

INITIAL REPORT ON THE COALITION AGAINST BOKO HARAM

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Since January 2015, the first operations of the military coalition which supposedly joins Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon have provided a glimpse of the problems to come. The fact is, everyone's objectives are different. In fighting against Boko Haram, Chad and Cameroon are trying to protect the supply line to Ndjamena, which is vital for their economy. Nigeria, on the other hand, is not interested in the Borno region, which is poor and does not have any oil or any mineral resources. Nigeria only wants to involve its neighbours to prevent Boko Haram from having reserve bases on the border, to ask for support from the international community, and to give the impression of a wider Jihadist insurrection: this makes it easier to justify the failures of its armed forces, something which could influence the electoral campaign. As for Niger, it wants to avoid Nigeria's problems spreading into its own territory. Local authorities are more concerned with the day-to-day issues of banditry and the deterioration of the situation in Mali and Libya. They are less directly affected by the "global" war against terrorism and do not want to find themselves involved in an international war. There is a serious risk of escalation: in February 2015, after Chad bombed a community near to Malam Fatori, Boko Haram insurgents retaliated, attacking the small Nigerien town of Bosso, near lake Chad.

There is still a lot to be done in terms of coordination. Chad is frustrated because Nigeria prevented it from continuing its offensive beyond the town of Dikwa, up to Maiduguri, the capital of Borno. The delay allowed the rebels to disperse across the countryside. People in Maiduguri would probably have been relieved to welcome Ndjamena's troops to replace the ineffectual Nigerian army, but the idea of Chad occupying Borno would have been a humiliation for the outgoing president Goodluck Jonathan, running for presidential re-election on the 28th of March. Since then, Nigerian authorities have remained vague on exactly what rights to pursue the armies of the former MJTF (multinational Joint Task Force) have; and this formation, created in 1998, does not include Cameroon. Officially, Nigerien troops went as far as taking the bordering town of Damasek, but we don't know if they then progressed into Nigeria, with or without authorisation from Abuja.

Neither does there appear to be any spirit of cooperation in encounters between the countries. The insults exchanged via statements between the general staff of the Nigerian and the Nigerien armies are almost certainly not unconnected to the dysfunction seen on

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the ground. According to local sources, in January 2015 a Nigerian fighter set off a bomb, killing 37 civilians, in Abadam in Niger. The inhabitants of the village had gathered for the two o'clock afternoon prayer (*fatya*) on the day of a funeral, and most of the Boko Haram fighters were hiding close to the Yau "forest", on the Nigerian side of the border. Of course, Abuja denied any involvement in this incident, while Niamey tried to cover up the story.

There is a high risk of repeating mistakes made in the past: this is particularly worrying when we look at the way Chadian and Nigerian troops have behaved before, which could lead to the Jihadist insurrection turning into a people's revolt against occupying armed forces – a significant threat to the success of the pan African coalition. In Niger, for example, the region in question around Diffa is stamping ground for the MNSD (National Movement for the Society of Development) of former President Mamadou Tandja, who ruled from 1999 to 2010. The rise in the number of incidents against civilians could be used by the opposition to try to weaken the current government, which has already been shaken by the anti-Charlie riots in Niamey in January 2015.

However, this is not the case for now. President Mahamadou Issoufou can count on the national unity of a population that identifies with the state more than with a political regime, for fear of seeing the same chaos that their neighbours – Mali, Libya, Nigeria, and Chad – have experienced. The Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism, which is currently in power, is mostly made up of students and union workers from the National Conference of 1990, and those opposed to the military dictatorship of the 1980s: they seem to have more influence on "civil society" than the MNSD, an ageing party made up of dignitaries. In addition, Mahamadou Issoufou still has local support in the South-east of Niger. He is Haoussa, married to a Kanuri Manga from Mainé Soroa, the birthplace of Mamadou Tanja – himself the son of, allegedly, a Fulani father from Mauritania and a Kanuri mother from Nigeria.

Even though it is 1400 kilometres away from Niamey, the prospect of unrest flaring up in the Diffa region is still worrying. The same goes for Cameroon and Chad, whose regimes do not have the legitimacy of being elected and are worn out by decades in power. In Ndjamena, the drop in oil prices, the production of which supplies a big part of the state's budget, has weakened President Idriss Deby's government. He will therefore use the war against terrorism to justify disproportionate military expenses, and potentially to remain in power beyond the end of his term in 2016. In Yaoundé, President Paul Biya has already started using the issue of national unity to silence domestic opposition. Nevertheless, the Jihadist threat may not be enough to quell discontent. Paradoxically, in seeking to assert the presence of the state in neglected areas, the militarisation and internationalisation of the response to Boko Haram is also a cause of destabilisation.