

## **BOKO HARAM AND THE RISK OF TERRORISM IN NORTHERN CAMEROON**

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The kidnapping of the Moulin-Fournier family by men claiming to be Boko Haram members has highlighted the growing threat by the Islamist sect for security in West Africa. The abduction of French citizens at the edge of the Sahel can be interpreted as a collateral consequence of the war raging in northern Mali. As we pointed out in our previous briefing, this case is also due to internal rivalries in the Nigerian group. Finally, it demonstrates that the risk of terrorism since 2009 that weighs on Northern Nigeria is in no way limited to the boundaries of the country, and that the alignment of Boko Haram to the strategies of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) represents a real threat to the entire Sahel.

It therefore necessary to study the situation in northern Cameroon, an area that is still considered non-responsive despite the proliferation of warning signs in recent years.

### **Religious tensions in Northern-Cameroon**

This penetration of a radical ideology born in Nigeria has occurred within the restructuring of the religious landscape of Cameroon at work for the past twenty years. Since early 2000, a process of religious radicalization has been at work in northern Cameroon, both because of fundamentalist Christians and Muslims brought into contact with the Salafist ideology following the return of Imams trained in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. This led to a conflict between this radical Sunni vision and Islam and the Sufi Tidjanism traditionally practiced by Muslims in Cameroon. Numerous Salafi mosques have been built throughout the country, including in Yaounde and Douala, with funding from the Gulf, in order to combat the influence of an Islam brotherhood equated with heresy. To this phenomenon, we must add an increasing ethnic fragmentation of Cameroon's Islam, which is divided between, among others, the Fulani, Haoussas, Bamounes and Malians ethnic groups.

So far, Cameroon had been spared by a Nigerian-type religious cleavage, mainly because of the alliance between the Muslim-Fulani elite in the North and the Christian-Betis in the South. This geographical balance - promoted by the survival of Christian communities / animist in the North after the Fulani jihad after the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - has nevertheless been clearly weakened since

the accession to power of Paul Biya in November 1982. The Catholic Church has used this time to propagate a rigorous ideology in urban areas in northern Fulani. Moreover, Christianity has benefited from the dynamism of evangelical missionaries from Nigeria, excited by the idea of a merciless Islam/Christian conflict throughout the African continent.

The tense atmosphere resulting from this upheaval of the traditional religious landscape came to light with the case of anti-Christian leaflets distributed in the north in 2004. Distributed by individuals claiming association with the "Islamic Youth of Cameroon" (JIC), these libels called for "multiply marriages with Christian girls to convert to Islam" or the "prostitute (. . .) to cause unwanted pregnancies". The authorities immediately pointed responsibility to the Muslim extremists of Chad and Nigeria. We cannot however rule out the possibility of manipulation organized by fanatical Christians to inflame religious tensions.

### **Boko Haram's target**

In this context, it was expected that the radicalization of Boko Haram and the flight into exile of its main leaders after the crackdown by the Nigerian army in 2009 had an impact on the neighboring Cameroon. Since 2011, the Cameroonian press has worried openly about the recruitment efforts made by Boko Haram, especially in the border towns of the North, where many people have received scholarships from the Koran. On several occasions, Nigeria has also accused Cameroon of showing passivity faced with Boko Haram installing sleeper cells on its territory.

In November 2011, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan ordered the closure of the border between the two countries. Prompted to act by the negative economic impact of this decision, the Cameroonian authorities closed dozens of Koranic schools in the Far North region, especially in the city of Maroua, the capital of the region and the department of Diamaré. The police and army also increased controls and security operations in the region bordering Nigerian, particularly in the city of Amchidé in the Mayo-Sava. Dozens of suspected members of Boko Haram were handed over to Nigerian authorities following these raids, as a token of goodwill from Cameroon to confront the Islamist threat.

If it helped ease relations with Nigeria, which authorized the reopening of the border in 2012, this security policy has also focused attention on Boko Haram in Cameroon. According to the Yaoundé newspaper «The eye of the Sahel», Nigerian security services (State Security Service) warned their Cameroonian counterparts of the presence of members of the sect in Douala. In addition, they focused on the existence of a growing number of Cameroonian citizens to its ranks. Note also that the video claiming the kidnapping of the Moulin-Fournier family, distributed on the internet on February 25, contains a warning message directly to the President of Cameroon. The kidnapers indeed threatened Paul Biya and demanded the release of their "brothers incarcerated in its prisons".

We see that the terrorist operation on February 19 did not only demonstrate the increased threat to French citizens residing in West Africa following the outbreak of operation Serval. It also highlighted the instability caused by internal religious tensions and the spread of the ideology of Boko Haram in Cameroon. In the absence of credible security policy, especially along the border between the Sahelian Nigerian

states of Borno and Adamawa in the far north of Cameroon, the country may therefore become a priority target of the Boko Haram sect, of which it was only a back-up-base to now.

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