

## **CAMEROON: THE KIDNAPPING OF A FRENCH FAMILY SHOWS AMPLIFICATION OF THE TERRORIST THREAT IN WEST AFRICA**

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On Tuesday, February 19, the kidnapping of a French family in Dadanga, in northern Cameroon, raises the specter of a destabilization of the entire West Africa as a result of the war against Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in northern Mali. Moulin-Fournier family, whose father, Tanguy, is employed by GDF Suez in Yaounde, consists of three adults and four children. They were travelling in an area considered non-hazardous when they were attacked by a group of unidentified armed men. According to sources in Cameroon, the kidnappers have transferred the seven hostages to the Nigerian state of Borno. They were held separately in Dikwa region, near the border with Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Note, however, Abuja has refused so far to confirm the presence of the hostages in its territory, and that the Nigerian Army has denied having localized.

On Monday January 25, a video made by the hostages-takers showed the Moulin-Fournier family and claimed responsibility for the kidnaping on behalf of the *Jamā'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lādda'awatih wal-Jihad* ("People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"), best known as Boko Haram ("Western education is forbidden. Without excluding an act perpetrated by local *"coupeurs de routes"* ("road bandits") the French and Cameroonian authorities had very quickly pointed the blame at the Nigerian radical Islamist sect, which in recent years has forged close links with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The disturbed regional context and the confusion which reigned during the first hours of kidnapping - with rumours of a release conveyed by Cameroonian officers and a premature statement by the French Minister for Veterans Affairs, Kader Arif had also accredited the assumption of an act committed by Islamist terrorists.

### **Involvement of Boko Haram**

The involvement of Boko Haram shows the extension of the scope of action and expanding of targets of the sect. Founded in 2002 by the radical Islamist preacher Mohammed Yusuf, the group was inspired by the ideology of the Afghan Taliban to expel all traces of the presence of non-Islamic states of North-East Nigeria. Until now, most of his targets were therefore Christian communities and institutions of the state, especially after the death of its spiritual leader in 2009. In recent years, the sect

has gradually approached jihadist fighters of AQIM and has claimed responsibility for attacks more deadly, including the federal capital Abuja.

On Saturday, February 23, a spokesman for the sect, Sheikh Abu Mohammad Ibn Abdulazeez, denied any involvement in the abduction of the French hostages. Many observers then raised the possibility of involvement of a dissident branch: Ansaru (*Jama'atu Ansarul Musilimina Fi Biladis Sudan* – “The vanguard for protection of Muslim black Africa”). The group, whose members have been trained in northern Mali in katibas (battalions) by AQIM, has indeed claimed the kidnapping of seven other foreigners, four Lebanese, a Greek, an Italian and a Briton, on 18 February in Jama'are in the Nigerian state of Bauchi. Ansaru however, has issued no statement claiming responsibility for the kidnappings in Dadanga. Therefore, one can assume that other radical elements of Boko Haram have perpetrated the kidnapping in order to stop the emergence of Ansaru with or without the hierarchical imprimatur.

Whether it was ordered by Boko Haram's exiled leader Abubakar Shekau or by another organization following the ideology of Mohamed Yusuf, it is therefore assumed that the kidnapping was committed as a reaction to Operation “Serval”. The military offensive in northern-Mali has indeed given all the reasons to groups close to AQIM to want to take revenge on France by attacking its interests in the region, including in a country where no foreigner had been kidnapped apart from piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. Remember also that AQIM already has six French hostages in the Sahel, whose lives represent as many pressures in the hands of terrorist groups. Aware of this new risk, the French authorities have therefore formally advised all their citizens not to undertake travel in northern Cameroon because of the terrorist threat. According to press reports, Paris has also deployed Special Forces in the country to accelerate the resolution of the hostages.

### **A growing threat to the region**

In August, the mission entrusted by the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, to assess the extent of the consequences of the Libyan crisis on the Sahel had already pointed the extreme threat represented today by Boko Haram:

“The mission representatives were informed that Boko Haram, which claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack, inter alia, against United Nations House in Abuja on 26 August 2011, was also mentioned as a threat to the region. Its presence was mentioned as a source of concern by most countries in the region. In the Niger for example, the radicalization of youth was a particular concern in the south, where interlocutors said that Boko Haram was already active in spreading its ideology and propaganda and, in some cases, had succeeded in closing down public schools. The mission representatives were also informed that Boko Haram had established links with Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and that some of its members from Nigeria and Chad had received training in Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb camps in Mali during the summer of 2011. Although Boko Haram has concentrated its terrorist acts inside Nigeria, seven of its members were arrested while transiting through the Niger to Mali, in possession of documentation on manufacturing of explosives, propaganda leaflets and names and contact details of members of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb they were allegedly planning to meet. Whereas Nigerian authorities viewed the group as a

national threat without any links to Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, it has become a growing source of concern for the countries of the region.”

In January 2011, the kidnapping of two French nationals in Niger's capital, Niamey, highlighted the geographical overflow capacity nuisance AQIM. The removal of the Moulin-Fournier family confirmed that the terrorist threat is no longer limited to areas traditionally considered dangerous in the Sahel, and the concerns expressed by the evaluation mission of the United Nations have materialized on field.

The affirmation of Boko Haram and its jihadi-Salafi ideology in northern Nigeria is therefore a threat more accurately, to be taken into account to ensure political stability and Western interests in West Africa in years.

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