Islam, Higher Education, and Extremism in Cameroon

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Key Findings

- Despite the growing influence of Salafism on campuses, there is little evidence of extremist ideologies or of intra-Muslim ideological conflict. The need to maintain cordial relations with the state provides a strong incentive for Muslim student activists to maintain a united front.

- The perceived "securitization" of university campuses as part of the Cameroonian war on terror has already had consequences for Muslim students, who feel surveilled, targeted, and harassed. This perception is worse on campuses where Muslims are not in the majority.

- Cameroonian students and key university stakeholders largely agree that higher education institutions can and do serve as a bulwark against the spread of violent extremism in the region.

- Muslim students and faculty largely accept the "status quo" of Cameroonian state secularism; nonetheless, many see the need for universities to take on a greater role in facilitating campus religious life.

- While many Muslim students are satisfied with the religious opportunities offered by student organizations like the Cameroon Muslim Students Union (CAMSU), there is a widely held belief that at the national level, university campuses are more open to Christian symbols and activities than to their Muslim counterparts.

- Students and faculty see significant barriers to improving Muslims' access to higher education. The quality of primary and secondary education in northern Cameroon is a concern, as is the perception that universities are "Christian spaces" that do not offer adequate support to the religious needs of Muslim students.

Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

As concern grows over the presence of violent extremist groups in the Lake Chad Basin, greater insight is needed into the factors driving the emergence and spread of those groups to facilitate the crafting of more effective and proactive interventions to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE). In West Africa, research indicates a complex web of factors, including local and regional political dynamics, economic inequality and lack of opportunity, environmental degradation, and religious ideology; however, it offers little specific guidance for policymakers seeking to identify concrete areas for intervention and investment. Both Boko Haram's own statements and actions, and the longstanding assumptions of CVE-implementing organizations, have drawn attention to the role of the region's educational system in combating or fostering extremism. The best available evidence suggests that improving access to quality education may be an important way to combat extremism,[1] but it provides little guidance about how to overcome barriers to quality education, or about what types of education are in demand and likely to yield positive outcomes.

NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Universities in the region are important sites for negotiating Islamic identities and mobilizing religious activism; however, further research is needed to understand how higher education institutions and the policies that shape them might either "incubate or challenge extremism."[2] Drawing on in-depth interviews with over 40 student leaders, campus activists, professors, administrators, and religious leaders, this RESOLVE Network research brief, part of a series of publications on similar dynamics in the region,[3] examines the politics of religion, higher education, and extremism in Cameroon specifically.

Few publications address the religious and political dynamics that shape Cameroonian Muslim students' campuses experiences and how these experiences compare to those of students across the region. Even fewer address how universities in Cameroon address or are affected by violent extremism. Officially, the country's colonial legacy of French-style secularism (laïcité) has kept religion off the official university curriculum — a stark contrast with regional neighbors like Nigeria and Sudan, where public universities offer prestigious programs in Islamic studies, jurisprudence, and theology. Increasingly, however, university administrators and state officials face pressure, if not teach religion outright, to at least make it a greater part of campus life.

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[1] See United Nations Development Programme, "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment," United Nations Development Programme, 2017, http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017- english.pdf.

[2] Alexander Thurston. "Campuses and Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin: Violent Extremism and the Politics of Religion in Higher Education." RESOLVE Network Research Report no. 1, 2018, Lake Chad Basin Research Series, p. 6.

[3] For additional research from this series, visit: https://resolvenet.org/index.php/projects/lake-chad-basin

SALIENT FACTORS

This pressure is not uniquely Islamic — Catholic, Pentecostal, and evangelical Christian student populations make similar demands — but two factors have played especially key roles in shaping the attitudes and experiences of Muslim students. The first is that Muslims have far greater access to universities today than 30 years ago. Created in 1993 and 2008, respectively, the Universities of Maroua and Ngaoundére are the first to serve Muslim-majority student bodies, with combined total enrollments of nearly 50,000. The second is the growing influence of external Islamic actors, including governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These entities support Islamic studies in primary and secondary schools and fund scholarships and student services at the university level to the Islamic universities that train an increasingly large number of Cameroonians who return home to teach on campuses.

However, this study finds little evidence of extremism on Cameroonian campuses. Participation in and engagement with the Cameroonian state remains the safest and most important pathway to career success for most university graduates. As a result, most key campus actors —Muslim and non-Muslim — accept the principle of laïcité as a commitment to state neutrality in religious affairs; they desire to work with and through the government to improve educational access and quality.

This study also found important barriers to expanding Muslim access to higher education; these barriers are shaped by popular perceptions that university campuses are not sufficiently attentive to the needs of Muslim students. Given these concerns, it is not surprising that much of the religious activism present on campus supports students struggling to balance academic demands with social and spiritual pressures to deepen their faith. The most important actor is the state-recognized Cameroon Muslim Students Union (CAMSU), a student organization offering a wide range of activities, educational programs, and student services. Although CAMSU is officially nonsectarian, many of its members have a Salafi tilt that occasionally brings them into conflict with parents and religious authorities in their "host" communities. Despite these doctrinal differences, there is little evidence of serious religious conflict on campuses or concern that it is likely to worsen.

Instead, many Muslim students expressed concern over the ramp-up of state surveillance on campus as part of the Cameroonian government's growing focus on domestic "extremism," political violence in both the Far North and the Anglophone regions, and harassment —particularly of veiled female students — by other members of the campus community and by local authorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The threat posed by violent extremist (VE) actors across the Lake Chad Basin remains significant, but there is relatively little reason to think that university campuses pose a major risk for extremist activity. Still, left unaddressed, evolving conflict and power dynamics and grievances could open space for more extremist ideas and actions to exploit conditions. It is essential for P/CVE policymakers and practitioners to consider how they can best partner with university students, institutional resources, and government actors in

the context of Cameroon's laïcité system and its legacy of heavy management of religious affairs.

Recommendations for proactive engagement include the following:

- Support Muslim student access to university education, and diversify the class, ethnic, and educational backgrounds of Muslim students on campus.
- Engage with religious student organizations on campus as key P/CVE partners, particularly around programs promoting nonsectarian civil engagement.
- Support additional research, specifically on the educational backgrounds of VE participants in the Lake Chad Basin, with an emphasis on improving access to higher education for otherwise marginalized communities.

Introduction

The rise of Boko Haram, a violent Nigeria-based extremist group based with significant reach across the Lake Chad Basin, has renewed scholarly and policymaker interest in the drivers of violent extremism in the region. Although Cameroon has experienced less violence than its Nigerian neighbor, it has been a key battleground in the war on Boko Haram, suffering over 1,600 civilian casualties and receiving tens of thousands of Nigerian refugees.[4] Widespread evidence suggests that Cameroonian Muslims have been recruited by the group; both demographically and politically, many of the same factors that made northeastern Nigeria vulnerable to violent extremism are present in Cameroon's Far North and North regions. A combination of growing interreligious tension between Muslims and Christians, and growing political uncertainty associated with Cameroon's aging leader, poses political challenges to adopting a comprehensive and effective P/CVE strategy, particularly one that addresses the needs, concerns, and interests of the country's Muslim minority — an estimated 20 percent of the population.[5]

As the RESOLVE Network's May 2018 report suggests, university campuses have become increasingly important potential sites to consider for P/CVE actors in the Lake Chad Basin for several reasons.[6] First, the region offers substantial higher education opportunities, including the newly created University of Maroua in Cameroon. These higher education opportunities serve overwhelmingly Muslim student bodies. Second, the potential drivers of violent extremism include high unemployment for graduates; frustrations with the quality of programs and their ability to cater to Muslim student interests; and perceived influence on campus of external religious actors, particularly from the Middle East. In northeastern Nigeria, evidence suggests that some university students have become violent extremist actors.

In line with issues raised in "Campuses and Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin," this research brief focuses on two closely related research questions.

The first explores the role of the government in regulating religious affairs and education. Although the Cameroonian constitution promises a secular state that is neutral in religious affairs, it lacks a clear legal definition for what this commitment means.[7] In practice, the state is heavily involved in regulating and managing religious affairs, including those on university campuses. Understanding how Cameroon's colonial legacy of laïcité impacts the experience of Muslim university students and faculty members provides an important starting point for identifying possible risk factors or sites of leverage for promoting peacebuilding and toleration on campuses. This report focuses on Muslim students, given

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[4] Hans de Marie Heungroup, "In the Tracks of Boko Haram in Cameroon." *International Crisis Group,* September 2, 2016, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/tracks-boko-haram-cameroon.

[5] See "Cameroon," *Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project,* http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/cameroon#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010&region_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2016.

[6] Thurston, "Campuses and Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin: Violent Extremism and the Politics of Religion in Higher Education," 2018. The report, also part of the RESOLVE Network Lake Chad Basin Research Series, explores the evolution of higher education in Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria; the role of religion on university campuses and intersections with violent extremism; and trends warranting further attention from P/CVE policymakers, practitioners, and researchers moving forward.

[7] C. M. Fombad, "State, Religion, and Law in Cameroon: Regulatory Control, Tension, and Accommodation," J*ournal of Church and State* 57, (2013), no. 1: 30-32.

their expanding enrollment in higher education in Cameroon, their grievances created by perceptions of favoritism toward Christian students, and the extent of external Islamic influences on university campuses.

The second examines the attitudes of key campus actors about violent extremism and its impact and influence in universities.

Methodology

This report draws on a synthesis of locally produced scholarship and a collection of new in-depth and group interviews conducted from February to May 2018. In all, 57 individuals involved in Muslim campus life across four universities — Yaoundé I and II, Ngaoundére, and Maroua, including the only two Cameroonian public institutions serving Muslim-majority student bodies — participated. Interviewees included current and former student leaders in national and campus positions in CAMSU; the staff and leadership of civil society organizations providing services and scholarships to Muslim university students, faculty, staff, and administrative personnel; officials in the Ministry of Higher Education; and imams and other religious leaders serving student populations.

The team adopted a qualitative approach for two reasons.

- First, despite a relatively rich body of existing research on Islam and Muslim communities in Cameroon, the relative dearth of research about religious affairs in Cameroonian universities and state regulation of religious affairs on campuses necessitated a more inductive and flexible approach; this approach included a snowball sampling process as the team identified key stakeholders and gained access to interview them. Research designed in this way requires caveats about the lack of a random sample and the need for care in generalization from the data presented, but it is also an important first step in creating the groundwork for future studies oriented to narrower hypothesis testing.
- Second, given the nature of the questions posed in the report, a qualitative, interview-based strategy produced a wealth of data suitable for teasing out processes and pathways of influence, as well as for triangulating the impact of key variables on a range of actors and institutions.

In addition to individual in-depth interviews, the team conducted four peer group interviews (with five to six participants each) on three campuses — Yaoundé I, Ngaoundére, and Maroua. Unlike traditional focus group interviews, which are generally larger, conducted among strangers, and highly directed by the facilitators, peer group interviews are designed to elicit minimally guided conversations among participants who are comfortable with one another. Particularly when dealing with politically sensitive or complex topics, this format is intended not simply to produce a series of responses to questions, but insights into the process by which participants grapple with sensitive issues about which they may not have settled or consistent opinions. The study team used this format specifically to probe students' views on secularism, the drivers and causes of violent extremism, and their own experiences on campuses.[8]

One further caveat is that while the interviewees frequently spoke candidly and even critically about the status quo in Cameroon, the interview process coincided with a marked rise in violence around the political grievances of Anglophone Cameroons in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, and the increased deployment of security forces across the country. It is likely that this overall climate had at least some impact on participants' willingness to be interviewed and on their responses reported here.

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[8] For additional background on the peer group interview, see Brandon Kendhammer, *Muslims Talking Politics: Framing Islam, Democracy, and Law in Northern Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016): 185-87, 235-39.

Context

VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN CAMEROON

Most of the attention on violent extremism in Cameroon is focused on Boko Haram. The group's influence in the country dates back to 2004, when certain members of the group fled over the border from Nigeria in search of refuge.[9] Since then, the group's attacks, kidnappings, and recruitment of Cameroonians, particularly in the Far North and North of Cameroon, have raised concerns and driven increased efforts to counter violent extremism in the country. While recent reports suggest that Boko Haram may be weakened in Cameroon,[10] the continued threat of attacks and worsening communal relations in Boko Haram-affected areas suggest that the threat still looms large. Moreover, the costs in terms of human lives, livelihoods, and economic and food security have destabilized large swaths of territories and could breed conditions conducive to the rise of additional violent extremist actors and sentiments.

CONNECTION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The connection between violent extremism and education is primarily rooted in anecdotal evidence. Most literature on the subject focuses on primary education, with emphasis on the role of religiously oriented education and *madrassas* in radicalizing youth. Fewer studies, however, focus on the role of universities as facilitators or mitigating factors in the spread of violent extremist sentiment and recruitment.[11]

The university experience for students in the Lake Chad Basin region today is defined by the rising public religiosity, the growth of religious student organizations, and the expansion of religious educational opportunities at the secondary level.[12] In Cameroon, understanding the relationship, if any, between violent extremism and the role of religion in higher education is increasingly critical, because of Boko Haram's influence, as well as because Cameroon boasts the highest percentage of enrollment among its neighbors. In 2015, 17.5 percent of college-aged Cameroonians were enrolled in universities, and opportunities for higher education continue to expand.[13]

COMMON ASSUMPTIONS: INCREASING RELIGIOSITY AND INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES

The dominant working assumption in recent policy-oriented research on religion, politics, and education in Cameroon and across the Lake Chad Basin is that the growth of public

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[9] Hans de Marie Heungroup, "In the Tracks of Boko Haram in Cameroon," *International Crisis Group,* September 2, 2016, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/tracks-boko-haram-cameroon.

[10] For example, see International Crisis Group, "Cameroon's Far North: A New Chapter in the Fight Against Boko Haram," August 14, 2018.

[11] For more on this, see: Thurston, "Campuses and Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin: Violent Extremism and the Politics of Religion in Higher Education," 2018.

[12] Ibid.

[13] UNESCO, "Gross Enrollment by Level of Education," http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=142.

religiosity — Christian, but especially Muslim — over the past several generations poses a significant threat to the public order. This analytic trajectory notes with trepidation the decline of "traditional" Sufi Islam and its influence on religious affairs, the rising influence of transnational actors and resources in domestic religious life, and the prospect of greater conflict over who will be able to speak authoritatively for religious communities as precursors to the emergence of violent extremism movements capable of gaining mass support.[14] As a result, much of the attention from P/CVE practitioners in the higher educational sector has focused on two primary issues — the impact of rising Salafism on campus and the influence of international actors in shaping education experiences and priorities.

These dynamics merit attention. There is a paucity of data, but a recent International Crisis Group report suggests that as many as 10 percent of Cameroonian Muslims identify with Salafi or "Wahhabi" ideology.[15] If anything, this number underestimates Salafism's broader social impact. While a rise in Salafi or Wahhabi ideologies should by no means be associated rising violent extremism in itself, social and cultural dynamics within communities in which new interpretations of religious thought are on the rise and perceived as threatening can incite conflict. Anthropological research in northern Cameroon notes a sea change in how many Muslim communities engage with questions like which languages their children should learn,[16] the veiling of girls and the separation of boys and girls in educational spaces,[17] and the erosion of traditional hierarchies of religious authority — all hallmarks of similar patterns of influence and change in Muslim communities across West Africa.

Moreover, transnational resources — including support for Islamic nongovernmental organizations and media, funds for the construction of mosques and schools, training of Islamic instructors, and other development projects impacting Cameroonian Muslims — have played a crucial role in driving these changes. Although the full impact of these resources is difficult to quantify, as one example, Cameroon received over US$1 billion in cumulative project financing from the Islamic Development Bank, a small but substantial proportion of which was devoted to educational initiatives.[18] The influx of Middle Eastern and Arab money in northern Cameroon had driven a cultural turn as well; many of the region's political and religious elites are increasingly looking to the Arab world in their travel habits, media consumption patterns, and even the names they give their children.[19]

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[14] For example, see International Crisis Group, "Cameroon: The Threat of Religious Radicalization," September 3, 2015: 1, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/cameroon-threat-religious-radicalism

[15] Ibid, 6.

[16] L. C. Moore, Change and Variation in Family Religious Language Policy in a West African Muslim Community." *Language Policy* 15, (2016), no. 2: 125-39.

[17] J. C. M. Van Santen, "'My "Veil" Does Not Go with My Jeans': Veiling, Fundamentalism, Education and Women's Agency in Northern Cameroon." *Africa* 80, (2010), no. 2: 275-300.

[18] Islamic Development Bank, Annual Report 2017, https://www.isdb.org/irj/go/km/docs/documents/IDBDeviolent extremism lopments/Internet/English/IDB/CM/Publications/Annual_Reports/43/Annual%20Report%202017.pdf: 108.

[19] G. L. Taguem Fah, "The War on Terror, the Chad–Cameroon Pipeline, and the New Identity of the Lake Chad Basin." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25, (2007), no. 1: 101-17.

GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE: DOMESTIC DYNAMICS

What is missing from these analyses, however, is the equally significant impact of domestic politics and local institutional legacies on the educational sector. Like many of its neighbors, Cameroon inherited a set of contradictory impulses from the colonial era. On the one hand, it retained an institutional commitment to secularism — and indeed, at least on paper, to French-style laïcité — a strict separation between "private" religious affairs and governmental policy. On the other hand, it inherited an impulse to regulate and manage religious actors and authorities. This latter was the case for Christian missionaries, but especially within Muslim communities, where colonial policy depended on the legitimacy and authority of local actors to govern effectively and securely, and where administrators feared the emergence of Islamic dissent movements.[20] The desire to manage religious affairs through top-down governmental authorities remains as strong today as in the past, and it has played a central role in shaping how the national government has responded to heightened religious consciousness on university campuses.

A second important domestic influence on shifting the relationship between the education system and Islam specifically is the era of political turmoil that began with the resignation of president Ahmadou Ahidjo — a Fulani Muslim from northern Cameroon — in 1982. Efforts to "break up" Ahidjo's political base in northern Cameroon following his resignation exacerbated existing ethnic and religious tensions already present across the region, and it played a key role in empowering "reformist" (in many cases, Salafi) voices who would later demand a greater role for Islam in public and private education.[21] Similarly, the onset of a national economic crisis and the adoption of structural adjustment policies in the late 1980s led to reductions in national education funding, clearing the way for new actors demanding an expanded range of private, Islamic offerings to serve Muslim communities.[22]

Finally, the national political crisis of the early 1990s, including the Villes Mortes general strikes,[23] the 1992 presidential election, and over a half-decade of student protests and disruptions at the University of Yaoundé — at that time, the only university in the country — led to the loosening of restrictions on civil society organization and the creation of private schools, as well as the institution of the 1993 university reforms that established the first university campus, Ngaoundére, in a Muslim-majority community.

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[20] On colonial cooptation of Muslim elites in northern Cameroon, see T. M. Bah and G. L. Taguem Fah, "Les élites musulmanes et la politique au Cameroun sous administration française: 1945-1960." In J. Boutrais (ed.). *Peuples et cultures de l'Adamaoua (Cameroun)* (Paris: ORSTOM; Ngaoundéré-Anthropos, 1993): 103-33.

[21] Philip Burnham, *The Politics of Cultural Difference in Northern Cameroon* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996): 147-50.

[22] T. Takou, "Les Nouvelles Offres d'Éducation Privée Islamique au Cameroun: Etat des Lieux et Perspectives." *Danibus,* 28 (2010): 104.

[23] The "Villes Mortes" ("ghost towns") were a series of general strikes across many Cameroonian cities in 1991 that effectively shut down economic activity (and the governmental revenue that accompanied it) in protest against state security crackdowns on peaceful opposition demonstrations. Since the early 1990s, the "Villes Mortes" protest model has been returned to frequently by the Biya regime's various opponents, including during the recent Anglophone crisis.

Religion and Higher Education in Cameroon: Tensions and Activism

Just as with its regional neighbors, the relationship between religion and education in Cameroon is in flux. New actors, institutions, and participants play an increasingly assertive role in shaping the relationship between Islam and the state and in attempting to meet the needs and demands of local Muslim communities. Many of these newly influential actors are either Salafi in orientation or at least represent Salafi ideas and values. Flocking to university campuses since the system's expansion in 1993, they have led the push for a greater role for Islamic learning and education in their training and campus life. University and Ministry of Higher Education officials have responded, in turn, from within the administrative framework of laïcité by allowing the expansion of undergraduate and graduate programs in Arabic languages, cooperating with student organizations to aggregate student concerns and demands, and allowing these organizations to take the lead in offering Islamic education and enrichment programming on campuses.

However, the tensions that exist around Islam, access to higher education, and campus climates have older and more complex origins. The roots of contemporary Islamic activism in the educational sector lie not only in the spread of Salafism, but also in the domestic and foreign policies of the Ahidjo administration (1960-82), which faced fierce opposition from "traditional" Muslim political and religious elites in northern Cameroon. In an effort to counteract and erode the influence of local Islamic authorities, Ahidjo pursued a policy of promoting domestic exchanges with the Arab world that would help to create a returning class of so-called "arabisant"[24] scholars and educators loyal to the regime.[25] These returnees played a central role in attempting to "modernize" the Islamic primary and secondary educational sector, a long process begun with the creation of the first "franco-arabe" schools to offer instruction in both French language and "secular" subjects alongside lessons in Arabic and Islamic religious knowledge. Classified as "private" but run under the aegis of the Association Culturelle Islamique du Cameroon (ACIC), a quasi-official Muslim interest group established in 1963 that favored arabisant scholars over the local Tijaniyya Sufi authorities, these schools were staffed heavily with instructors trained at the Islamic University of Medina (IUM) and other international Islamic universities. The schools also endeavored to facilitate the modernization and regularization of religious curriculum and to train Muslims to enter the civil service and public affairs.

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[24] The term denotes scholars who are fluent speakers and readers of Arabic, rather than simply able to pronounce and recite the Quran.

[25] H. Adama, "Islam and State in Cameroon: Between Tension and Accommodation." In Clarke, K.A. (ed). *Local Practices, Global Controversies: Islam in Sub-Saharan African Contexts* (New Haven, CT: Yale MacMillan Center, 2006): 54.

EARLY ACTIVISM AND DIVISIONS IN EDUCATION

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, the ACIC became increasingly disconnected from local dynamics and vulnerable to disruption as the institutionalized Muslim "voice" within the state sphere. Indeed, despite nearly 30 years of efforts, by 1990 the ACIC's franco-arabe schools were serving less than 3,000 students; the vast majority of school-aged Muslims remained either within the public secular system or, more commonly, in informal "traditional" Quranic schools.[26] Ahidjo's exit from power in 1982 saw the new administration return to a more cooperative relationship with traditional religious authorities. The collapse of state funding for education under the structural adjustment and the protest wave of the early 1990s pushed for a more decentralized approach to managing the relationship between Islam and education. In 1990, the Biya government approved legislation allowing the registration of new apolitical religious organizations. In the years since, several new Islamic groups have entered the field with an explicit mandate to improve the quality of and access to religious education for Muslims.

Since the early 1990s, new types of Islamic schools have proliferated, most tilting heavily toward Arabic language and religious studies.[27] These new schools range from madrassa-style schools that offer Quranic memorization and more updated pedagogies in Arabic language instruction, to specialized private "arabo-Islamique" secondary schools that offer structured religious training in preparation for advanced work in Islamic universities abroad. While these institutions remain relatively small players overall, their socio-cultural influence as both an option for students and parents and a symbolic alternative to the secular system is significant.

Even more important has been the development of what is known locally as "la double scholarité" (double schooling), which updates the curriculum and schedule of traditional Quranic school instruction to accommodate students who are already enrolled in secular public instruction. Although parents and teachers in both systems have been critical of this arrangement — public educators because it undermines their curriculum with the introduction of a "passive, non-analytic learning style," and Quranic instructors because it represents a compromise with a system they believe distracts from the "social, moral, and spiritual development of their children"[28] — interviews on campuses conducted for this research brief suggest that more and more Muslim students reaching the university have pursued both paths, and that they expect their new institutions to be able to accommodate their "double" interests.[29]

INCREASING RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

Initially, domestic religious organizations devoted much less energy to advocating on behalf of Muslim students at the university level. In part, this was because many of the

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[26] H. Adama, "L'enseignement privé islamique dans le Nord-Cameroun." Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara 13 (1999), 13:19.

[27] Two new organizations, *l'Organization Nationale de l'Enseignement Privé Islamique* (ONEPI) and the *l'Organization des Etablissements Scholaries Privé Islamique* (OESPI), founded in the late 1990s, having taken over much of ACIC's work, including soliciting international funding and support for Islamic education.

[28] L. C. Moore, "Learning by Heart in Qur'anic and Public Schools in Northern Cameroon," *Social Analysis* 50, (2006), no. 3: 114.

[29] Group Interview with Muslim students at the Universities of Yaoundé I and II, Yaoundé, Cameroon, February 22, 2018.

most engaged and qualified students were already leaving for religious training outside of the country. Additionally, with a single national university based in Yaoundé, higher education was simply out of the reach of many Cameroonians. Still, as early as the late 1980s, Muslim students at the University of Yaoundé were already part of the campus protest infrastructure, seeking many of the same concessions and changes that motivated the spread of private Islamic education and "la double scholarité," including halal foods, space for prayers and activities, and course schedules compatible with prayer times.[30]

The most important developments in the university space, however, were the 1988 founding of CAMSU — an Islamic student organization with extensive reach and impact, discussed at greater length in the following section — and the 1993 university reforms that laid the groundwork for seven new campuses across the country. The new universities have essentially localized Muslim students' university experiences. While Muslim students and student organizations are present on all eight campuses, the curriculum, programming, and faculty hiring in Ngaoundéré and Maroua have emphasized the interests of local Islamic communities. The local focus of these new universities has led to the development of "Arabic language" programs and the recruitment of faculty trained in Islamic studies in Egypt, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan, among others. Although no official statistics exist on the religious affiliations of students, the University of Maroua currently enrolls 21,000 students and the University of Ngaoundéré enrolls over 30,000; the majority of these students is drawn from Muslim-majority communities in northern Cameroon.

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[30] H. Adama, "Islamic Associations in Cameroon: Between the *Umma* and the State." In B. Soares and R. Otayek (eds.), *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa* (New York: Palgrave, 2007): 227-42.

Findings: Testing Assumptions and Identifying Enduring Issues

While the evolution of religion and legacies of secularism in the Cameroonian education sector are well documented, the impact — real and/or potential — of these dynamics on violent extremism on university campuses today — as a driver, neutral party, or mitigating presence — is less studied. In line with RESOLVE's "Campuses and Conflict" report, the research findings in this brief provide some much-needed insights on the assumed impact of religion-campus dynamics on violent extremism in Cameroon. Further, the findings identify issues that merit greater attention by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners moving forward.

VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND CONFLICT ON CAMPUSES: TESTING ASSUMPTIONS

Violent Extremism on Cameroonian Campuses: A Phantom Threat?

There is little evidence that particular kinds of educational institutions — particularly the *madrassas*, traditional Quranic schools with memorization-based pedagogies — are especially prone to fostering extremism, and equally little that others are especially strong at countering it.[31] Nor is it correct to assume that the spread of internationally trained and Salafi-oriented faculty or of Salafi-inspired student organizations is consistently associated with the emergence of extremism. In Nigeria, for example, the rise of Salafi-inspired student activism on university campuses in the 1970s clearly contributed to an atmosphere of growing religious tension and politicization that eventually produced a wave of violence between Muslims and Christians beginning in the mid-1980s.[32] However, to link it even tenuously to the development of Boko Haram in the 1990s is much more difficult. In Cameroon, there is even less evidence that the increasingly Salafi tenor of Islam on campuses today is related to the religious ideologies and narratives held by local participants in the Boko Haram insurgency.

   While it is hardly impossible to imagine that at least some students and community members have participated in or supported the Boko Haram insurgency, none of the participants interviewed for this report claimed to have seen the spread of violent extremism ideologies on Cameroonian university campuses or to consider it a major problem. Instead, nearly all of the interviewees argued that institutions of higher education can and do serve as a bulwark against the spread of violent extremism in the region.

   It is important to note, however, that many university stakeholders interviewed seem to view the drivers of VE — and thus their potential role in preventing or mitigating it — in a very specific light. Across nearly all of the interviews, campus stakeholders emphasized

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[31] Alexander Thurston, "Campuses and Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin: Violent Extremism and the Politics of Religion in Higher Education." RESOLVE Network Research Report no. 1, Lake Chad Basin Research Series, May, 2018.

[32] See, for example, J. Ibrahim, «The Politics of Religion in Nigeria: The Parameters of the 1987 Crisis in Kaduna State." *Review of African Political Economy* 16, (1989), no. 45-46: 65-82.

the power and importance of education, and specifically of religious education focused on "correct" interpretations of Islam, in preventing the emergence of extremism. This finding mirrors those of other studies in the region in which community leaders and educators noted that religious ignorance, "broken homes," and illiteracy motivate participation in violent extremism.[33] Several times, interviewees for this research brief offered blanket statements akin to that of one imam from Maroua, who asserted that while traditional Quranic education might be responsible for extremism "elsewhere," it was categorically untrue that it could ever have such an impact in Cameroon, since he and his colleagues only offered correct religious instruction.[34]

Without dismissing the perspectives of local actors, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the gap in how university stakeholders and international P/CVE actors assess the drivers of VE. For one, it speaks to the importance of building networks of research and practice that bridge diversified views and encourage knowledge exchange between local and international experts. Few interviewees in this project spoke directly to experience or interest in primary research on VE drivers beyond religious ideology, suggesting a need for greater dissemination of alternative theories. Many participants, nonetheless, expressed interest in expanding the sort of activities that universities in general are well-positioned to provide, such as workshops and seminars on P/CVE-related topics for academics and activists. However, doing so would require tapping university resources to facilitate effective P/CVE programming, which could prove challenging.

Religious Divides on Campuses and with Local Communities: How Great of a Concern?

At least some evidence indicates that a portion of the early community that would coalesce into Boko Haram included students at the University of Maiduguri in Nigeria. As Andrew Walker argues, these students were influenced by a combination of disenchantment and grievances with university culture, the availability of extremist rhetoric in Maiduguri itself, and access to local mosques.[35] On Cameroonian campuses, however, interviewees for this study expressed mixed reactions to campus life and varying degrees of grievances toward it. In all of the student group interviews, there were mentions of encounters with lecturers or university staff with "anti-Muslim" attitudes, reputations for making derogatory remarks about Islam, or an unwillingness to work with Muslim students on research or special projects.[36] Nonetheless, most saw Muslim-Christian relations on campuses as relatively peaceful; most reported few of the sort of clashes and confrontations common in Nigeria, often around evangelical rallies or overt efforts to attract converts among students.

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[33] For an example of this tendency, see Freedom Onuoha, "Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram?" United States Institute for Peace Special Report 348, Washington, DC, June 2014. For more information on what former participants actually say about their experiences and reasons for joining, see Mercy Corps, "Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth," April 16, 2016.

[34] Interview with senior imam, Maroua, Cameroon, April 16, 2018.

[35] Andrew Walker, *'Eat the Heart of the Infidel': The Harrowing of Nigeria and the Rise of Boko Haram,* (London: Hurst, 2016): 142-43.

[36] Group interview with CAMSU leadership, University of Yaoundé I, Yaoundé, Cameroon, February 19, 2018; group interview with Muslim students at the Universities of Yaoundé I and II, Yaoundé, Cameroon, February 22, 2018; and group interview with students at the University of Ngaoundére, Ngaoundére, Cameroon, March 25, 2018.

When asked about relationships between Muslim students and the broader Muslim communities of Ngaoundére and Maroua, interviewees offered two perspectives. The first emphasized that, overall, relationships between the two were peaceful, although occasional "generational" conflicts arise. The second noted that, as researchers in the region have already observed, Muslim activists and scholars on university campuses sometimes have different religious and social backgrounds from those of local Islamic communities and that these differences can lead to real conflict, although not necessarily violent.[37] Students and faculty interviewed often presented these conflicts in terms favorable to their own positions. One participant argued that an imam who had left his position in a mosque near campus some years earlier had done so because "the Muslim students knew the Quran better than he did."[38] However, when probed further, interviews revealed that the issue driving student-community tensions is often doctrinal conflict —that is, between local imams with a Tijaniyya Sufi background and Salafi-oriented "reformist" students affiliated with CAMSU.[39]

Although student religious activism on campus is having at least some impact on the "host" communities, most student interviewees described such tensions as a secondary issue. Instead, students interviewed for this research brief expressed greater concern about their daily struggle to just get by — as students adapting to a new and challenging university environment, as Muslims away from their home communities, or as young adults searching for job prospects and concerned about the trajectory of their future lives. While Muslim students clearly desire and seek out religious engagement and education on campus, the fact is that, for most, the real opportunity afforded by a university education is the possibility — albeit far from certain — of accessing one of the few stable, high-paying jobs in civil service, politics, or business. Such jobs require networks and personal connections, at times even more so than academic merit. Female students additionally face pressures to navigate persistent cultural biases about educated, employed women; some turn to religious education and visible performances of piety to avert criticism that their newfound status will make it harder for them to marry and have families.

These dynamics suggest that, when looking at higher education, those interested in pursuing P/CVE policies and practice in Cameroon need to be mindful of potential sources of grievances post-graduation, given social and cultural divides. This aligns with reports conducted outside of the Lake Chad Basin region that suggest that lack of access to respectable, high-paying, and stable employment may breed grievances that, in select cases, can be exploited by extremist actors.[40]

Enduring Issues in Religion and Higher Education

Findings from this research suggest that, despite religious diversity and demands for greater religious education, violent extremism and religious conflict are not necessarily clear and immediate concerns on university campuses in Cameroon. Still, the enduring legacies

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[37] M. S. Umar, "Education and Islamic Trends in Northern Nigeria: 1970s-1990s," *Africa Today,* 48, (2001), no. 2: 127-50

[38] Group interview with students at the University of Ngaoundére, Ngaoundére, Cameroon, March 25, 2018.

[39] Group interview with students at the University of Ngaoundére, Ngaoundére, Cameroon, March 25, 2018.

[40] See Mercy Corps, "Motivations and Empty Promises."

of secularism via laïcité, and the grievances its implementation in the higher education system has and will likely continue to engender among religious student populations, could prove problematic in many aspects. In addition, the spillover effects to university campuses of military responses to Boko Haram in Cameroon risk demonizing and further marginalizing Muslim student populations from social and political structures and from efforts to counter violent extremism.

Enduring Legacies of Laïcité: Regulation of Religious Actors and Opportunities on Campus

Nearly all of the interviewees who participated in this project noted a continued and growing demand for opportunities for students to develop their spiritual lives alongside their studies in the classroom. However, there was little consensus on the most effective way of meeting those demands.

Underlining this debate is the Cameroonian experience with laïcité, which has had a profound impact on not only the institutional dynamics of state-religion relations, but on how Muslim actors themselves imagine what is possible within public spaces. In the French context from which Cameroon (mostly) inherited it, laïcité is a doctrine that demands the state take on an "assertive role" in excluding the mobilization of religious identity from the political sphere.[41] In Cameroon, laïcité has never really functioned in that manner — in no small part because of colonial efforts to manage, contain, and coopt religious actors for their own ends. The Cameroonian state heavily regulates religious organizations and associations by requiring they register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization. New organizations are rarely authorized — currently, there are only 47 — leaving many new evangelical Christian and Salafi Muslim groups technically outside of the law. Much of the government's support for religious activities is funneled through registered associations. These associations have taken on roles formerly played by the colonial administration and its adjuncts in providing services like facilitating the hajj, surveilling imams, and siting and constructing new mosques.

In this sense, perhaps the best way to think about laïcité in Cameroon is not as state neutrality toward religion, but as an insistence on the primacy of state interests in dealings with religious communities.[42] Those who work with the government on university campuses

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[41] Ahmet Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies Toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2009): 11.

[42] Although this point emerged organically in our interviews, this particular conception of secularism is widely embraced by anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists. As anthropologists and religious studies scholars like Talal Asad (1993) and Timothy Fitzgerald (2007) have long argued, the emergence of secularism as a concept allowed early modern European states to define religion as a separate sphere of human activity apart from politics and state power, a matter of private belief and action rather than public interest. As anthropologist Hussein Ali Agrama (2012) argues in his study of Islamic law and state power in Egypt, contemporary states regularly use that power not simply to ban some religious groups and favor others, but to draw the line between where religious expression stops and where state power begins in ways that give the government power over what sorts of religious expressions are allowable in the public sphere and which are not. In Cameroon, we found that our interviewees were often hyper-aware of how the Cameroonian state had drawn these lines in the past, often in ways that placed "Christian" activities like religious music performances in public places on the allowable side, while "Muslim" activities like group prayer and holiday commemorations were defined as intrusions into secular public space. See Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Talal Asad, *Geaneologies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1993); Timothy Fitzgerald, "Encompassing Religion, Privatized Religions and the Invention of Modern Politics," in Fitzgerald (ed.) *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (London: Routledge, 2007).

and in recognized organizations are highly sensitive to the need to cultivate a relationship with state interests. As one interviewee from the Ministry of Higher Education noted, religious organizations *want* to be present on university campuses, since that is where many of Cameroon's most dynamic youth are already present and active.[43] This means adhering to the state's policies, even if, as in the case of an organization like the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY) in Cameroon — a Saudi-funded organization that provides significant financial assistance to Muslim university students and programming for university-bound Muslim youth — their actual theological commitments are in opposition to the Cameroonian educational system, which they consider to be a Western, colonial imposition.

As a result, civil society, faculty and staff, and student interviewees who participated in this study expressed strong support of at least a thin version of laïcité, which they described as "administrative tolerance" of faith communities,[44] the absence of state coercion in religious matters and a commitment to coexistence,[45] and "the state's recognition of religion and their recognition of each other" in a peaceful context.[46] Most noted that, at least formally, the state places few or no restrictions on the practice of Islam in public spaces, recognizes religious organizations like CAMSU that provide valuable services for Muslims, and provides the opportunity for Muslims on campus to participate in university life *as Muslims*.

For its part, CAMSU is, by far, the most important Muslim-led organization on Cameroonian campuses; its former leadership occupies important roles in government and civil society, which may be cause for its appeal. CAMSU's creation in 1988 coincided with the unprecedented wave of university protests that eventually shut down the University of Yaoundé for much of the period between 1990 and 1996. These protests reflected deep dissatisfaction with the quality of university programming, but they also reflected the deeper social divisions around the Villes Mortes protests and the 1992 elections. While many Muslim students were left out of the most divisive of these conflicts — between Anglophone and Francophone students, and between those of Beti and Bamileke ethnic backgrounds — the politicized environment created strong incentives for CAMSU to avoid politically charged public messages or stances that might disrupt their ability to work with university and ministry administrators.

In practice, like other Cameroonian student organizations, this means that the group is careful to obtain permissions, vet statements, and emphasize programming that does not overlap with what the university itself already provides. Instead of advocating for the creation of new Islamic studies programs or instruction through formal channels, they have emphasized providing it themselves, through a combination of informal, self-described "remedial" and more advanced instruction in "Islamic sciences" (that is, hadith, fiqh, tawhid) that resembles the standard curricula in Islamic universities across the region.[47] This care also extends to CAMSU's relationship within the Muslim community.

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[43] Interview with senior official, Ministry of Higher Education, Yaoundé, Cameroon, February 18, 2018.

[44] Interview with Arabic language instructor, University of Maroua, Maroua, Cameroon, April 28, 2018.

[45] Interview with senior imam, Maroua, Cameroon, April 16, 2018.

[46] Interview with Abdoulakarim Abbo Yerima, President of WAMY-Cameroon, Yaoundé, Cameroon, February 19, 2018.

[47] Group interview with CAMSU leadership, University of Yaoundé I, Yaoundé, Cameroon, February 19, 2018.

In interviews, current and former CAMSU leaders and affiliates often downplayed the possibility of intra-Islamic conflicts on campus. In practice, however, the group was founded on and continues to espouse a sort of "soft" Salafism, focused rhetorically on eliminating "superstition" and emphasizing "correct" religious education as a means of universalizing Islamic practices among its members, which can lead to social divisions. CAMSU also emphasizes the participation of female students — especially via educational programming — and outreach to Muslims with Sufi backgrounds and non-Muslims.[48]

CAMSU and other Muslim student activists remain an important force, not only on campuses, but also in the national conversation around Islam. Despite Cameroon's laïcité, religious programming appears regularly on Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) networks. Christian programming has generally received more airtime, but Muslim organizations and activists have taken on a major role in producing religious media content for an eager public.[49] CAMSU has been at the forefront of these efforts, offering engaging, interactive radio programs that competed (usually successfully) with the ACIC and state-sponsored broadcasts featuring local Sufi leaders doing little more than offering Quranic recitation.[50] During an interview in February 2018 with members of CAMSU's University of Yaoundé leadership, project researchers encountered CAMSU students actively engaged in producing video and podcast content for student and general audiences.

The Limits of Laïcité: Divisions, Grievances, and Implications

Although interviewees acknowledged that laïcité did not necessarily restrict religious engagement and the activities of religious organizations on campus, probing beneath the surface led to more complicated responses. Many Muslim participants spoke to concerns—seemingly widely held — that whatever laïcité might mean in theory, in practice the Cameroonian state often privileges Christian groups and organizations with "tacit" recognition — in the scheduling of classes and activities, holidays, and access to formal spaces. Several interviewees with long memories noted that Christian student choirs regularly received access to the University of Yaoundé auditorium for performances, while Muslim groups seeking to hold prayers there had been denied. Although these sorts of grievances can seem trivial, in the aggregate they can also add up to significantly undermined credibility for state actors claiming a commitment to religious neutrality when a more substantial issue arises. When combined with a more aggressive anti-West rhetoric, these grievances also have the ability — as they did in Nigeria over the course of several decades from the 1970s to the late 1990s[51] — to transform into demands for Muslim autonomy to adopt much more aggressive policies, like state-funded religious schools or even Sharia (Islamic law).

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[48] H. Adama, "Islamic Associations in Cameroon: Between the *Umma* and the State," *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa,* (2007), 227-41.

[49] Interview with former student activist and co-founder of Islamic radio station in Ngaoundére, Ngaoundére, Cameroon, March 24, 2018; and interview with Ibrahim Shérif, former director of CRTV in charge of Isamic programming, Maroua, Cameroon, May 9, 2018.

[50] H. Adama, H. "Islamic Communication and Mass Media in Cameroon." In R. J. Hackett and B. Soares, *New Media and Religious Transformation in Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015): 144-45.

[51] See, for example, Brandon Kendhammer, *Muslims Talking Politics: Framing Islam, Democracy, and Law in Northern Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

More pointedly, according to interviewees and despite the presence and activities of groups like CAMSU, in practice, Cameroon's laïcité makes it difficult or unattractive for Muslim participation in campus life or in public life more generally. As one group discussion of students framed the issue, for even many of their most committed stakeholders, Cameroonian universities like those in Ngaoundére and Maroua are still perceived as "forms of social organization produced by the Christian West" that struggle to produce knowledge truly relevant to the Muslim communities in which they are embedded.[52] Many of the campus activists interviewed noted that while religiosity — and demand for religiously-oriented academic programs of real interest to the local Muslim community — seems to be growing, there is simply no means for formally accommodating that demand under the current rules.[53]

Both the Universities of Ngaoundére and Maroua have found partial workarounds to these restrictions involving their departments of Arabic Language and Civilization. These departments are not allowed to hire faculty with training primarily in theology or associated fields — such as Sharia jurisprudence or Quranic translation. In practice, however, they have been able to skirt these rules by recruiting graduates of Islamic universities abroad who combined that training with other academic disciplines. These efforts speak to the demand from Muslim students for this material, even if it must be taught primarily in courses focused on linguistics or history.[54] Other interviewees noted that more explicitly Islamic subjects and courses are offered without problem in Nigeria, Sudan, and elsewhere in the region, which only strengthens the reputation and appeal of universities in Kano, Khartoum, Maiduguri, and Zaria as destinations for budding Cameroonian Islamic scholars.[55]

For at least some interviewees, laicité's prohibition on university faculty and formal curricula providing Islamic education poses an additional problem in the fight against extremism. Graduates from franco-arabe primary and secondary schools are able to acquire credentials on par with those issued by the secular state system and are eligible to seek university admissions. However, those who attended private Islamic primary and secondary schools receive only a certificate sponsored by the ACIC. This certificate is designed in coordination with religious authorities in Egpt, Nigeria, and Sudan, but it does not quality graduates for entry into Cameroonian universities or Cameroon's public service. As such, the structure effectively puts higher education out of reach for a significant number of Muslim students whose families either fail to understand the system, prioritize religious education, or are unhappy with the quality of the secular public alternatives. While this alone tells us little about whether they are likely to become involved in violent extremism and the ideologies that promote it, the fact remains that there is no real place for them in the domestic higher education system. This reality may, in turn, limit their future career prospects, which eliminates a potential point of leverage in addressing grievances that may lead to violent extremism. At the same time, it shapes the Muslim

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[52] Group interview with University of Maroua students, Maroua, Cameroon, April 25, 2018.

[53] Group interview with CAMSU leadership, University of Yaoundé I, Yaoundé, Cameroon, February 19, 2018; and group interview with students at the University of Ngaoundére, Ngaoundére, Cameroon, March 25, 2018.

[54] Group interview with senior faculty, University of Maroua, Maroua, Cameroon, April 2, 2018.

[55] Group interview with University of Maroua students, Maroua, Cameroon, April 25, 2018.

student population that *does* arrive at universities, providing a market for other actors to fill that gap informally once they have arrived on campus.

The Impact of Counterterrorism Policies on Campuses

In addition to perceived obstacles related to restrictions and limitations imposed by laïcité in practice, Muslim students and activists interviewed for this research brief also expressed concern about growing government surveillance on campus in the context of Cameroon's new anti-terror initiative and its impact on Muslim students across the country. Notably, these complaints echoed those of journalists and other activists across the country, who have alleged that the country's 2014 "suppression of acts of terrorism" law, ostensibly passed to facilitate the fight against Boko Haram, can be utilized as an all-purpose tool to police political dissent.[56]

Others observed that in Ngaoundére and Maroua, Muslim students were generally able to move through their equally Muslim-majority host communities with few problems. However, they also noted that they had heard or, in the case of student leaders who regularly work with colleagues across the country, seen first-hand that in Yaoundé, Douala, and elsewhere, local officials harassed female Muslim students wearing veils. Similarly, they noted that Muslim students generally, but especially women, faced negative attention off-campus.[57] Most of the activists interviewed expressed frustration and even powerlessness to confront these issues, which they saw as driven by a political conversation in which they had little foothold. Such perceptions are problematic, for they can serve to marginalize Muslim populations and may engender or further negative perceptions of the state and validate narratives spread by violent extremist actors.

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[56] Committee to Protect Journalists, "Cameroon Uses Anti-Terror Law to Silence Critical Press." September 20, 2017. https://cpj.org/2017/09/cameroon-uses-anti-terror-law-to-silence-critical-.php.

[57] Group interview with Muslim students at the Universities of Yaoundé I and II, Yaoundé, Cameroon, February 22, 2018.

Recommendations and Gaps in Knowledge

While the impact of the Boko Haram insurgency is evident across much of the Far North region of Cameroon, most Muslim university students in the country have been touched only indirectly by the conflict. This research brief cannot rule out the possibility that former university students or community members have participated in Boko Haram-related VE, but it also finds little evidence of mounting Islamic extremism on campuses that could be easily tapped by that group or others. What it finds instead is a growing body of Muslim students, faculty, and other stakeholders that broadly accepts that government-run universities serve a secular purpose and that recognizes the wisdom of "getting along" in a system where working with and through the state is essential to preparing for careers. These stakeholders are eager to position themselves and their institutions as bulwarks against extremism, and they see improved access to higher education for Cameroonian Muslims as a means to accomplish that goal.

Yet there is also growing dissatisfaction among many Muslim campus community members that, despite their desire for access, the state does not do enough to make being a Muslim on campus easier. Their most pressing concern is not the absence of religious educational opportunities within the university curriculum, but rather a sense — and one that is not entirely unfounded — that laïcité is not as neutral as the state has claimed and that Muslims remain at a disadvantage across the higher educational system.

In light of these findings, moving forward, P/CVE policymakers and practitioners concerned with the spread of violent extremism actors across the Lake Chad Basin should consider the following:

- Although the connection between exposure to higher education and the prevention of extremism is unclear and in need of further research, *promoting Muslim student access to higher education, and providing those students with support once they arrive, on campus can be valuable P/CVE programming*. This support can help to combat the real and perceived disadvantages that undermine Muslim student confidence in the Cameroonian government's commitment to religious equality, making them, in turn, more willing future participants and leaders in P/CVE efforts.

- Credible reports of bias and discrimination against Muslim students, particularly those on non-Muslim-majority campuses, suggest an immediate need for greater action to include them in P/CVE conversations and programs that promote and include concrete steps to build community trust, cohesion, and religious equality. This programming could take the form of campus interfaith dialogues; however, it also must highlight the unique social and academic contributions of Muslim students and faculty at religiously plural universities, their importance to the campus community, and the damage done to that community by discrimination against Muslims.

- As a recent report notes, P/CVE programs have had a tendency both to assume that certain religious groups (Salafis, notably) are especially "predisposed towards violence" and that officially-recognized and credentialed religious leaders are the best local partners for P/CVE work.[58] However, *on Cameroonian university campuses,*

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[58] Peter Mandaville and Melissa Nozell, "Engaging Religion and Religious Actors in Countering Violent Extremism." United States Institute for Peace Special Report 413, Washington, DC, August: 9-10, 2017.

Salafi-inclined student activists—and particularly those in CAMSU—are the most credible actors in promoting religious co-existence and countering extremism. They possess deep local knowledge, have a national presence, and already interact extensively with the Cameroonian state. *CAMSU student activists interviewed for this research brief expressed a clear desire to partner with international P/CVE programs, both as an implementing partner and a potential beneficiary of training and expertise.*

- Most Muslim university stakeholders interviewed during this research expressed an interest in engaging in activities to counter extremism on campus and in the surrounding communities, yet many held attitudes and beliefs about the nature and causes of VE that are not supported by evidence. *There is a need to connect these stakeholders with ongoing research and practitioner efforts on P/CVE in the Lake Chad Basin, and to provide training in research methods that will facilitate equal partnerships in efforts to identify drivers of and solutions to address violent extremism.*

Conclusions and Areas for Further Study

This report's top-line findings — that there is little evidence of growing violent extremism on Cameroonian university campuses, as well as significant potential resources for combatting it — are encouraging for anyone invested in P/CVE in the Lake Chad Basin. Yet there are also important signs of trouble. Muslim students and campus stakeholders perceive that they are treated unequally when it comes to state acknowledgement and recognition of their faith, that they face mounting state surveillance tied to the national "war on terror," and that they are often harassed and discriminated against when they are minorities on campus. Moreover, it remains difficult for many Muslim students to satisfy their own desires for a religiously mindful education on campus.

In addition to suggesting important areas for immediate action by P/CVE funders and practitioners, these findings also highlight important areas for further research, including the following:

- There is little evidence of support for or participation in violent extremism on campus. Is this because campus environments are effective at countering extremist narratives, or because the students who have access to them are simply less likely to be impacted by drivers of violent extremism?
- What are the implications for Muslim students' careers and future social and political engagement of their participation in campus religious organizations and activism? Do these experiences equip them for later success and engagement, or sour them to the prospect of participating fully in Cameroonian society *as Muslims*?
- What strategies are most effective for improving Muslim students' access to higher education and supporting their success on campus? What types of programs and opportunities can best engage and empower university stakeholders in designing and implementing local P/CVE activities?
- Beyond the finding that most Muslim stakeholders are aware of the threat of extremism and are interested in countering it, what do local conversations and debates look like, for example, around the nature of extremism, the impact of Boko Haram, and the relationship between state security force activities and extremism?

These are sensitive and complicated questions and require ongoing investments of resources to pursue. This research brief has filled a crucial gap by providing locally derived information on the impact of historical legacies and politics surrounding the treatment of religion on campuses in Cameroon. However, without further investigation, the means of creating impactful P/CVE programming aimed at the higher education sector are likely to remain elusive.

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INSIGHT INTO VIOLENT EXTREMISM AROUND THE WORLD

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