were imperative and rarely opposed. However, few informants framed their own engagement in ideological terms. Boko Haram is no exception in this regard. There are relatively few truly committed believers in any group (Maynard 2019). This does not render the role of ideology irrelevant. While the ideology training involved passive recitation of the Quran and religious obligations, which were distilled and perverted into Boko Haram’s code of conduct, it was the translation of formal ideological doctrines into everyday social practices that gave them power and meaning. There were several motives for participants to act in accordance with the religious system, which they leveraged for educational, social, material, and emotional opportunities.

First, the chance to gain education was a reason for women to join, especially during the early years of the insurgency (International Crisis Group 2016; Matfess 2017; Nagarajan 2018). Some abductees even spoke positively about the classes they attended during captivity, saying “I enjoyed it! ... I didn’t know about Islamic studies before but learnt it all there”.²³⁷ Despite the popularity of *Islamiyah* schools, girls in Northern Nigeria still receive significantly less education than boys, both religious and secular (Hoechner 2018). This explains why some young women, more than men, perceived Boko Haram’s Islamic education as an opportunity to gain knowledge and to escape traditional gender norms (Nagarajan 2018). However, this was a rare perspective among my informants, who instead found the many hours they spent in class each day a nuisance and the disciplining measures frightening. Nevertheless, the role that the organization ascribed to religious proficiency and diligence could be leveraged to gain social and material power. During *Islamiyah* classes, some “bold women” used the time to ask the *mallams* for the reasons of the war.²³⁸ They were not punished for it. “If you ask questions, you get answers”, Hamatu explained. In fact, “they like it when you are outspoken and interested. That’s why these women grew in the ranks”. Hadiza

²³⁶ The quote stems from a 2012 video “Message to Nigeria’s President Goodluck Jonathan”. For a full translation, see Kassim (2018b).

²³⁷ Interview with Helina, January 2020.

²³⁸ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

made the same observation about one of her friends who “grew in the ranks because she was outspoken and asked a lot of questions” and even “snitched on [her] later”.²³⁹ Outside of class, convincing other women that “the group’s way of life was right” served as a strategy for upward mobility regardless of one’s held beliefs.²⁴⁰ The social recognition and male protection associated with religious zeal became further evident in the way Musa talked about one of his wives, saying “She went to *karatu* [studies], learned things quickly, and taught other women. Everyone talked about what a great woman she was”.²⁴¹ He was “proud and happy about her”, which made her his only wife he did not turn into a suicide bomber.

Instrumental and normative motives did not operate in isolation. They were discursively linked and mutually reinforcing in practice. For example, Fatima recalled the messages and rules they were told, including that they should never attend Western schools, talk to the military, go to places governed by the constitution instead of the Quran, or return to their parents.²⁴² If they stayed, they would go straight to heaven. Asked about how they were perceived, she elaborated:

So many girls started believing it. They didn’t care about their parents anymore and were no longer thinking about home. They would start telling you, “If you escape, I will personally slaughter you”. The ideology is easy to understand. They convince you gradually, gradually. You start believing in it without even realizing. It even happened to me! Some were deceived by what they saw. They also wanted to sleep well, have nice clothes and electricity. Some girls were singles and decided to stay to get a husband. People adopted the ideology for many reasons.

The synergies were even more pronounced in Ahmadu’s account, explaining why he was praying for the insurgents when they were out on missions. “I prayed because when they won, everyone was jubilating in the camp and was happy because they came back with cars, food, beverages, and other things they seized from communities. It was always the best moment seeing them return home!”²⁴³ The interplay of religious, material, and social incentives that they mentioned in the same breath makes it difficult to disentangle the underpinnings of conformity. Rather than being a

²³⁹ Interview with Hadiza, November 2019.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

²⁴² Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

²⁴³ Interview with Ahmadu, March 2020.

methodological issue, it reflects that drivers of norm-adherent behavior can accumulate and evolve over time.²⁴⁴

Moreover, ideology uptake was not a deliberate decision, as Fatima alluded to by saying that she was “convinced gradually, gradually”. The distinction between the formal ideological training and the assimilation of religious practices became apparent in the way Hamatu spoke about her attitudinal change.²⁴⁵ She attended morning and evening *Islamiyah* classes. Due to her proficiency in reciting the Quran, she gave the appearance of a dedicated student while avoiding getting flogged or beaten for mistakes. She neither liked the classes, nor considered “the Boko Haram religion” to be in line with the Quran, listing all the differences in the teaching, interpretation, and practices from skipping *hadiths* to wearing shoes during prayers. Nevertheless, she explained that “[she] did not commit to it at the beginning, but when you have overstayed, you just accept it”. Similarly, Hadiza said, “We all resigned to their faith. We thought we would die there. It became home”.²⁴⁶ Neither “accepting” nor “resigning to their faith” are indicative of genuine ideological commitment. Instead of having internalized formal ideological doctrines, they became familiar and comfortable with the religious practices through repeated exposure and repetition. Over time, these practices became normal parts of their daily lives, even if they did not embrace the underlying belief system. Given the assumption that they would never leave the camp, dissolving the contradictions between their own values and the moral code imposed by the organization was a coping mechanism. It allowed them to process the trauma of abduction, frequent ruptures, and indefinite captivity. As a psychological resource, it offered a degree of emotional stability, no matter how fragile, and the prospect of a “normal” life without constant contestation and violence. This resonates with Titeca’s (2010, 63–64) observation that rituals and rules in the LRA’s spiritual order gave individuals a certain sense of control over their lives back because it became a “legitimizing frame of reference” that attached meaning to activities and made adherence “a source of reassurance and a motivational force”. Consequently, religious norms and practices were strategically harnessed by civilians for basic or more advanced protection, yet could incrementally draw them further into the organization. These shifts in behavior and attitudes differ from

²⁴⁴ See also Oluwaniyi (2021) on the fluidity of motivations that explain women’s recruitment into Boko Haram.

²⁴⁵ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

²⁴⁶ Interview with Hadiza, November 2019.

conventional understandings of indoctrination, emphasizing formal training that leads to the fusion of personal and group identities. Nevertheless, civilians' adaptation still reinforced the religious order and propelled them towards increased involvement.

However, this was not a linear process. Rebel laws and law enforcement, through which abstract religious ideals became tangible, played a prominent role in both accelerating and disrupting adaptation. The group acted swiftly to punish and eliminate individuals who were "stubborn" and had "a strong head".²⁴⁷

Some people arrived and said, "I will never stay here". They had made up their minds and remained stubborn. Some were punished and beaten every day, some were just slaughtered right away, and some were killed by accident. If you misbehave and they get angry, they just shoot you, like when they ask you to do something and you deny, when they give you work and you don't do it, or when they ask you to go and kill and you say no. Some rather died than doing it. It happened all the time.²⁴⁸

When you show them that your head is strong, they will eliminate you right away. They told us that when we do the jihad, we will go to paradise. When they ask if you join them and you say no, they may put a bomb around your belly. This happened all the time.²⁴⁹

Such accounts provide an important perspective, representing those who chose a path of uncompromising, deadly resistance. It also demonstrates that the movement swiftly taught new recruits its near-unrestrained readiness to wield violence in response to insubordination, which effectively instilled fear and discipline within their ranks. "The rules are very clear and easy to understand", Hamatu said, confirming a generally expressed view. She experienced first-hand the harsh consequences of defying orders, as was the case with her refusal to marry. She also had to familiarize herself with more subtle norms. For example, during her first weeks in the camp, she was flogged for "checking out the environment", which was interpreted as an attempt to search for escape routes. Going forward, she tried to move around as little as possible with her head held down. Physical punishments were often traumatic experiences that became defining moments in

²⁴⁷ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020; Mohammed, May 2018; Nenna, January 2020.

²⁴⁸ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

²⁴⁹ Interview with Mohammed, May 2018.

individuals' trajectories, while simultaneously, as intended, shaping their behavior towards conformity going forward.

Civilians not only reproduced social norms, but also enforced the law, as discussed in the context of gender policies. However, their engagement in the process surpassed merely asserting their rights, positioning them as central actors within the security apparatus. Hamatu recounted a telling incident:

If husbands go out for war, women will be home alone. Some men come and say that they want to sleep with you. If you say no, then he might kill you. If you say yes and your husband finds out, he will not be happy. It happened to me twice. I said no both times but the second time, the guy threatened to kill me. I told my husband what happened, and they called the guy. Because of what he did, they decided to kill him. I didn't want to shoot him but if I hadn't done it, they would not have believed me or had suspected that I had committed adultery. I will always remember shooting him.

Several aspects of her narrative are noteworthy. First, civilians faced threats of violence from all sides, creating dilemmas when determining the source or situation that posed the most significant risk – the offender who “might kill you”, the husband who “will not be happy”, leaders who might not believe you, or perpetrating an act of violence you “will always remember”. Second, the law was enforced selectively. Although not always the case, she employed it for self-protection rather than for normative reasons, as suggested by her concealment of the first incident. In fact, this decision carried significant risk. The legal system imposed punishments on victims and bystanders who failed to report violations, making law enforcement a matter of self-interest. Civilians therefore not only reported offenses to signal their loyalty, but also out of fear. “People were scared because if it comes out that someone broke or planned to break the law and you knew about it but didn't report, you will be punished together with the culprit”, said another informant.²⁵⁰ In addition to formalized security and intelligence branches, it was therefore standard practice for people to police each other. This caused extensive suspicion and taught Hamatu that “[y]ou cannot trust anyone or else you will be betrayed”, as she noted later in the interview. Third, civilians could become violent actors, perpetrating internal violence. These were no rare occasions. The insurgents played with the dynamics of fear and complicity, especially during weekly or even daily public

²⁵⁰ Interview with Christina, January 2020.

executions. Not only did everyone have to attend and watch, but they were occasionally required to participate, explained Fatima:

Everyone was forced to watch. Guards were standing behind you to see whether you looked away. They want you to get scared. Even over time, it didn't get easier. I dreamed of it at night. The leaders said "*Allahu Akbar*" and then everyone repeated it. Then a specific group of people did the execution. Sometimes they picked a person from the audience who had to do it. When they chose you, you had to do it, or they added you to the group.²⁵¹

Although she said that she never got used to it, it did not stop her from reporting other people, illustrating the ambivalence in experiences with law enforcement. Like Hamatu who recalled the execution as a decisive moment, Ahmadu noted that "whenever they shot people in [his] presence, it kept [him] disturbed and he started to miss his parents again".²⁵² Thus, even those who became intimately entangled with the organization were not blindly following rules or numb to the violence it brought upon themselves and others, but were grappling with the costs of their survival strategies.

The accounts discussed above highlight the intricate relationship between structures and ruptures in the adaptation process. Civilians learned to navigate the religious and legal landscape, selectively leveraging opportunities for self-protection that norms and laws offered. Doing so could draw them further into the organization, either through a gradual and passive process or through a violent and ruptured one. Their cooperation reproduced the imposed order and made them complicit in the perpetration of violence, which could strengthen their ties to the group even if its brutal manifestations punctuated their trajectories. Rather than over- or understating the role of ideology, exploring it as a collection of everyday social practices provides a critical perspective. Understanding civilian experiences within the religious and legal framework reveals how it constrained and guided, protected and hurt them. These dynamics led to fluctuations in how civilians related to the movement.

²⁵¹ Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

²⁵² Interview with Ahmadu, March 2020.

Violence and resistance

In contrast to fighters whose association started with military training, civilian militarization occurred more gradually. However, again, this was not an evenly-paced process. It accelerated and slowed down, jumped forward and then took a few steps back. After one year in Sambisa, Hamatu was summoned to the leader. “They don’t call you for nothing, but only when there is a serious challenge”, she explained. She was informed that her husband had decided that she was “ready” for military training. They were told that it was compulsory, and everyone who refused would be killed. Hamatu considered that her co-wives had already undergone the training, leading her to believe that she should probably do it as well. She decided to join the shooting unit instead of slaughtering because of her “resistance to even slaughter a chicken”. Most women preferred shooting, she said, but some were not good at pointing and were sent over to the other unit to learn how to carry out amputations and beheadings. The boot camp consisted of one week of “theory”, where they practiced loading ammunition and learned which body parts to target for killing or injuring. During the second week of “practice”, they were given equipment, aimed at targets with rubber bullets, simulated attacks, and learned offense and defense strategies. The third week of “fitness training” entailed 6km runs, crawling exercises, and bodyweight workouts, which Hamatu found the most challenging and humiliating segment of the training. At the end, “we had to shoot in the presence of the *oga* [boss]”.

During heavy ground and air strikes, civilians were mobilized. “When the attacks were light, we continued with *Islamiyah* classes”, said another female informant, “but when the fighting got heavy, we had to come out and shoot the planes”.²⁵³ They were not integrated into the military ranks but gathered and armed in moments of attack, and subsequently disarmed. This was also the case for Ahmadu who, after having survived his deployment as a human shield, learned “the procedures of engaging the enemy”.²⁵⁴ Civilians who had been with the group for several months, as well as commanders’ wives, typically received training. However, at times, newly adopted women were included if they demonstrated bravery or when there was a shortage of other women to train.²⁵⁵ Especially when fighters were away on missions, women had to defend the base. This

²⁵³ Interview with Grace, January 2020.

²⁵⁴ Interview with Ahmadu, March 2020.

²⁵⁵ Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

became increasingly common throughout 2015 when all battalions were deployed confronting the MNJTF. It was remembered as an especially violent and deadly period in the camps, with “body parts lying around everywhere” as a result of air and ground assaults.²⁵⁶ “One time, soldiers came with heavy weaponry”, remembered Hamatu. “I got scared and retreated, but some other brave women kept fighting and were captured”. When questioned about risking her life for a group that held her captive, she responded: “You know that you cannot leave, so you have to start believing in the place. You have to want to defend the territory. I tried to be brave”. This attitude was also reflected in the transitory authority that wives of leaders assumed in these periods. While times that husbands were on missions have been described as particularly precarious for women in other groups (Coulter 2009, 112; McKay 2004; Utas 2003, 176), it was also one of female empowerment in Boko Haram. “We were bragging about our husbands because of them being in charge”, said Fatima. “But when the men were out”, she continued, “wives were in charge”.²⁵⁷

For many, defense served as the steppingstone to offense. This transition was not merely a formality, but rather a significant turning point in their trajectories. When Hamatu was assigned to join an attack in Gwoza, she was already accustomed to participating in defensive operations, but becoming part of Boko Haram’s ground forces was a different issue:

The day before my first attack, I was scared and wondering what would happen to me. Would they kill me? I kept thinking about how it would go and couldn’t sleep. I asked my husband whether there was a way to get out of it, but he said “no, don’t be lazy. Just show braveness and go”. They called us in the morning. There was one department where they gave us uniforms, socks, boots, and a turban. After you have changed, they give you a gun, a date, and water. We prayed and said that *Allah* should give us success. Then we entered a vehicle. Everyone was excited and happy to go. They were shouting and jumping but I was just praying that I would come back safely. Immediately when we arrived, we started shooting. I saw a young man running away and said “stop, stop” but he didn’t stop, and I shot him. After that I felt dizzy and fell. [...] When we got back, my husband slaughtered a chicken for my bravery. I was the only woman who shot someone. My husband was very proud of me. I was also proud of myself. The other women didn’t do anything, but I did a lot of things. I was proud of my performance.

²⁵⁶ Interview with Blessing, November 2019; Fatima, January 2020; Hamatu, March 2020; Musa, November 2019.

²⁵⁷ Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

The change of status was also reflected in her social standing: “Since I was now the one going out on attacks for food, my position got better. The other people in the camp showed me more respect and courtesy. They carried things for me and said ‘Welcome, welcome!’ when I returned”.

She participated in another two attacks, which she summarized by saying: “I was mixed in my feelings and thinking. The first attack, I did out of fear. The second one was willingly. I went with hope and excitement. The third one, I did not really care anymore. Gradually, I started losing hope and confidence in the whole thing”. She started to struggle with the moral implications of her behavior. “After I killed these people, I kept thinking about it and had bad dreams. That was what contributed to a change in my thinking”, which translated into open resistance. When she was called for her next mission, she told the insurgents that she would no longer fight:

They brought me to the leader. When he said that the only options are either getting beaten or going to war, I said “beat me”. They naked me and three men beat me severely. They took turns. It was the beating of my life! I knew that this would happen, but I also knew through how much trouble I had been going because I killed these people. I was sick for two weeks, but at least I did not have to go to war any longer.

Chernov Hwang’s (2018, 5) work identifies feelings of guilt and disillusionment with a group’s tactics or leaders as an important factor influencing the disengagement process of terrorists, causing them to leave or change roles within a movement. She also highlights that this process is not always linear or forward moving because feelings of disillusionment can ebb over time. Indeed, Hamatu’s demotion brought her “peace of mind”. She was pregnant when the military attacked the camp and ended her association after four years.

Women’s combat participation remained episodic and neither led to their formal integration into the armed forces, nor changed their civilian status first and foremost as wives. It nevertheless allowed them to broker power that increased their protection inside the camp while exposing them to the risk of frontline fighting. It was therefore a balancing act to leverage their husbands’ status for protection without increasing vulnerability associated with combat. For men, integration into the armed forces was a constant option, pressure, and risk to navigate. After Mohammed had resisted the insurgents’ initial attempt to turn him into a fighter and offered his skills as a tailor

instead, they kept trying to “confuse his mind”.²⁵⁸ When he took their measurements, they told him that they were “doing the work of the Almighty”, that they “were healthy, had money, and were capable”, and that he could be like them if he decided to fight. He told them that he would think about it. He estimated that he had been in the camp for over a year when they informed him that they would bring an elderly man for him to execute. They would give him a better position “and even make [him] governor with [his] own security”. He explained, “When they come to you to shoot or slaughter a person and you don’t do it, they kill you! Some were doing it; some were not doing it. It happened a lot”. Unlike Hamatu, he decided not to comply, highlighting the varying breaking points for individuals. Aware of the risk he faced, he waited for the insurgents to return from a heavy battle, leaving them exhausted and distracted. Due to the trust he had gained, they did not expect him to run away. Reflecting on his experiences, he concluded, “You have to learn how to play the game. You have to be flexible in your thinking and tactical because there is no guarantee that you will be alive in the next moment. You have to deal with new situations and adapt quickly”, which applied equally to deciding when to cooperate and when to resist.

The intimate relationship between adaptation, violence, and resistance is epitomized in the dynamics surrounding the practice of suicide bombing. The transition from a civilian to a military actor happened in an instant. The outcome, however, was the result of a more complex process. “Every morning, they announced who was brave enough and ‘went to sleep’ as they liked to call it [suicide bombing]. It meant that the person could rest in paradise now”.²⁵⁹ Public reports shed light on the coercive nature of the practice, in which individuals were sent to densely populated places, especially markets and IDP camps, to blow themselves up (Mbiyozo 2017; Pearson 2018; Searcey 2017). More than half (56 percent) of the bombers were female as of June 2017 (Warner and Matfess 2017, 29), and as Musa explained, they only “used men who were not fighters after all the females were depleted”.²⁶⁰ Informants accounts suggest that the group’s indoctrination efforts, promoting suicide as a direct way to paradise yielded results:

During the reciting of Quran, they ask who is willing to go do the suicide bombing. Then, women would raise their hands willingly. She would tell her name and say that she is willing to do the work for *Allah*. Then they take her out, give her some

²⁵⁸ Interview with Mohammed, May 2018.

²⁵⁹ Interview with Grace, October 2019.

²⁶⁰ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

training, slaughter a cow or goat for her, give her the vest and tell her the place where she has to go.²⁶¹

Several sources confirmed that there was no shortage of volunteers (International Crisis Group 2016, 11).²⁶² It was a form of self-realization for those who started to believe in the promises of self-sacrifice. A female respondent who was taken to Sambisa by her husband spoke with disappointment about the fear that made her back down:

Many of my friends with whom I was trained together went and committed suicide and died. One of them went to Maiduguri and bombed herself. For me, I had all the trainings but was afraid to blow myself. I took the preaching, trainings, and the convictions about suicide bombing and the entire technicalities from the *munzir*, but fear gripped me. There were instances where I almost did it but declined in the end.²⁶³

However, voluntarism was not always an expression of ideological commitment. It was also an act of desperation and strategic adaptation.

As the group's campaign of suicide attacks intensified in 2015 (Pearson 2018, 35), so did the pressure on Fatima to act as a role model. "They kept trying to make me a suicide bomber", she recalled and continued, "At one point, it was getting too much, and I agreed".²⁶⁴ She decided to volunteer despite her comfortable position as "the first lady" that did not protect her from the recruitment drive. It was part of her strategy to escape. The rationale shared among women was that, once out of the forest, surrendering to the security forces would bring safety and freedom (Searcey 2020; Warner and Matfess 2017).²⁶⁵ In preparation, Fatima described, "[w]e spent one week with Shekau. Many girls volunteered, even small girls. They gave us tea with a date and lectures to make sure that we completely changed our minds". On the way to her target destination, the military barracks in Maiduguri, she started to doubt her plan. She decided to return. "I went back to the camp and told my husband, 'If you go to paradise for this, then come on, let's go together'. But he did not want to go [laughing]". Although some women were able to escape this way, it is likely that the majority of attempts ended deadly, given the notable discrepancy between

²⁶¹ Interview with Atikah, May 2018.

²⁶² Interview with Fatima, January 2020; Godiya, November 2019; Musa, November 2019.

²⁶³ Interview with Sadiya, February 2020.

²⁶⁴ Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

²⁶⁵ Interview with Fatima, January 2020; Godiya, November 2019; Nenna, January 2020.

how often informants mentioned this strategy and the small number of reported cases where women successfully surrendered to the military (Searcey 2017). Upon returning to the camp, Fatima resumed her position, something that would have been unlikely for women with less powerful spouses. Over the course of 2016, escalating food scarcity in the camp made it difficult for her husband to maintain his level of provisioning while aerial bombardments threatened people's lives. She expressed her desire to leave because of "hunger, disturbances and bombs". He asked her to be patient and assured her he would seek permission from the leaders, which she knew would never be granted. Following another unsuccessful and punished escape attempt, she decided to stay. Two weeks later, her husband was killed by a bomb. "I did not want a new husband. They were all dirty and I knew they would not take good care of me. They were about to bring me a new man when I decided to escape". This time, she found two women from the area who knew the way out of the camp. They took a riskier route passing through a deep river. After five years in Sambisa, and two days of trekking, she entered Gwoza.

Conclusion

The stories of those who decided to die for the group tend to overshadow the experiences of the vast majority of civilians whose primary concern was survival. With death and violence often marking their initial encounters with Boko Haram and remaining ever-present in camp life, informants understood that staying alive was never guaranteed. This raised the central question of what one was willing to do to survive. Initial attempts to find stability and safety in a system that follows its own logic, along with strict codes of conduct and law enforcement, usually resulted in a painful process of trial and error. But as Denov and Gervais (2007, 902) note about girls in the RUF, "following their coercive introduction to the war system, they eventually began to understand the intricacies and internal workings of the system and subsequently created different ways to master it". Informants' accounts have similarly demonstrated how they navigated Boko Haram's expectations against their own interests, although mostly at the expense of the latter. As part of the adaptation process to the rebel system, civilians not only learned to strategically maneuver within the social landscape, where status, gender, and militarism regulated access to opportunities, but also experienced changes in their perceptions and motivations. Initially, many abductees were purely driven by coercion and fear, but material, social, and affective

considerations could accumulate. In the words of a respondent, “Some stayed because of fear, some for things like meat, money, power, and weapons”.²⁶⁶ It was as an active and passive process through which they learned “how to play the game” and normalized their association when they “overstayed”, eventually making Sambisa feel like “home”.

It has also been shown that this process was far from linear. The volatility that emerged from being in the military epicenter of rebellion caused frequent ruptures, some of which affected men and women differently. Sudden changes in levels of protection, provisioning, or assignments could abruptly remove the precarious stability they had managed to attain. But these events also created openings for civilians to reassess options, renegotiate involvement, resist changes, or reposition themselves within the system. Engaging in forms of resistance came at a heavy price, which civilians paid to slightly steer their trajectories in a specific direction, or simply away from the path the insurgents envisioned. Forms of cooperation were hence contested and negotiated. Nevertheless, Boko Haram managed to establish a control system that left limited room for civilians to subvert or challenge it. Although small wins for which they fought could make a significant difference to them personally, they did not exempt them from becoming active participants. Successful attempts to negotiate one’s position were limited in scope, neither resulted in forms of collective action nor challenged the movement’s supremacy, and were often met with brutal punishments. While moments of change and activism stood out in narratives, they were followed by a process of readaptation. It must therefore be recognized that civilians made deliberate choices about how to cooperate, but these choices were heavily restrained or overridden by the agency of those with institutional power.

It is thus not the lack of order and control that creates unpredictability and instability, but hyper-control in a system where stability is derived from taking up arms. Against this backdrop, turbulence results from the continuous power struggles to broker protection and possibilities in a militarized, dynamic, and dangerous environment that precludes civilians from gaining the stability they seek. I therefore contend that generating turbulence was not a deliberate strategy by Boko Haram; instead, it was a byproduct of absolute control and the design of a war machine primarily designed to produce violence. As the pressure on civilians to militarize increased over

²⁶⁶ Interview with Grace, January 2020.

time and strategies and motivations evolved, gravitating towards the military sphere proved to be a delicate balancing act. On one hand, some of the protection and authority of commanders rubbed off on civilians. On the other hand, it made them vulnerable to becoming violent actors themselves, both inside and outside of the camp, blurring the line between civilians and combatants. Proximity to military power had thus both alluring and horrifying effects – much like a magnet that can attract and then repel.

It is through these dynamics that the intricate relationship between violence and resistance becomes evident. Violence served as a primary means to enforce discipline and assert power, creating both victims and, at the very least, accomplices, if not perpetrators. Witnessing, perpetrating, or enduring violence could subsequently ignite resistance. These dynamics drew civilians into recurring cycles of violence and resistance that marked their experiences under Boko Haram from the beginning. They are an intensification and extension of the adaptation and rupture cycles that shaped other forms of (non)cooperation, rather than a divergence from them. Constant experiences of physical and psychological insecurity and abuse gradually ingrained into civilians the logic and practices of institutionalized violence. As Granovetter (1985, 487) notes,

Actors do not behave or decide as atoms outside a social context, nor do they adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories that they happen to occupy. Their attempts at purposive action are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations.

Although the majority was at the receiving end of violence, those who lived in the camps for extended periods of time became embedded in these problematic systems of social relations. Turbulent cooperation is a manifestation of these dynamics through which individuals get caught up in the violent and complex workings of rebellion. This perspective further delineates mobilization from participation, emphasizing that people's pathways into a group do not determine their subsequent engagement.

These findings add to current understandings of civilian cooperation, resistance, and resilience. So far, scholars have studied adaptation in the context of noncooperation, that is, as the core mechanism through which communities remain autonomous and resilient against armed actors (A. C. Carpenter 2012; Dorff 2015; O. Kaplan 2017; J. Krause 2018). Adapting to the insertion into a rebel movement and resisting it can be seen as opposing forces, with contestation impeding

adaptation. But as has been shown, they can also work together, forging alignment between the individual and the organization going forward. Thinking about adaptation as a process of gaining resilience in the face of extreme adversity directs attention to civilians' efforts to reduce vulnerability within structural confines and leverage the tools at their disposal. Consequently, demonstrating that working with and against insurgents is not mutually exclusive combines scholarship on both themes and offers a more nuanced portrayal of civilian realities, which force them to straddle various behavioral categories during the course of their association, sometimes occupying more than one at the same time. It recognizes that individuals flexibly and to varying degrees adjust to their precarious position by pushing against or leaning into the system. Understanding the effects of the social structures that keep the military support apparatus functional thus allows for a shift in analyzing civilian cooperation. Moving away from a binary perspective of coercion or voluntarism, this approach recognizes agency as constrained by both the individuals' and the armed group's struggle to survive.

CONCLUSION

As I reflect upon the many stories and experiences of my respondents, I am drawn back to Fatima and the countless others who, through a confluence of circumstances, found themselves behind front lines. When I started this research, I largely discounted the potential for individual agency. I assumed that in a situation of “do or die”, there was no room for choice or creating new alternatives. The force people submit to would first conform their actions and, eventually, transform their sense of self until it blurred with the organization. However, as civilians shared their experiences, and the pages of this dissertation unfolded, I came to understand that such a perspective refuses to see the difficult choices people made, their intentional responses to adversity, and to their efforts to walk the fine line of self-sacrifice and self-preservation in order to survive. Reducing civilian cooperation to a mere struggle to survive may seem banal, but it is far from it. The characters that have woven the tapestry of this book have demonstrated that the force they all had to grapple with was not uniformly exerted or perceived; it was neither all-encompassing nor static. Instead, it was the ever-shifting landscape of relationships, priorities, and power dynamics that defined the ways in which they navigated survival. The patterns of turbulent and stable cooperation attest to the connection between individual struggles and the overarching force of insurgent control. This realization is crucial not only for understanding differences in rebel-civilian engagement but also for recognizing the fortitude and resilience of those who are compelled to adapt, resist, and ultimately, find a way to endure.

Summary

The main objective of this research has been to elucidate differences in civilian cooperation, particularly why certain individuals living in rebel territory become deeply entangled with

insurgent organizations while others do not. I integrated theoretical perspectives from scholarship on rebel governance, civil action, armed groups' internal dynamics, and civil war. Yet, most studies concentrate on the factors and conditions that drive civilians to either support or oppose armed groups collectively. By examining the diverse roles that civilians play in sustaining an insurgency and the relations they build with the armed organization over time, my work has revealed that patterns of cooperation between civilians and Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria were more complex and varied than commonly assumed.

Specifically, the developed theoretical framework suggests that adaptation to the rebels' mode of governance is a critical factor in shaping civilian engagement with the insurgent organization. The strategic military importance of a site determines the objectives that a group pursues with its governance, namely whether to prioritize militarization or civilianization. This leads to different ways of structuring social relations, which are reflected in the degree to which the organization interferes in civilian affairs and the extent to which civilians are integrated into the military apparatus. This, in turn, affects the conditions to which civilians must adapt, and how they behave and relate to the group as a result. When insurgencies prioritize militarization, civilians are placed in a more precarious state, and their positions within the militant hierarchy become more turbulent as they try to find stability in an unpredictable and volatile environment. In contrast, when insurgencies prioritize civilianized governance, people can maintain some sense of normalcy as the persistence of civilian institutions provides predictability, which translates into more stable engagement.

Focusing on roles, relationships, and restraints that define civilian behavior in militarized and civilianized spheres helps us to see how variation in control and cooperation originate in processes endogenous to war. Approaching cooperation through this lens has opened our view of insurgent control as a tie that binds people to the organization in specific ways, rather than solely a territorial status or administrative system. Through detailed, intimate first-hand accounts, I was able to uncover how people experienced and navigated respective constraints, and how they interpret their own engagement with insurgents. This has diverted the discourse away from the notion of civilian opportunities – for collusion and resistance – and toward individuals' and armed groups' struggle to survive. Thus, this research moves beyond assumptions about mobilization and political

voluntarism to explain conflict participation and, instead, traces the socio-organizational process that makes civilians vulnerable to or resilient against absorption into rebellion.

Emerging themes and implications

Control and order

The findings of this study carry implications for our understanding of different conflict and post-conflict dynamics. One such implication relates to widely accepted assumptions about the relationship between control and order that form the basis of many political science theories. It is commonly assumed that control and order are positively correlated, such that an increase in control leads to a corresponding increase in order and stability. To recap, control may be derived from either formal institutions or informal social norms and values, which provide individuals with a framework to understand their roles and responsibilities and promote cooperation. Conversely, it is argued that a lack of control leads to chaos and instability, with individuals left to their own devices without clear guidelines or rules to follow, resulting in conflict, competition, and violence.

In the context of state-building and civil war, however, scholars have challenged the idea that “ungoverned spaces” are in fact ungoverned and disorderly (Keister 2014; Kingston and Spears 2004; Migdal and Schlichte 2005). Additionally, the field of rebel governance has expanded our knowledge on how non-state actors establish political orders, and order, in these spaces. Nonetheless, much of this scholarship still operates with the notion that rebel governance provides the basis for stability.

This project asked what kind of control brings stability for whom? I have shown that insurgents may choose to only exert minimal social control in civilianized spaces, meaning that territorial control does not equal governance and that civilians experienced stability in these settings compared to turbulence in highly controlled militarized places. For insurgents, centralized command structures and an extensive security and surveillance apparatus helps keep a tight grip on military strongholds where absolute order is required and chaos intolerable. Having a civilian workforce who flexibly supports the logistical, social, and military needs of combatants contributes to operational stability. These institutions and functions that purport to offer stability for the organization are the exact roots of turbulence for civilians. Integration into the war

machinery, high oversight, and proximity to those with military power create unpredictability and volatility. In contrast, the stability for communities in civilianized sites is based on a precarious arrangement for insurgents. Even though they reap the benefits of holding territory with minimal costs and effort, they have de facto very limited control, which can backfire if other conflict actors decide to challenge the status quo. It follows that whether control leads to order and stability, and the lack of control to chaos and disorder, depends on the perspective and mode of governance. The findings thus contribute to our understanding of how control and stability are related in different contexts. They also underscore the importance of correcting a combatant- and state-bias in civil war scholarship and instead exploring the meanings and consequences of wartime phenomena from diverse points of view.

Civilian rebels

Second, the project broadens and complicates our view of civilians in several regards. Far from being a monolithic entity, their experiences and contributions to war-making differ significantly, and they do so at least partially along the fault line of militarization. Combining civilianized and militarized governance, and people's roles therein, in one framework helps to bring the scholarship on rebel governance, internal armed groups' organizational dynamics, and women's wartime participation in a systematic dialogue. Current approaches to rebel rule overlook that civilians are governed both outside of the group and also inside. They can become part of the insurgent organization itself, or "adopted" as informants liked to say. They face unique challenges when they become embedded in a militant system that makes high-risk participation structurally available and favorable by linking it to the prospect of protection and power. Engaging with the empirical realities of militarism and subjective understandings thereof provides a more holistic picture of civilian experiences in conflict zones; one that needs to reconcile that civilians can also be rebels.

Moreover, the binary distinction between civilians and combatants in these contexts is far from clearcut. The decision of whether to bear arms is not solely dictated by an individual's status, but influenced by factors, such as skills, perceived loyalty, gender, and a group's military and logistical needs. As has been shown, noncombatants may still receive basic military training and participate in violent activities, from executing punishments to defense operations. Rather than a reflection of one's commitment to the group, the assignment of roles is often guided by pragmatism, just as

rules and norms of violence can be reinvented when the need and opportunity arise (Ahmad 2019; Marks 2013a). Due to the multiple and changing demands of insurgency, civilians are expected to take on various duties, hold dual roles, or transition into more militarized positions and back again. The same applies to combatants who, as Loken (2022, 145) notes, “rarely take on only frontline roles. Instead, they tend to perform multiple tasks, move between positions or activities, and make dual contributions”. These dynamics challenge traditional civilian-combatant distinctions as well as related and often gendered victim-perpetrator categorizations. They also open avenues into studying armed groups more comprehensively, such as in terms of the organizational setup and social processes that enable such fluidity, their effects on an armed group’s strength and resilience, and their impact on people’s wartime trajectories.

The civilian status is not only hard to capture from the outside, but even the insurgents themselves tend to have uneasy relationships with the general population and the noncombatants within their ranks. The treatment of civilians is often a cause of friction, exemplified by schism among Boko Haram leaders over the subject of *takfir* (Kassim 2018a; Zenn 2021), divisions within the LTTE over the transition to terrorism and forced conscription that eroded popular support (Kalyvas 2006), and disagreement inside the Taliban with members of the political wing being more supportive of a reduction in civilian casualties (Giustozzi 2019). The ambivalence also manifests itself at the individual level with rebels both fearing and hurting civilians whose approval and respect they seek, while subjecting them to abuse to ward off feelings of shame when such recognition is not forthcoming (Keen 2002; Mitton 2015). As I have shown, even within insurgent organizations, civilians may be considered “members” while their position is still fraught with ambiguity and distrust. Unlike fighters who can prove their loyalty through acts of valor on the battlefield, civilians must navigate a more challenging terrain to gain the trust and respect of their peers and leaders. They must broker resources through relationships, all while managing the delicate balance between maintaining a civilian identity and embracing the military power that defines opportunities and status in an armed group. The in-between position that civilians occupy, neither fully protected by the group’s security apparatus nor fully integrated into its fighting forces, implies that they must constantly negotiate the shifting lines between those who fall within the group’s protection scheme and those who do not. To comprehend the realities of civilian life in conflict zones, we must acknowledge the blurred boundaries and contested categories that characterize these environments. This may inform further research on how civilians act and make

decisions, how they mitigate vulnerability, and gain resilience inside rebel territory. It may also facilitate comparative analyses on how internal civil-military relations affect social cohesion, the design and strength of military support apparatuses, or patterns of violence.

These insights have practical implications for de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DRR) measures generally and for the Nigerian context in particular. Several official programs and local initiatives are ongoing in Nigeria, with the federal government's Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) and *Sulhu* being the most prominent.²⁶⁷ In addition to the small size of these programs,²⁶⁸ there are other problems related to the selection of participants and program design, building on the points raised above. These programs are primarily focused on men who are generally suspected to have been combatants, which is compounded by false testimonies due to problematic screening procedures that include intimidation, beatings, torture, and inhumane conditions in detention facilities (Amnesty International 2016; International Crisis Group 2021). Women have also been subject to severe sexual and other abuses by authorities (Amnesty International 2018; Carsten, Levinson, et al. 2022), but the vast majority has been screened only cursorily, sometimes without questioning, and sent to IDP camps or garrison towns without any assistance (International Crisis Group 2019b; Samuel 2020a). The selection criteria further entrench gender-stereotypes about combatants as male perpetrators and civilians as female victims that have been defied in this study and other scholars' work.²⁶⁹

Especially in light of the funding constraints of these programs, considering under what mode of governance people have lived may help to identify populations who are more likely in need of attention than others. The findings suggest that there is a case to be made for prioritizing the screening and programming for those coming out of high-level militarization and who were

²⁶⁷ The former is a six-months program for low-level, "repentant" combatants run by the Nigerian military at Mallam Sidi in Gombe state, while the latter is aimed at senior jihadist commanders and carried out by the Nigerian domestic security service (DSS) and the military. For women and children, the process is less formalized, but the Borno state-run Bulumkutu Transit Centre offers 12-week-long rehabilitation in Maiduguri.

²⁶⁸ Only 920 people were admitted into OSC between its inauguration in 2016 and 2021 (International Crisis Group 2021) while about 2,000 women and 4,000 children went through Bulumkutu (International Crisis Group 2019b; UN News 2022).

²⁶⁹ Significant progress has been made on revealing women's military and noncombat contributions in armed groups (Alison 2009; Darden, Henshaw, and Szekely 2019; Henshaw 2017; Loken 2022; Marks 2017). Apart from a more accurate depiction of the gendered composition of military wings, it also seems to have contributed to a feminization of noncombat labor.

socially embedded in the group – whether as combatants or civilians. This may work against current misallocation. As noted by Brechenmacher (2019, 28) about OSC, “the screening criteria remain opaque, with no clearly articulated guidelines or principles to distinguish between hardline elements within extremist groups and those that only provided low-level support”. According to former Safe Corridor internees, about 75 percent of their cohort had been civilians in minor support roles who had escaped Boko Haram-controlled areas and were incorrectly categorized as fighters by authorities, detained, and assigned to OSC (Abdullahi 2022; International Crisis Group 2021). Reports also indicate that even avowedly committed female ex-associates and long-time wives of militants were immediately released (International Crisis Group 2019b) or “told to forget about their experiences” and sent away after less than one month in rehabilitation (Samuel 2020a). By distinguishing between militarized and civilianized participants, it may be possible to more effectively target and quickly channel former high-level participants into programs, while allowing low-level noncombatants to rebuild their lives outside of detention facilities. This approach could reduce overall suffering as well as the time in and resources spent on detention.

Other implications relate to the program design, which combines vocational training, psycho-social therapy, and religious re-education (Bukarti and Bryson 2019). These interventions mostly address individual behavioral and attitudinal change but tend to pay limited attention to the social contexts from which ex-associates come and to which they return. For example, the skills training is neither tailored to the roles and status individuals had within Boko Haram’s hierarchy, nor based on a realistic marketplace evaluation. This means that especially those who held positions of higher status feel disillusioned by the modest economic prospects of making shoes, soap, or caps (International Crisis Group 2021).²⁷⁰ Moreover, many of my respondents who were confined to camps, sometimes for years on end without any outside contact, became accustomed to norms and practices without actually believing in their ideological underpinnings. In these cases, religious re-education may not be as useful as engagement with problematic norms, routines, and social relations that create vulnerability or proneness to violent, abusive, or unhealthy behavior. For instance, the persistence of social dynamics was observed in reception centers for formerly abducted people in Northern Uganda where power dynamics that had been in place within the

²⁷⁰ Interview with Musa, November 2019.

LRA were at times replicated when wives of commanders turned other residents into servants (Allen and Schomerus 2006). Matfess (2017, 137–38) made a similar observation about the lasting authority of a former Boko Haram *amira* who could silence other women in a rehabilitation facility with a mere look or sound. Especially given that it is not uncommon for some OSC defectors and female returnees to stay in touch with people still within the insurgency (International Crisis Group 2019b, 2021), the risk of social patterns to stick or being reactivated is heightened. All of these matters are further aggravated by communities’ stigmatization of and resistance against reintegrating returnees (Brechenmacher 2018; Felbab-Brown 2018; International Alert and UNICEF 2016). “This is destined to happen to us”, said Fatima, “because people are scared that we carry bombs with us. They don’t want us to come close”.²⁷¹ The role of communities in facilitating or impeding reintegration was initially neglected in the DRR program design (Clubb and Tapley 2018), but acceptance has since improved thanks to local initiatives and sensitization campaigns (International Crisis Group 2019b; Nagarajan 2019) and positive experiences with returnees (Littman et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the need remains to connect individuals’ in-group experiences with the empirical realities outside of Boko Haram to improve the effectiveness of DRR efforts and to stop more people from rejoining the insurgency (International Crisis Group 2019b; Nwaubani 2018).²⁷² In sum, knowing which specific practices, duties, and norms ex-associates followed in civilianized and militarized settings can inform more targeted and socially embedded rehabilitation and reintegration activities. This is particularly critical in funding-constrained contexts and where conflict and post-conflict developments run in parallel, as we see in many protracted conflicts.

Armed groups’ constraints

Even though the findings shed primarily light on the constraints faced by civilians, they also speak to the challenges and constraints faced by militant organizations themselves. The study has highlighted the durability of formal and informal civilian institutions in community settings, as well as the emergence of novel institutions within armed groups. These institutional trajectories of resilience and decay, apart from affecting civilian behavior, reflect insurgents’ differentiated use of control due to, among other things, resource constraints. Neglect that permits institutional

²⁷¹ Interview with Fatima, January 2020.

²⁷² Interview with Hamatu, March 2020.

persistence in one place can exist alongside destructive and constructive interventionism elsewhere. The employed mode of governance in a specific location may not necessarily be the preferred choice, but a tool to balance the desire to expand power with available resources to do so. Rather than a predetermined and fixed strategic preference, the proposed framework therefore accounts for the need of armed groups to adapt to varying internal limitations and external counterforce. That is why places can morph in and out of specific states, causing spatial and temporal variation in orders emerging, evolving, and falling apart.

When looking at conflict phases chronologically, as laid out in Chapter 4, it becomes clear that insurgents update their approaches to governance and warfare in response to challenges and setbacks. Bamber-Zryd (2022) has shown that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria critically reflected and adapted its strategy after each governance cycle consisting of seizing territory, implementing institutions, and losing territory again. It thereby gained the necessary expertise to govern ever greater territory, with more sophisticated institutions, and for longer periods. Boko Haram went through comparable cycles that indeed reflect its ability to adapt, but also its limitations to do so. Those cycles include its early expulsion from Maiduguri by the CJTF in 2013, which prompted the creation of safe havens and a more aggressive approach towards civilians; the subsequent rise of the proclaimed Caliphate and its fall, which underscored Boko Haram's inability to implement its envisioned governance system; and its return to guerilla warfare, which ISWAP disrupted by bringing Shekau's reign to an end in 2021 (Adebajo and Abdullahi 2021).

Military and civilian actors thus not only influence whether rebels are able to seize territory in the first place (Kalyvas 2006; M. A. Rubin 2020) and what kind of orders emerge (Arjona 2016; van Baalen 2021; Breslawski 2021), but also how viable modes of governance are and what kind of experiences civilians are likely to make as a result. Over the course of the conflict, various opponents challenged Boko Haram, with episodes of contestation being directly linked to spatial and typological aspects of governance. Although such grand narratives that paint the arc of a conflict tend to smooth over more granular sub-regional dynamics, it has been demonstrated throughout this work that the development, consolidation, and decay of governance is not a singular and uniform process. Communities can go through different stages of distinct forms of governance at the same time, reflecting localized pressures and priorities of militants. Thinking about rebel governance not only as a political project but in the context of a group's struggle to

survive brings the fundamentals of war-making back into the discourse. And it helps to see that the militants' constraints in sustaining an insurgency are inextricably linked to those of civilians.

These insights could also hold implications for counterinsurgency campaigns. They suggest that fighting for militarized territories may be more important to curtail a group's strength and to free civilians under duress than going after civilianized sites. Taking individuals out of rebel camps reduces the number of high-risk and often militarily-trained participants. It thereby more significantly disrupts core operations and a group's ability to replenish its military ranks than liberating civilianized populations. It also breaks individuals' integration into group norms and hierarchies that causes more drastic transformations in behavior and attitudes, whereas adaptation to civilianized governance is less problematic. Even if armed forces do not dismantle military enclaves, disrupting life within them can push disengagement processes forward. As demonstrated in Chapter 7, externally induced ruptures create openings for civilians and fighters alike to reconsider their association and provide opportunities for escape when the organization is in disarray.

Moreover, the empirical evidence indicates that counterinsurgency tactics and the types of disruption they produce may have different effects on the group and individuals. For instance, when the army challenged Boko Haram in Sambisa Forest through heavy ground and air assaults as part of Operation Lafiya Dole in 2015, the insurgents increasingly armed and weaponized civilians as they struggled to defend the camps.²⁷³ In contrast, when cut off from supply networks the following year, there appeared to be an organizational shift toward noncombat labor. Both civilians and combatants were assigned to food-finding missions, raiding livestock, agricultural production, and establishing alternative supply routes.²⁷⁴ In addition to the effect on the distribution of labor, the military campaign inflicted heavy casualties on camp populations and fueled fear and distrust toward the government among some of my interlocutors.²⁷⁵ In contrast, the food shortage that also caused severe hunger, diseases, and death seemed to predominantly undermine trust in Boko Haram's ability to care for its members, sparking a wave of surrenders

²⁷³ Interview with Grace, October 2019; Hamatu, March 2020.

²⁷⁴ Interview with Musa, November 2019; Kadi, November 2019.

²⁷⁵ Interview with Umaru, January 2020; Fatima, January 2020

(Searcey 2016a).²⁷⁶ However, more research is needed to establish the relationship between counterinsurgency tactics and forms of civilian cooperation.

In comparison, reclaiming civilianized areas cost insurgents their territorial foothold and unhindered access to community resources. For the state armed forces, it offers the chance for a relatively quick win. But it might be one that is easily reversed if the government does not have sufficient capacity to secure the area, which made insurgent neglect a viable and low-cost strategy in the first place. We have seen this development when ISWAP filled the power vacuum that was left after the Nigerian military and its allies had cleared Borno's countryside from Boko Haram (Carsten 2019; International Crisis Group 2019a). One could also observe the counterproductive effects of a brutal military campaign that failed to differentiate between levels of civilian engagement. "When we can't see the enemy, civilians become the enemy" stated a senior military official in this regard (Center for Civilians in Conflict 2015, 6). As mentioned, indiscriminate abuse and violence against local populations has been widely documented throughout the conflict (Amnesty International 2015b; Carsten, Lewis, et al. 2022; Human Rights Watch 2012). It undermined trust in authorities and bolstered sympathies for Boko Haram (Anyadike 2018; Botha and Abdile 2017). The fear of the military could even exceed that of the militants, causing individuals who were caught in the middle to retreat with Boko Haram.²⁷⁷ Many others were abducted.

The reclaiming of mostly civilianized or low-level militarized territories can hence reduce the overall number of people living under rebel control, but enlarge the highly militarized population, thereby tying civilians closer to the organization than before. Another unintended consequence is that the emptying of villages, unlawful detention, and relocation into IDP camps can erode communal cohesion, practices, and networks. Tearing communities apart can undermine exactly those elements that are sources of resilience even when living under rebel control, as demonstrated

²⁷⁶ Interview with Grace, October 2019.

²⁷⁷ A farmer from Gwoza LGA described this dynamic the following way: "We were caged in the village by Boko Haram and the military was engaging them. We kept running from one settlement to another in the middle of the war. Soldiers were burning houses and shooting indiscriminately. Some of the civilians were killed by soldiers while others were massacred by Boko Haram. Once you make any attempt to follow the direction of the soldiers, the Boko Haram men would just shoot you. ... If we decided to escape and go to where the military was, the security forces would also torture and sometimes kill us. When the battle got tough, everybody was running for their lives and some of us went to the bush [Sambisa Forest]" (Interview with Ismael, March 2020).

in Chapter 5. By disturbing the delicate but stable status quo that keeps a range of risks at bay, state forces can cause some of the very instability they aim to avert. In sum, not only may a focus on clearing civilianized sites misallocate already-limited security forces to communities with weak ties to insurgents, and thus fail to meaningfully mar insurgent operations, but it could even increase civilian vulnerability. To be clear, there are no straightforward policy solutions that follow from this research, but they might be worth exploring further from a counterinsurgency, peacebuilding, and humanitarian perspective.

Limitations and future research directions

While this study sought to broaden our view of civilian-rebel relations, it still only offers a partial perspective. There remain patterns of rebel and civilian behavior not explained, such as why and when insurgents seize civilian territory. It also does not explain how rebels and civilians interact in government-controlled or contested territories. What it does attempt to explain is why, despite all these factors that lead insurgents to control areas and populations to reside therein, there are systematic differences in the relations civilians and militant organizations forge. I have defined the scope conditions in Chapter 2 and discussed in Chapter 3 how the methods, data, and analysis may have influenced or limited the results. I will now turn to further limitations and unanswered questions that can guide and be addressed in future research.

The developed framework accounts for the strategic interests and behaviors of both civilians and armed groups, as well as the context that structures their interactions. However, other actors – particularly the state and its security forces, or alternative social institutions – may play an important unobserved in my framework. Their impact warrants further examination, which could be particularly important to specify the conditions under which we are likely to see a specific pattern of governance and civilian cooperation emerge or erode. Tactical questions – such as when does an armed group consider it necessary and possible to militarize a location, and what drives the decision to ramp up or drive down social control? – are critical for deriving predictive implications from this research. Pinpointing the triggers that activate the identified mechanisms not only improves the explanatory power of the framework but could aid in anticipating conflict developments. This could then inform the decision-making of military and humanitarian actors, preventing unintended consequences, such as prompting the transformation of a civilianized site

into a militarized one, and allowing for more proactive and effective responses when it comes to the treatment and evacuation of civilians, among other things.

Additional interviews with former Boko Haram junior and senior commanders, which will become more feasible to conduct in the future due to high numbers of surrenders since Shekau's death (Anyadike 2021; Maclean and Alfa 2021), could lay out the group's thoughts on threats to military survival and related rationales for governance decisions. They can also provide insight into the obstacles faced in implementing those decisions, as well as the actors and factors that contributed to their success or failure. Members of the Nigerian military, the CJTF, and humanitarian organizations could offer complementary perspectives on these issues. Moreover, drawing on the scholarship on how community characteristics and capacity shape rebel rule (Arjona 2016; van Baalen 2021; Breslawski 2021; M. A. Rubin 2020), a structured and focused cross-case comparison of communities that experienced civilianized, militarized, and none of these modes of governance would be critical in further developing and testing the internal validity of the framework. One may explore how social cohesion, religious and ethnic demographic features, ideological proximity, or CJTF presence affected rebel behavior to determine conditions and probe the inferences I made.²⁷⁸ The challenges of researching an active conflict have impeded such systematic data collection with vast areas of Borno state still being insecure and partially under rebel control, with community members being spread across the region, and conversations about conflict participation being a sensitive issue.

Second, although I drew on fine-grained, individual-level data to theorize the micro-foundations, it is a predominantly structural account that I offer. Individual-level factors may not be the primary driver of the variation, but they still shape behavior in ways that remain underexplored in this project. While the framework identifies distinct patterns of cooperation, the categories are still fairly broad. Turbulent cooperation, in particular, can manifest in a range of extremes. People fall or rise from different heights within the hierarchy, undergo more or less occupational changes, and have relationships of varying intensity and attachment. Even among turbulent participants, some manage to maintain a certain level of autonomy, whereas others become committed members.

²⁷⁸ The work by Monguno & Umara (2020) which disaggregates and analyses attack patterns at LGA- and ward-level could provide a starting point even though my research suggests that both civilianized and militarized sites experienced insurgent violence.

Exploring personal circumstances and characteristics could shed light on some of these differences within differences.

Identifying factors that facilitate or impede adaptation could be an especially fruitful path of investigation. Cohen (2017) provides evidence that younger fighters and those who reported greater physical insecurity were more prone to violent socialization. Such factors that diminish a person's sense of agency may also apply to noncombatants, leading to perceived pressure to conform. Moreover, the impact of social ties such as staying with spouses and children is worth exploring. While this could potentially reduce feelings of physical insecurity and the need to adapt, it could also make life in the camps more tolerable or even enjoyable and thereby increase a willingness to adapt, as some participants suggested. A straightforward and plausible assumption is that the length of association is positively correlated with the degree of adaptation. In addition to situational micro-level factors, one may also examine individual character traits. The capacity for psychological and social adaptation could affect the speed and degree with which one adjusts to change. For example, cognitive rigidity, defined in the neuropsychological literature as a difficulty to adapt to change and ambiguity and to switch between modes of thinking, is associated with tendencies to adopt extremist political action, beliefs, and willingness to exert violence (Zmigrod 2020; Zmigrod and Goldenberg 2021). High levels of rigidity could make individuals susceptible to either buy into an armed group or to vehemently resist any form of cooperation whereas higher levels of cognitive and social flexibility may ease the navigation of the rebel system. Therefore, interviews on cooperative trajectories in combination with a survey that assesses individual-level resources for adaptation could complement this project. It could advance one perspective for why people in similar positions took different strategic approaches to cooperation as well as why some individuals and further disentangle the complexities within the categories of turbulence and stability.

The downside of a single case study design is that the findings may not be generalizable. Thankfully, the burgeoning field of rebel governance has provided extensive evidence of armed groups establishing all kinds of governing institutions in warzones across the globe as well as engaging differently with populations within their territory. In Chapter 2, I have referred to cases of rebel neglect and extensive civilianization as well as to examples of low and hyper-militarization, showing that variation in modes of governance and social control have been

documented in many armed conflicts even if not referred to as such. Finding comparative data on civilian cooperation has been more difficult. Due to the way it has been conceptualized, most studies differentiate and detail compliance based on coercion and support based on commitment and armed group legitimacy (Revkin 2021; Revkin and Ahram 2020; Terpstra and Frerks 2017), which does not directly relate to the patterns of roles and relationships described in my work. However, ethnographic studies of life inside jungle camps of rebellions in Uganda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Mozambique suggest that the phenomenon of turbulence travels across contexts (Coulter 2009; Denov and Maclure 2007; Vermeij 2014), just as different types of stability, order, and normalcy have been shown to exist in warzones outside Northeast Nigeria (Keister 2014; Koloma Beck 2012; Lubkemann 2008; Metelits 2010).

To test the validity of my framework, several approaches could be taken. Firstly, structured, focused comparisons of armed groups in Northeast Nigeria could be conducted, where contextual factors are held constant. ISWAP, in particular, lends itself to such as comparison. The group's fundamental difference to Boko Haram, and reason for the split, is its engagement with civilians. It has taken a softer approach, primarily targeting military and government structures, and successfully resurrecting relations with the civilian population of the Lake Chad area and rural Borno state (International Crisis Group 2019a, 2022). From my arm's length observations, the case seems to confirm my findings. In some villages in the periphery of ISWAP's core operational zones, civilians and militants merely co-exist. Villagers are prohibited from cooperating with security forces, but beyond that, the insurgents largely neglect them. In other areas, ISWAP is more active yet less predatory than Boko Haram. In exchange for tax payments, ISWAP digs wells, provides sporadic health services, and persecutes fighters for unallowed abuses of civilians. It puts price caps on basic food items, polices cattle rustling, and permits farming. These measures enable people to provide for themselves and boost the local economy (Samuel 2019). The group thus exhibits higher levels of civilianization, which remained unobserved in the case of Boko Haram, inducing stable cooperation among the population. In contrast, the few civilians I interviewed who were abducted to the insurgents' militarized camps on the banks and islands of Lake Chad reported similar dynamics to those in Sambisa Forest.²⁷⁹ Exploring these comparative dynamics in more

²⁷⁹ Interview with Aisha, March 2020; Amara, March 2020; Samastu, March 2020; Abubakar, March 2020.

depth may also test whether the framework is biased towards groups that are particularly violent, predatory, and exclusive in their relations with civilians. Although I hope that the identified lacking elements and remaining uncertainties do not undermine the drawn conclusions, the primary objective of this study has been achieved if it is a steppingstone towards a more comprehensive understanding of what leads civilians to become embedded in insurgencies, or not.

Finally, although I shed light on how group practices and norms governed the private sphere, there is much more to say about the complex emotional landscape of wartime relationships, and about how it feeds into social and cultural group dynamics.²⁸⁰ Themes emerged in conversations which I was unable to pursue at the time or could not sufficiently discuss here. How were interpersonal alliances or competitions forged, maintained, and broken? I was as much struck by the trust, bonds, and loyalty that people developed as I was by the rivalry, jealousy, and violence they exerted towards each other. Adversity as well as chance appeared to bring people together, prompting them to offer protection and support to each other, but also to pursue their own interests even if it meant hurting others. Stories about the dissolution of long-standing friendships, unexpected encounters and acts of kindness, and twists of fate caused by betrayal stuck with me.

At the intra-individual level, while the findings shed light on the under-examined issue of retention, escape remains an elusive object of study. I demonstrate that during ruptures, the dynamics of cooperation could shift, causing the risks of remaining to outweigh those of leaving, even if it meant facing the possibility of death. However, it remains unclear what prompted individuals to take the risk of escape in a specific moment. “That’s when I decided to leave”, many respondents like Fatima said at one point in the interview. There is certainly no single factor that leads to the decision. An individual’s circumstances, threat perception, risk aversion, and external opportunities are likely to play a role. Identifying the compounding causal factors, especially those that can be manipulated, could make the decision more transparent and help in creating conditions conducive to escape. Relatedly, given the necessary selection criteria of my interlocutors – all had escaped or been somehow divorced from the group – I can’t help but wonder how the type of exit affects people’s processing of experiences and trauma afterwards. My informants were eager to

²⁸⁰ This would build on scholarship on the role of emotions in mobilization (Kaufman 2001; McDoom 2012; Pearlman 2013; Petersen 2001; E. J. Wood 2003) and perpetration of violence (Baaz and Stern 2008; Dolan 2002; Keen 2002; Mitton 2015; Zur 1998).

share their stories of escape with me, not necessarily to prove their innocence but because they were proud. Conversely, rescue by the military featured less prominently in their accounts. It is possible that the act of running away ended an episode of lost control over one's life with a restored sense of agency, whereas "liberation" reinforced self- and externally imposed narratives of victimization. How experiences of turbulence and stability, escape, and return affect civilians' trajectories is beyond the scope of this work. Yet, addressing those questions is all the more important in a context where civilians' relationships to Boko Haram are not a matter of the past but continue to shape individuals' and the regions' present and foreseeable future.

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APPENDIX: LIST OF INFORMANTS

List of informants (interviews conducted 2018-2020)

No.	Category	Pseudonym	Status	Date	Gender
1	Civilian	Joy	Conflict-affected	May 2018	F
2	Civilian	Hadizatu	Conflict-affected	May 2018	F
3	Civilian	Azumi	Conflict-affected	May 2018	F
4	Civilian	Binta	Conflict-affected	May 2018	F
5	Boko Haram civilian	Anatu	Militarized	May 2018	F
6	Boko Haram civilian	Esther	Militarized	May 2018	F
7	Boko Haram civilian	Habibah	Militarized	May 2018	F
8	Boko Haram civilian	Usman	Militarized	May 2018	M
9	Boko Haram civilian	Jamilah	Militarized	May 2018	F
10	Boko Haram civilian	Haniya	Civilianized	May 2018	F
11	Boko Haram civilian	Salma	Civilianized	May 2018	F
12	Boko Haram civilian	Zahrah	Civilianized	May 2018	F
13	Boko Haram civilian	Maryamu	Civilianized	May 2018	F
14	Boko Haram civilian	Falta	Militarized	May 2018	F
15	Boko Haram civilian	Umi	Militarized	May 2018	F
16	Boko Haram civilian	Anniyah	Militarized	May 2018	F
17	Boko Haram civilian	Amina	Militarized	May 2018	F
18	Boko Haram civilian	Mohammed	Militarized	May 2018	M
19	Boko Haram civilian	Maigado	Militarized	May 2018	F
20	CJTF			May 2018	M
21	Think tank staff			May 2018	M
22	Journalist			May 2018	M
23	Think tank staff			May 2018	M
24	Researcher			May 2018	M
25	INGO staff			May 2018	M
26	NGO staff			May 2018	M
27	INGO staff			May 2018	F
28	IOM staff			May 2018	M
29	IOM staff			May 2018	F

30	Researcher			May 2018	M
31	Boko Haram civilian	Blessing	Civilianized/ Militarized	Oct. 2019	F
32	Boko Haram civilian	Grace	Civilianized/ Militarized	Oct. 2019	F
33	Boko Haram civilian	Faith	Civilianized/ Militarized	Oct. 2019	F
34	Boko Haram civilian	Kadi	Civilianized/ Militarized	Nov. 2019	F
35	UNODC staff			Nov. 2019	M
36	Boko Haram commander	Musa	Militarized	Nov. 2019	M
37	Boko Haram fighter	Ali		Nov. 2019	M
38	Boko Haram civilian	Hadiza	Militarized	Nov. 2019	F
39	Diplomat (EU delegation)			Dec. 2019	M
40	Boko Haram civilian	Laraba	Militarized	Jan. 2020	F
41	Boko Haram civilian	Aisha	Militarized	Jan.2020	F
42	Boko Haram civilian	Helina	Militarized	Jan. 2020	F
43	Civilian	Ijagila	Conflict-affected	Jan. 2020	F
44	Boko Haram civilian	Hamdiya	Civilianized	Jan.2020	F
45	Boko Haram civilian	Habiba	Civilianized/ Militarized	Jan. 2020	F
46	Boko Haram civilian	Fatima	Civilianized/ Militarized	Jan. 2020	F
47	Boko Haram civilian	Umaru	Militarized	Jan. 2020	M
48	Boko Haram civilian	Christina	Militarized	Jan. 2020	F
49	Boko Haram civilian	Nenna	Militarized	Jan. 2020	F
50	Boko Haram civilian	Anisah	Militarized	Jan. 2020	F
51	Public official (Federal Ministry of Justice)			Jan. 2020	M
52	Judge (Federal High Court of Nigeria)			Jan. 2020	F
53	Public official (Nigerian Correctional Service)			Jan. 2020	M
54	UNICEF staff			Feb. 2020	F
55	INGO staff			Feb. 2020	M
56	Boko Haram civilian	Sa'adatu	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
57	Boko Haram civilian	Amelia	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
58	Boko Haram civilian	Knadija	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F

59	Civilian	Kawu	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	M
60	Boko Haram civilian	Kabiu	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	M
61	Civilian	Sara	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	F
62	Boko Haram civilian	Salamatu	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
63	Boko Haram civilian	Amina	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
64	Boko Haram civilian	Hamsatu	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
65	Boko Haram civilian	Sadiya	Militarized	Feb. 2020	F
66	Boko Haram civilian	Zaynab	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
67	Civilian	Comfort	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	F
68	Boko Haram civilian	Ene	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
69	Civilian	Adina	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	F
70	Boko Haram civilian	Asabe	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
71	Civilian	Marta	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	F
72	Boko Haram civilian	Yusuf	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	M
73	Boko Haram civilian	Istipanus	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	M
74	Civilian	Albert	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	M
75	Civilian	John	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	M
76	Civilian	Happy	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	F
77	Civilian	Veronica	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	F
78	Boko Haram civilian	Regina	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
79	Civilian	Naomi	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	F
80	Boko Haram civilian	Jumja	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
81	Civilian	Hajaratu	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	F
82	Boko Haram civilian	Amala	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
83	Civilian	Mariam	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	F
84	Boko Haram civilian	Charity	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
85	Boko Haram civilian	Usman	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	M
86	Boko Haram civilian	Ishaku	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	M
87	Boko Haram civilian	Faizah	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
88	Boko Haram civilian	Kunle	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	M
89	Boko Haram civilian	Esther	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
90	Boko Haram civilian	Sini	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	M
91	Civilian	Julie	Conflict-affected	Feb. 2020	F
92	Boko Haram civilian	Idayat	Militarized	Feb. 2020	F
93	Boko Haram civilian	Saratu	Civilianized	Feb. 2020	F
94	Boko Haram civilian	Hamatu	Militarized	March 2020	F
95	Boko Haram civilian	Alhassan	Civilianized	March 2020	M
96	Boko Haram civilian	Jasmine	Civilianized/ Militarized	March 2020	F
97	Boko Haram civilian	Talatu	Civilianized	March 2020	F

98	Boko Haram civilian	Ladi	Militarized	March 2020	F
99	Boko Haram fighter	Benjamin	Militarized	March 2020	M
100	Boko Haram civilian	Dauda	Militarized	March 2020	M
101	Boko Haram fighter	Isa	Militarized	March 2020	M
102	Boko Haram civilian	Ynusa	Militarized	March 2020	M
103	Boko Haram civilian	Ibrahim	Militarized	March 2020	M
104	ISWAP civilian	Samastu	Militarized	March 2020	F
105	ISWAP civilian	Aisha	Militarized	March 2020	F
106	ISWAP civilian	Amara	Militarized	March 2020	F
107	Boko Haram civilian	Anna	Militarized	March 2020	F
108	Boko Haram civilian	Leila	Militarized	March 2020	F
109	Boko Haram civilian	Deborah	Militarized	March 2020	F
110	Boko Haram civilian	Kaltumle	Militarized	March 2020	F
111	Boko Haram civilian	Annam	Militarized	March 2020	F
112	Boko Haram civilian	Anisha	Militarized	March 2020	F
113	Boko Haram civilian	Godiya	Militarized	March 2020	F
114	Boko Haram civilian	Halimah	Civilianized/ Militarized	March 2020	F
115	Boko Haram civilian	Ismael	Civilianized/ Militarized	March 2020	M
116	Boko Haram civilian	Buba	Militarized	March 2020	M
117	Boko Haram civilian	Dawo	Civilianized	March 2020	M
118	Boko Haram civilian	Audu	Civilianized	March 2020	M
119	Boko Haram civilian	Ahmadu	Militarized	March 2020	M
120	ISWAP civilian	Abubakar	Militarized	March 2020	M

Note:

Pseudonyms were chosen by the interviewees and are used to protect their identities.

The list does not capture follow-up interviews with key informants.

Numerous informal conversations that informed this research are not included in the list.