Pastoralists and the state … and 'Islamic State' on Eastern Niger's frontier: Between evasion and engagement[1]

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Introduction

In the current situation of militant Islamist groups assuming control of remote areas in different Sahelian countries, rural actors, and particularly mobile pastoralists, are often accused of sympathizing or collaborating with jihadists (e.g. AREN 2018; Benjaminsen and Ba 2019). This corresponds to a widely prevailing image of mobile pastoralists as being difficult to integrate and prone to state evasion strategies. Examining the situation of pastoralists in eastern Niger in the context of the Boko Haram insurgency in the wider Lake Chad basin, this article links two important debates in the fields of pastoralism studies, and African studies, respectively: the first is about pastoralist-state relations between integration and withdrawal; the second is on frontiers and borderlands as spaces not only of difficult governance, but also of economic and political opportunities. The first part of the article argues against the idea that state evasion is a general principle among Sahelian pastoralists. Rather, the question of state avoidance or integration significantly depends on the state's role as either facilitating or complicating access to crucial resources.

Today, Boko Haram's ISIS-affiliated offshoot ISWAP has established a base in the interior of Lake Chad, which, on the one hand, can in itself be regarded as an act of state evasion. On the other hand, the group pursues its own (counter-)state project. When the Nigerien state, as part of its counter-insurgency strategy, forced local populations to leave the interior of Lake Chad, the rich resources of the area and the lack of economic alternatives constituted important incentives for pastoralists and other rural producers to circumvent the state and find

arrangements with the new, self-imposed authorities in order to assure resource access. As ISWAP, although an armed non-state actor, acts similar as a state in certain regards, the issue is not only one of state avoidance or engagement, but one of competing models of 'state' towards which pastoralists – and other local producers in the area – have to position themselves.

Based on an analysis of this context, the second part of the article thus puts the argument of the first part into a more general perspective: Pastoralists' decision-making with regard to evasion of or engagement with different actors assuming positions of force, whether state or non-state actors in the legal sense, depends on pragmatic judgements, crucially based on the question of how these actors interfere – either positively or negatively – with the pastoralists' fundamental needs and interests regarding access to pasture resources. In the Lake Chad area today, however, this pragmatism can easily lead to dangerous liaisons and its merits are limited by the fact that both state and non-state actors in the region often behave in similarly predatory fashion and impose their rules violently.

Methodology

This article is based on long-term regional experience in Niger's eastern provinces of Zinder and Diffa since 2004, including anthropological research over several periods since 2010. Extensive fieldwork of 15 months was carried out between 2010 and 2012 in a group of pastoral Fulɓe with a focus on questions of integration into state and society (Köhler 2020). Faced with the dramatic transformations in the region due to the spill-over effects of the Boko Haram crisis from neighbouring Nigeria, a new research focus has been placed on these recent developments and on how local actors adapt to them, leading to a new project involving one month of fieldwork in Diffa and Niamey in 2018. Although an existing network of trusted relationships in Diffa was helpful in establishing contacts with interlocutors, the conditions for field research were overall challenging, due to the current situation of insecurity. Thus, any longer-term sojourn was inadvisable, and interlocutors had to be met in town rather than engaging them in discussions during participant observation in the field. Twenty-two qualitative interviews were conducted with members of local communities, representatives of the administration and civil society, and religious authorities, in addition to many informal conversations. To assure the validity of claims, information was cross-checked with other interviewees and with published sources. Interaction between locals and insurgents being a sensitive issue, detailed information on particular practices of specific groups was difficult to obtain, and moreover, publication of such data would have been ethically problematic. One limitation of this article is therefore that

some statements had to remain rather general, in order to avoid harmful consequences for the actors and groups concerned.

Regional Background

Eastern Niger is characterized by an arid Sahel climate with sparse, highly unpredictable and unevenly distributed rainfall. Rain-fed agriculture is possible only in a narrow strip in the south, while the region's north is covered by desert. The vast savannah zone in-between can be put to economic use only by mobile pastoralism, which is practiced by different socio-economic and ethnic groups in the region, specifically Fulɓe, Tubu, Arab and Tuareg. An additional group of pastoralists, who live in the interior of Lake Chad, where they also engage in fishing, are the Yedina (locally also called Buduma).

Although regularly depreciated as being outdated and economically unviable, mobile pastoralism has in numerous scientific studies been shown to be well adapted to the region's ecological conditions (Bonfiglioli 1981; Sandford 1983; Colin de Verdière 1998), and significantly contributing to the country's GNP (Bayard et al. 2001; Mansour and Tan 2008). Pastoralists in the region depend on access to the more fertile areas in the south to level out seasonal shortages. In the Diffa province, the shores and islands of Lake Chad and the area along the Komadugu river – Niger's natural border with Nigeria – constitute essential resources not only for irrigated agriculture and fishing, but also as seasonal grazing areas for mobile pastoralists. Over the past years, however, cross-border transhumance into Nigeria and Lake Chad has become complicated and highly risky, due to the insurgency of the Islamist movement Boko Haram and the regional states' ongoing counter insurgency operations.

Jama'at Ahl as Sunnah Lid Da'wah wal Jihad (JAS), popularly known as Boko Haram, originated as a Salafist sect in Maiduguri in the early 2000s (Last 2009; Loimeier 2012; Higazi 2013; Pérouse de Montclos 2014). An escalation of violence in an uprising and massive state security response in 2009 led to the death of leader Mohammed Yusuf in police custody and to the dispersal of the group. However, members reorganized under the leadership of Yusuf's hard-line successor Abubakar Shekau and challenged the state with increasingly sophisticated and lethal attacks that soon affected not only northern Nigeria, but also the neighbouring countries in the Lake Chad basin – Niger, Cameroon and Chad. Pushed out of Maiduguri, the group established safe havens in rural areas of difficult access, particularly in Nigeria's Sambisa forest, the Mandara mountains on the Cameroon border, and subsequently on the islands and shores of Lake Chad (Jezequel and Foucher 2017; Seignobos 2014, 2015, 2017; MacEachern

2018). Local populations, although mostly Muslim, became a principal target of violence due to Shekau's doctrine of declaring all those who refused to support his movement apostates, and thus legitimate prey (Al-Tamimi 2018; Foucher 2020). In 2015, the group's leader pledged allegiance to ISIS' self-proclaimed caliph Abubakar al-Baghdadi, and Boko Haram became the 'Islamic State's' West Africa province (ISWAP). Internal differences about the use of violence against Muslim civilians led to a split and to a leadership change in ISWAP in 2016. While Shekau returned to using his JAS label and continued his fierce strategy, ISWAP, in its sanctuary in the interior of Lake Chad developed a subtler approach that focused on military targets and enabled new forms of interaction and exchange with local populations (Foucher 2020).

Escaping the state in its margins: Mobile pastoralists and rebels

Mobile populations are often regarded with suspicion by sedentary state institutions, and accused of deliberately using mobility as a means of evading control by the state (Galaty and Salzman 1981; Salzman 1981; Azarya 1996; MacKay et al. 2014; Engebrigtsen 2017). Thus, in Niger the administration tends to complain that mobile pastoralists are difficult to integrate and aim to escape the control of authorities. Anthropological studies, although generally rather arguing in favour of rural mobility, have also added to its image of being a strategy of state evasion, whether in the case of nomadic pastoralists (e.g. Irons 1974; Salzmann 2004), hunters and gatherers (Clastres 1974) or swidden cultivators (Scott 2009). In a wider perception, such representations have found resonance for example in Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) concept of 'nomadology', in which the nomad exemplifies resistance against state domination by flexibility and mobility.

In the literature on pastoralism, the phenomenon of state evasion has variously been referred to as an 'exit' option (Azarya 1988; Bierschenk 1997; Dafinger and Pelican 2002). The concept is borrowed from Hirschman (1970), who distinguishes two principal ways of reacting towards dissatisfaction with superordinate structures: while raising one's 'voice' would describe a political reaction by active engagement, 'exit' corresponds to circumvention, evasion or avoidance. As Hirschman defined exit not necessarily as physical retreat, but rather as withdrawal from participation, the concept applies well to the case of pastoralists' withdrawal, not necessarily through flight from the territory of a given polity, but through retreat into less systematically controlled, peripheral areas, the *hinterland*, to escape the reach of authorities (see Bonfiglioli 1988; Schareika 2004).

The underlying principle of space appropriation has been described with the concept of interstitiality (Stenning 1966: 389; Diallo 2008). Diallo's definition of 'interstitial spaces' (2008: 7) makes explicit mention of frontier regions and thus recalls Kopytoff's (1987) concept of the internal African frontier, or 'interstitial frontier', the no-man's land between established polities characterized by a sparse population and a weak presence of the political institutions. Similar to Kopytoff's model, Reyna (1990) conceptualized the precolonial states in the region as consisting of different zones of influence, with only the core zone under direct control of the state elite, its influence fading towards the more peripheral zones where the state can impose itself only temporarily with military power.

Exit into such interstitial frontier areas at the periphery of the state's zone of influence has been documented for example for the pastoral Fulɓe at least since the later period of the Sokoto Caliphate (Bonfiglioli 1988), when the initial euphoria about the new Fulɓe rulers increasingly made way to disenchantment: confronted with ideologies discouraging their central cultural practices and values, or with state policies plaguing them with taxation and urging them to settle down, Fulɓe pastoralists reacted with strategic retreat (Bonfiglioli 1982; Paris 1990).

What indeed makes the pastoralist livelihood particularly suited for state-circumventing strategies is the ability to make economic use of remote ecological niches. This allowed pastoralists in different regions and historical contexts to keep at a distance from the state's sphere of influence. Thus, it has been pointed out for example with regard to different groups of Fulɓe that they identify the open pastoral rangeland as an asset granting them relative political autonomy (Schareika 2007: 117; Ciavolella 2010: 75f.).

However, a one-sided characterization of pastoralists as evading the state would certainly be incomplete and biased. If pastoralists are often found in peripheral areas, this is not in itself an indicator for a conscious exit strategy. On the one hand, what is 'the margins' from the state's perspective, can, from the pastoralists' perspective, be the center (Catley et al. 2013). This can make pastoral movements look evasive when in fact they are primarily motivated by questions of access to grazing resources (Turner and Schlecht 2019). On the other hand, retreat into interstitial areas is today often the result of pasture lands being poorly protected and pastoralists as a consequence increasingly being pushed into marginal spaces.

In historical perspective as well, state evasion was by no means a systematic tendency. Thus, among the Fulɓe, even in colonial times interactions with authorities shifted between keeping a low profile and at times more self-confident and pragmatic, even opportunistic,

engagement with the colonizer as a new player on the political scene towards whom one had to position oneself (Paris 1990: 198; Schareika 2004: 181). More recently, at least since the major Sahel droughts of the 1970s and the 1980s, one-sidedly evasive strategies would have led to a clearly undesirable state of exclusion from political and economic participation. Henceforth, the state, together with international aid and development organizations, has more or less regularly been acting as a distributor of resources, and participation in this distribution process constituted an obvious incentive for stronger integration into administrative structures (Köhler 2020).

Assumptions about the state-avoiding attitudes of pastoralists thus cannot be generalized. Azarya (1996) suggested that the question of integration or withdrawal should be seen in the light of a cost-benefit ratio, the crucial question being what the state has to offer. Depending on the conditions of resource access, more inclusive or more exclusive forms of interaction with the state and the wider society are favoured. Withdrawal, or exit, tendentially occurs where the state makes access more difficult or costlier and where evasion is possible; integration can become attractive when resources are scarce and the state acts as a distributor of resources – as in the context of contemporary aid and development programs. Hence, access to resources is a basic need and the state's role in regulating access to these resources is a crucial variable. As I will show, the processes currently observable in eastern Niger follow the same rationale.

While Kopytoff's historical approach was primarily concerned with pre-colonial African polities, frontier zones with similar characteristics can be found in the colonial and post-colonial context, too. Sahelian states such as Mali or Niger offer good examples: although political no-man's land no longer exists, owing to the vastness of the territory state control in remote areas is often limited. National borders can further add to the dynamics of the frontier: inadequately controlled in many African contexts, borderlands can constitute an asset for a variety of informal economic activities. Consequently, Hoehne and Feyissa (2013) have proposed to view borders and the related borderland dynamics less in terms of constraints than in terms of the potential opportunities they offer.

Yet, it is not only rural producers such as pastoralists who use the opportunities of frontiers and borderlands. As Kopytoff's volume showed, frontier regions are also apt to serve as refuge for those in rebellion against the metropolitan society (Patton 1987) – an issue that is of great acuity today. Unsurprisingly therefore, state-society interactions in the margins of modern states – in Africa and elsewhere – have recently drawn the attention of numerous

researchers, and Kopytoff's ideas are of undiminished significance. Thus, Korf et al. (2013) argue for the usefulness of Kopytoff's concept in the context of postcolonial Africa. They stress the significance of the frontier as offering a space for the ideological projects of actors who claim political space at the margins of states (ibid.: 32). The frontier is seen as a space where the state is not necessarily absent, but where it 'does not live up to the proclaimed ideal of the state as the guarantor of welfare and political stability' (ibid.: 33). As the state can at the same time be 'absent and forcefully present in its frontier' (ibid.), groups in armed opposition against the state potentially not only find refuge here, but also supporters for their cause. Kopytoff characterized the interstitial frontier not simply as a peripheral zone out of the reach of established polities, but significantly as having a potential for groups that pursue alternative political projects. Similarly, Korf and Raeymaekers (2013), building on concepts like 'margins of the state' (Das and Poole 2004), and '(un-)governable spaces' (Rose 1999; Watts 2003, 2004), conceptualize the state margins as 'spaces in which state practices and images are copresent with other systems of rule', and where in consequence 'unsettling and often violent renegotiation of rights and social conditions' take place (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013: 5). The marginal spaces at the state's periphery can thus be regarded as

> sites where lawmaking and other activities of the central state's representatives are not just evaded, but actively transformed and 'colonized' by other more or less organized practices, thus generating important political and economic outcomes that may have a decisive impact on state formation in a broader sense (Zeller 2013).

This is currently also the case in different areas of the West African Sahel, which had been widely neglected by the centres of the respective states and where jihadist groups have started to establish a form of alternative governance. Thus, in the interior of Lake Chad, the insurgents of ISWAP currently find supporters for their counter-state project and have effectively established a rural proto state (Barrett and Pierson 2018; ICG 2019; Samuel 2019).

The retreat into peripheral frontier areas is thus potentially not merely associated with passive state evasion or exit strategies, but also with active counter-state ambitions. What is rather evident in the case of insurgents is certainly less so in the case of pastoralists, yet the ambivalence is apt to explain much of the prevailing suspicions against the latter.

Navigating between state and non-state predators on the Lake Chad Frontier

Niger's Diffa province has been affected by the Boko Haram crisis, first with a dramatic influx of refugees (Oumarou et al. 2017) and since early 2015 also in the form of direct attacks. Boko Haram infiltrated the interior of Lake Chad in a way that made it difficult for the Nigerien military to ascertain who was on which side. Local populations were widely suspected to be cooperating with the insurgents. In this situation, the government took the decision to evacuate the area and residents were given an ultimatum in early May 2015 to abandon the area – without either organizing the evacuation, nor providing economic alternatives other than moving into IDP camps where people would receive humanitarian aid. Whoever failed to comply with this order was threatened to be considered a collaborator of Boko Haram if caught in the restricted areas after the deadline (Alternative Espaces Citoyens 2015). The border zone along the Komadugu river was also ordered to evacuate and villages located along the river were resettled some kilometres further north. Counter insurgency measures thus included the restriction of access to the region's most fertile areas and significant parts of the population, bereft of their productive lands, felt extreme economic hardship. As a result, incentives were high, despite the security threats posed by both Boko Haram and the state military, to seek alternative ways of accessing the spatial resources restricted by the government (Bukarti 2018).

This situation of forced displacement was particularly difficult to bear for many Yedina, autochthonous pastoralists of the interior of Lake Chad. The Yedina are known for their Kuri cattle – a special breed particularly well adapted to the climate and pasture conditions of the lake. As these cattle cope badly with the dryland pastures of the mainland, especially at the time of the forced departure during the hot dry season, many Yedina displaced from their villages in the interior of Lake Chad had no choice but to return with their cattle – or to search for their cattle, which, according to some reports, had in numerous cases returned to their habitual lacustrine pastures on their own.[2]

As a result, the Yedina are often summarily accused of collaboration with the insurgency in Lake Chad – an undifferentiated view that was unfortunately taken up in many reports and thus given wide acceptance (AREN 2016). Apparently, the assumption of an alliance of Boko Haram and Yedina seemed self-evident to anyone familiar with the realities of Lake Chad: the fact that the area is extremely difficult to navigate for outsiders without local knowledge

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[2] Interview with a Yedina representative, Diffa, May 2018.

undeniably points to some form of collaboration between some locals and the insurgents. Some observers also depict 'the Yedina' as having an interest in collaborating with Boko Haram to oust economic rivals from the Lake, notably Hausa merchants who dominated the fish trade and Fulɓe pastoralists who had spread into the lake's northern basin over the past decades (Seignobos 2017, 2019). Such generalizing denunciations of an entire ethnic group are highly problematic. Not only do they ignore that many Yedina were themselves victims of the violence; a dangerously escalating conflict in the Diffa province in mid-2016 also shows how mutual accusations and biased depictions can fuel inter-community tensions. After a Boko Haram attack on a village near Lake Chad, allegedly with the participation of some Yedina, ethnicized armed militias were mobilized, which resulted in retaliative violence in the name of self-defence, based on the premise that the quasi totality of local Yedina were members or collaborators of the insurgents (Foucher 2016; Seignobos 2017, 2019; AREN 2016).

With regard to transhumant pastoralists from the Nigerien mainland, in particular different groups of Fulɓe, the question of abandoning the Komadugu and Lake Chad pastures for other, less conflict-affected, areas might at first sight seem less dramatic than for the highly specialized Yedina. However, the insecurity in northern Nigeria caused severe resource pressure and dramatic overgrazing of the already scarce pastures in the Diffa region. Moreover, many pastoralists consider the nutritional value of the abundant Lake Chad pastures so beneficial for their animals that they have a decided interest not to miss out on these crucial resources (Krätli and Schareika 2010). In this situation, many took the risks involved in returning to the restricted areas, and arrangements with the insurgents in order to get access to pastures have become a common practice as not only my own interlocutors, but also many reports clearly confirm (Carsten and Kingimi 2018; Hassan 2018; ICG 2019; Samuel 2019; Obaji 2019).

It is thus fair to say that the government's anti-insurgency strategy pushed many rural producers into state circumventing strategies (Samuel 2019). Options for the latter increased after ISWAP's split in 2016 and the subsequent strategy change under a new leadership. Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, the new leader appointed by ISIS in 2016, and the influential commander Mamman Nur, whom most locals regarded as the real driving force behind ISWAP's strategic revisions, clearly distanced themselves from Shekau's policy of indiscriminate killing and looting of rural populations. The strategy change resulted in restricted violence against civilians and thus paved the way for new forms of interaction between the insurgents and local populations that were, although still coercive, less based on blunt violence. Over time, more

and more producers thus returned to the abandoned areas of economic production in the Lake Chad area (Carsten and Kingimi 2018; ICG 2019, Foucher 2020).

Lake Chad is a frontier area *par excellence*: From the perspective of Niger and Nigeria alike, it is at a significant distance from the centre, at the state's periphery, and the presence of the state and its capacity to enforce its hegemony are weak. The inaccessibility of this veritable labyrinth of myriads of small islands and endless swamp lands, a topography in constant flux due to changing water levels, and a dense vegetation make the area almost impossible to control and thus an ideal sanctuary for groups that are at odds with the state. Over the course of history, the interior of the Lake has thus variously offered refuge to social groups at times of war and persecution. It allowed the autochthonous Yedina to resist subjugation by the Borno Sultanate (Heiss 2006: 113), and in post-colonial times it served as safe haven for political opponents and rebels (Seignobos 2015).

With regard to the current situation, it can be argued that both pastoralists and insurgents in Lake Chad pursue exit options: the latter because their open rebellion against the state forced them into an underground existence in difficult to control rural areas (Jezequel and Foucher 2017); the former because, dissatisfied with the state who refuses them access to crucial resources, they are looking for alternative ways of access. Moreover, in the case of ISWAP in Lake Chad, Kopytoff's concept of the frontier not only as a space for state evasion, but also as an arena for political projects from below, perfectly applies. Not only are the insurgents fleeing the state, they also want to impose their own model of politico-religious rule. They compete with the state in the sense that they pursue themselves a state project. Hence, while evading the state, they emulate certain state practices. They do so for example by imposing a religiously framed tax, as one Fulɓe leader reported:

> The people of Mamman Nur collect taxes from the pastoralists and they call this *zakat*.[3] They approach the pastoralists and count their cattle. In a herd of about 100 heads, they will take two or three animals. In addition to this, a tax is payable per head of animal. For each head of cattle, you pay 1.500 Francs CFA[4] or 1.000 Naira.[5]

ISWAP also appropriates the signs and symbols of the state: locals who accept the taxation system are given receipts with a stamp and are encouraged to raise the organization's flag in

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[3] While producers may accept such payments, many deny the legitimacy of framing it in religious terms. While they point out that *zakat* is voluntary and should not be forced, they leave no doubt that refusing to pay '*zakat*' to ISWAP would have severe consequences.

[4] Francs CFA is the currency of the French West African Monetary Union; Naira is the currency of Nigeria which is widely used in the markets of the Diffa region in Niger as well. 1.500 FCFA amount to ca. 2,50€.

[5] Interview with a Fulɓe leader, Diffa, May 2018.

their camps as a sign of allegiance.[6] Not only pastoralists are taxed in the ISWAP controlled areas: especially the control over the production chains of fish and dried pepper in and around Lake Chad constitutes a significant source of income for the group (GICS 2019). Here, the borderland economy comes into play: characterized by the complex convergence of the national borders of four states – Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon – Lake Chad is both frontier region and border area. The insurgency has successfully connected to the informal border economy and integrated into the social landscape of groups and actors who use the borderland dynamics for their economic interests, such as smugglers, traffickers and bandits (MacEachern 2018). It is this economic potential of the border that facilitates ISWAP's state project by providing it with a material basis (GICS 2019).

In order to assess the question of avoidance or cooperation, one has to compare not only what the insurgents demand, but also what they offer. There are reports indicating that ISWAP provides a number of services that the state fails to provide in the Lake Chad area, such as medical care, sanitation, and security (Jezequel and Foucher 2017; Carsten and Kingimi 2018; Samuel 2019; Obaji 2019). While the state inhibits producers' access to crucial resources and has even closed down important rural markets in order to dry out sources of financial income for ISWAP (Bukarti 2018), the insurgents explicitly encourage people to come into the areas under their control, do business, cultivate or graze their animals. In this way, they have progressively positioned themselves as a viable alternative for local producers facing the problem of resource access (ibid.; Samuel 2019). ISWAP's more recent propaganda material demonstrates this quite impressively: the 2018 video production *Tribulations and Blessings* features images from Lake Chad showing abundant pastures, the harvest of maize and vegetables, and fishermen with heaps of fish. In interview sequences, farmers and herders praise the favourable conditions in the area, while refuting reports of ISWAP violence against local producers as lies of state propaganda.

My interlocutors also confirmed a conscious and active policy from the part of ISWAP of building trust and complicity with local populations. One interviewee stated that audio messages were distributed in local markets, inviting farmers, herders and fishermen to return to their abandoned sites of economic production in Lake Chad. In addition, just as the state pursues counter-radicalization strategies by using Sufi Imams to spread their vision of a moderate, state-affirming Islam, ISWAP also works with preachers to promote an image of the state being incapable of caring for its citizens, and to persuade IDPs to return to the territories controlled

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[6] Interview with a member of a pastoralists' association, Diffa, May 2018.

by ISWAP and accept their 'protection' (Carsten and Kingimi 2018; Hassan 2018). This campaign seems to bear fruit: increasing numbers of locals are willing to pay the imposed taxes (Samuel 2019), thus bringing the group economic returns and contributing to the success of ISWAP's state project (Carsten and Kingimi 2018).

Some recent reports paint a rather positive picture of the interaction between ISWAP and local producers, stating for example that locals feel protected from Boko Haram by the ISWAP militia rather than by state security (Bukarti 2018; Samuel 2019; Obaji 2019; Horton 2020). This largely corresponds to my own interview data, where respondents explicitly stated that they were more worried about meeting military patrols in critical areas than ISWAP troops.[7] Such statements must be seen in light of the fact that rural populations in the region are often exposed to arbitrary treatment by security forces, which makes them prone to sympathize with non-state movements if they promise fairer treatment. While ISWAP's taxation could arguably be regarded as Mafia-like coercing of protection money, it has to be born in mind that the locals' experiences with state officials are hardly better. In their response to Boko Haram, the Nigerian military, and to a lesser degree those of neighbouring countries, were accused of massive human rights violations, ranging from arbitrary detention to extrajudicial execution of suspects and sexual violence (Amnesty International 2018). With regard to ISWAP, recent reports indicate that arbitrary or unjustified violence by members of the group against civilians have led to internal punishment of the perpetrators (Hassan 2018). If this is indeed the case, it is bound to have a particularly strong appeal to locals. Impunity for crimes and abuse committed by state security forces was amongst the most problematic grievances against the regional states' crisis management (Pérouse de Montclos 2018; Amnesty International 2018). Against this background, interaction with the insurgents can look more attractive to some producers than loyalty to the state (Jezequel and Foucher 2017; Carsten and Kingimi 2018; Samuel 2019; Obaji 2019).

Virtually all interlocutors stated that they remained unmolested by ISWAP as long as they complied with their rules and did not collaborate with the military. Such statements are interesting insofar as they confirm that ISWAP's claims concerning their restriction of violence against Muslim civilians actually translate into some form of not primarily and overtly violent interaction on the ground. Nevertheless, the role of ISWAP providing services and access to resources to attract local producers should not be romanticized: on the one hand, interlocutors left no doubt that producers not complying with the rules imposed by the insurgents risked to

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[7] Interview with a local entrepreneur, Diffa, May 2018.

be killed. On the other hand, the actual 'protection' that ISWAP offers in return for payments can be rather limited, due to the complex map of violent actors. Respondents stated that pastoralists paying 'taxes' to ISWAP in their areas nevertheless risked to be attacked and robbed by members of JAS or simply by bandits working on their own account.[8] One interlocutor clarified that for many pastoralists, moving into ISWAP-controlled areas in Lake Chad was crucially a cost-benefit calculation:

> You have the choice: either you stay in the interior of Niger and lose a good part of your herd for lack of suitable pastures, or you accept to pay them [i.e. ISWAP] and in return get access to abundant pastures.[9]

This interlocutor stressed that it was merely out of necessity that he and others from his community took the risk, which was, after all, not insubstantial: In the lake, outsiders were easily taken for government spies, and upon their return, military patrols would inevitably suspect them of being collaborators of the insurgents. Also, as their movements into Lake Chad were formally prohibited, there could not count on legal assistance in case they became the victims of any crime, even if unrelated to the insurgency. Similarly threatening is the risk of air-strikes or ground operations by the regional military coalition. Without so far being able to fully contain the insurgency, the repeated military offensives not only pose an additional threat to producers' lives, but they can also make negotiated arrangements with ISWAP obsolete if the rebels are pushed back from an area they used to control.

The establishment of ISWAP had the effect that Lake Chad is no longer an area poorly controlled by the state authorities in place. It is under the control of new, self-appointed authorities, some of which assume the role of a state. Meanwhile, the increased presence of state military forces does not add to protection, but rather complicates resource access further. Instead of a power vacuum, the frontier is characterized by competing regimes of coercion, and it thus no longer constitutes an asset as it may have in the past.

While in a sense, pastoralists' and other producers' moves into the restricted frontier zones can be interpreted as withdrawal from the state, due to the necessity of making arrangements with ISWAP they can from another lens be regarded as engagement with a new actor on the scene – not unlike some pastoral Fulɓe's ambivalent interaction with the French in colonial times. In this sense, the current arrangements with jihadist groups show a continuation with old patterns of flexibly adapting to different authorities and forging pragmatically

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[8] Interview with a member of a pastoralists' association, Diffa, May 2018.
[9] Interview with a Fulɓe leader, Diffa, May 2018.

changing alliances according to their pastoral needs and opportunities. Similar to the colonial and post-colonial contexts, in the current case of interaction with ISWAP the degree of cooperation also depends on individual variance, yet the general question of interaction or withdrawal is crucially determined by concerns for the well-being (or, in these times often more dramatically, the survival) of the herds, i.e. by the question of resource access. The fact that growing numbers of pastoralists in the Lake Chad area are willing to accept agreements with ISWAP should therefore not one-sidedly be interpreted as taking sides in the ongoing conflict. While the increased interaction undeniably also facilitates more opportunistic relations between the insurgents and some rural producers, including direct involvement in violent action, in most cases it is less an expression of sympathy with ISWAP's ideological project than the choice for the lesser of two evils. If the motivation for interaction is mainly need-based and little ideological, however, as recent research on the engagement of pastoralists with jihadist groups in other regions of the Sahel also suggests (Benjaminsen and Ba 2019), this does not necessarily reflect conflicting loyalties. The pragmatism of decision-making rather leads to simultaneous arrangements with more than one authority at once, and to switching patterns of interaction. For actors, this nevertheless involves high risks of repressive consequences, because both the state and non-state interlocutors will potentially interpret such switching as a breach of loyalty. However, recent reports suggest that in this regard as well, ISWAP tends to show more flexibility towards rural actors, leaving them more room for manoeuvre than the state: locals are allowed to move into ISWAP's territories and back into their activities in state-controlled areas (Jezequel and Foucher 2017; Carsten and Kingimi 2018; Samuel 2019).

Conclusion

Pastoralists have been characterized by the flexibility to adapt to changing conditions of access to resources by either circumventing or making concessions to and pragmatic arrangements with changing authorities. The current situation in eastern Niger – and other parts of the Sahel – is particularly interesting in this regard because a new category of non-state actors comes into play who in certain regards behave similarly as a state and towards whom pastoralists, and other local producers, have to position themselves. Faced with an extremely difficult situation of resource pressure and scarcity in Niger's drylands, and exposure to violence by both state and non-state actors in the region's more fertile, yet officially restricted, frontier areas, pastoralists in eastern Niger have to find ways of coping. The answers that they come up with range from risk-avoidance and reliance on external aid, to continued movements into dangerous areas,

despite the risks involved. ISWAP's recent, more population-friendly strategies have made the latter option more attractive and make more people accept dubious agreements with dangerous actors. In the current situation of extreme insecurity, pastoralists are caught between state and non-state predators, and the strategy of flexible adaptation, for long a fruitful one in face of the scarce and unpredictable conditions, reaches its limits.

The historical view indicates that generalized suspicion against mobile pastoralists is not only morally and strategically problematic, but also unfounded. As long as state performance is attractive for pastoralists and efforts are made to integrate them in a constructive way – by providing them with crucial infrastructure and facilitating them access to pastoral resources – there is no reason for the regional states to regard pastoralist mobility as a threat. The states bordering Lake Chad would be well advised to assure protected access to resources and improve citizen services in remote areas. If they fail to do so, non-state actors will continue to challenge them by doing this in their place and potentially win the battle over hearts and minds of local populations. ISWAP currently shows itself capable of making use of the economic and political potential of Lake Chad, at once frontier and borderland region, to its best advantage. Although it is open which direction ISWAP will take after the execution of Mamman Nur in late 2018, the deposing of Abu Musab Al-Barnawi in 2019, and subsequent internal leadership turmoil, there are so far no obvious signs that ISWAP's overall strategy of avoiding the excesses of Shekau against local communities will be abandoned (ICG 2020; Horton 2020).

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