



Q & A: Boko Haram in Cameroon

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In May 2014, Cameroon declared war on Boko Haram at the Paris Summit. Since then, Boko Haram has intensified its activities in the Far North Region of the country, making Cameroon the second most targeted country, in terms of attacks, by the sect. Hans De Marie Heungoup, Cameroon analyst at the International Crisis Group, provides insights on the rise of Boko Haram in Cameroon, the stakes for the country and efforts made by the Government to overcome the jihadist organisation.

How would you describe the rise of Boko Haram in Cameroon?

The penetration of Boko Haram in Cameroon took place gradually and in several phases. At each phase, the group has been able to change its modus operandi and adapt to the response of Cameroonian defence forces. While the first frontal attack of Boko Haram against Cameroon dates back to March 2014, the presence of members of the sect in the Far North was signaled as far back as 2009. In fact, in July 2009, after clashes between Boko Haram militants and security forces at Maiduguri in which more than 800 members of the sect were killed, including the founder Mohamed Yusuf, several members of Boko Haram found refuge in and/or transited through the Far North of Cameroon. But up until then, Cameroon had shown only little interest in the Islamist group.

Boko Haram's interest in Cameroon grew between 2011 and 2013. This is an interesting phase because it is during this period that Boko Haram started spreading its religious ideology, mainly in the Logone and Chari and Mayo Sava divisions of the Far North, recruiting Cameroonians as fighters and using this part of the territory as a rear base or safe haven. Specifically, from 2011, in addition to seeking refuge on Cameroonian territory after attacks in Nigeria, members of Boko Haram regularly bought foodstuffs on different markets in

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the Far North. They also infiltrated former networks involved in trafficking, smuggling of motorbikes, adulterated fuel (zoua-zoua) and Tramol (drug) in the far north. It was also between 2011 and 2013 that they established most of their networks of arms caches on Cameroonian territory, with Kousseri serving as their logistics base. At the same time, like Chad, the Far North of Cameroon served as transit points for weapons bought by Boko Haram from Libya and Sudan. Fotokol in Cameroon has been one of the entry points of these arms into Nigeria.

While until 2012 the presence of Boko Haram in the Far North was rather passive and unknown to the public, despite a few targeted killings and abductions of Cameroonians in the Mayo Sava and Logone and Chari divisions, the practice of kidnapping of foreigners, adopted from February 2013, marks a shift by Boko Haram to a more active approach on Cameroonian soil. Between 2013 and 2014, the jihadist group abducted 22 foreigners (French, Chinese, Canadians and Italians) in Cameroon and released them each time after the payment of ransoms the total amount of which was at least \$11 million and the release of about forty of its members detained in Cameroon. In 2014, Boko Haram moved from the active approach to a frontal approach with attacks on police stations and military bases. Thus, from March 2014 to March 2016, Boko Haram carried out more than 400 attacks and incursions in Cameroon, as well as about fifty suicide bombings that left 92 members of security forces dead, injured more than 120 others and killed more than 1350 civilians.

Over the last two years, Boko Haram has been able to alternate between low-intensity attacks requiring only about ten fighters on motorbikes and conventional attacks that can mobilise more than 1000 fighters, as well as armored vehicles and mortars. Up to now, the abduction of the Vice-Prime

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Minister's wife in July 2014, the thirty or so conventional attacks on Fotokol, Amchide and Kolofata in 2014 and 2015, as well as a series of suicide attacks that hit Maroua in July and August 2015 are the most spectacular actions carried out by Boko Haram in Cameroon.

After this peak period, Boko Haram, whose firepower was at its best between July 2014 and March 2015 when it also controlled more than 30 000 square kilometers of territory in northeast Nigeria, gradually declined from January 2015 following renewed engagement of the Nigerian army ahead of the presidential election, and then the coming to power of Muhammadu Buhari who overhauled the apparatus to fight Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the engagement of Chadian and Cameroonian troops, who inflicted huge losses and setbacks on Boko Haram, significantly weakened the group to the extent that, for the past nine months, it has not been able to carry out any conventional attacks in Cameroon and has lost most of the territories that it was holding in Nigeria (Cameroonian troops declare that they have killed more than 1500 members of Boko Haram in fights and arrested more than 900 suspected members. The Islamist group has also suffered huge logistical losses). Conscious of the new power balance, the jihadist organisation has resorted to purely asymmetric warfare, giving preference to suicide bombings and low-intensity attacks. From July 2015 to March 2016, Boko Haram carried out more than 50 suicide attacks in Cameroon, killing more than 230 people and wounding 500 others. This war has had an adverse effect on the economy of the Far North of Cameroon which was already the poorest and the region with the lowest school enrolment rate in the country before the war. It also led to an influx of 65 000 Nigerian refugees to Cameroon and caused the internal displacement of more than 93 000 people.

Why did Boko Haram start attacking Cameroon?

Boko Haram started launching a frontal attack on Cameroon because the Government strengthened the security apparatus in the Far North and dismantled about ten arms caches of the sect, as well as corridors for the transit of weapons. In fact, Cameroonian authorities were in an increasingly untenable situation at the beginning of 2014. Despite the head-in-the-sand policy adopted at the beginning which consisted of turning a blind eye on the presence of Boko Haram members in the Far North in the hope that they would not take on Cameroon, the sect continued to abduct foreigners and Cameroonians. Moreover, the Nigerian Government and press accused Cameroon of serving as a rear base and support for Boko Haram. Faced with such pressures and following the abduction of ten Chinese nationals at Waza, the only rational option for Cameroon was to declare war on the sect. Of course, once war was declared in May 2014, Boko Haram, in turn, increased its attacks in Cameroon to the extent that the country became the second major target of the Islamist group.

How effective are the Cameroonian government's counterinsurgency efforts?

To combat Boko Haram, Cameroon has deployed two military operations, namely Operation EMERGENCE 4 made up of units of the regular army and Operation ALPHA comprising of units of the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), the elite corps of the Cameroonian army. In addition to these operations, we have the multinational joint task force whose first military sector is based in Mora and comprises of 2450 Cameroonian troops. On the whole, about 7000 men have been deployed by Cameroonian defence forces in both operations they and the regional joint task force have efficiently warded off conventional

attacks by Boko Haram. However, Cameroonian troops find it more difficult to thwart suicide bombings.

Moreover, the weakness of Cameroon's response against Boko Haram is the absence of a policy and measures to combat radicalization and a program for de-radicalization. Similarly, given that this region is the poorest and has the lowest school enrolment rate in the country, and that these factors have facilitated recruitment and indoctrination by Boko Haram, the Government's response on the socioeconomic development level in the Far North is still fragmented, poor and ill-adapted to the stakes.

How do you analyse the state of the regional cooperation against Boko Haram?

To address the threat posed by Boko Haram, the states in the region (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin) under the aegis of the Lake Chad Basin Commission set up a multinational joint task force. The regional task force has been slow to put in place, but after several delays, the multinational task force was set up and only finally went operational later in 2015. However, the multinational force is witnessing financial and logistical difficulties that are affecting its full operationalisation and few donors have so far delivered on their pledges. As such, only the first sector of the force is operational as of now.

The other specificity of the regional response is that it has assumed more of a bilateral rather than multilateral orientation: like the military cooperation between Chad and Nigeria or Nigeria and Cameroon that, despite the bottlenecks recorded at the beginning, has improved significantly over recent months to the extent that the right of hot pursuit is now a reality. However, the major shortcoming of this regional response is that it focuses on military

aspects. No serious brainstorming is done on development issues and the fight against radicalization at the regional level. In the same light, no reflection has been initiated on the ways to end this crisis now that Boko Haram is weakened.

What do you see as the future of Boko Haram in the region and what will this mean for counterinsurgency efforts?

The most likely scenario, in my view, is that Boko Haram will become a sort of criminal network with several small independent leaders. This network will comprise of fake religious leaders, real traffickers and criminals and remain in the area for several years until the states of the region resolve to adopt an African Marshall plan to boost trans-regional development: that will require investment in social sectors such as schools, health centers; and development of high intensity labor force projects in the region to sustain fishing and agriculture around Lake Chad, to support the local industrial sector and build roads between and within provinces of the area. All these should be accompanied by a de-radicalization and counter radicalization project at the transregional level.

Artwork of Boko Haram insurgent. Image by Surian Soosay via [Flickr](#).

Hans De Marie Heungoup is Cameroon analyst at the International Crisis Group. He conducts field research and provides analysis on prevailing security, social, legal, governance and political issues; proposes policy initiatives for governmental, intergovernmental, political, and nongovernmental stakeholders to address and resolve sources of conflict; and prepares detailed reports and briefing papers setting out relevant research findings and policy recommendations.

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