

# Debating Boko Haram



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# **Book Review: *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement,* by Alexander Thurston (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 333 pp.**

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The emergence, spread, and transmutation of Boko Haram into one of the deadliest terror groups in the world has attracted global attention from policy makers, scholars, researchers and analysts. Between 2009 and 2015, Boko Haram claimed more than 20 000 lives; according to some accounts this figure could be as high as 100 000. In addition, the group has destroyed property worth billions of dollars. There is a growing body of literature on various aspects of its history, ideology, violent disposition and impact. Within this context, Alexander Thurston's ground-breaking work presents a uniquely insightful, analytical documentation of the trajectory of this militant group.

The book uses an impressive style, with polished language and covers a wide range of themes relating to Boko Haram. In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the book contains five main chapters as follows: (1) The Life world of Muhammad Yusuf; (2) Preaching Exclusivism, Playing Politics; (3) Chaos is Worse than Killings; (4) Total War in Northeastern Nigeria; and (5) Same War, New Actors. As informative as the chapter

titles appear to be, they tell the reader much less about the topics covered in the book than the sub-chapters. The book is rich in references with the "selected bibliography" covering 21 pages, from page 307 to 327. The references include books, articles, reports, documents from governments and military organizations, newspapers, online news resources, blogs, Jihadi videos and audio recordings. There are written Jihadi sources as well as videos, recordings and unpublished documents by Nigerian Salafis (non-Boko Haram). The author also conducted 11 interviews, all via Skype and telephone, apart from one possible exception.

The book, which is "not an ethnography, but a documentary history," clarifies "how ideas and environments interacted to produce and sustain Boko Haram" (p.7). Its main theme is the "interaction between doctrine and events" (p.244) while its main thesis is that the Boko Haram violence "is largely driven by mutually reinforcing interactions between religious trends, including Boko Haram's initial worldview, and its political environment" (p.300). It follows events chronologically, documents facts, covers details

and analyses many of the important milestones in the history of Boko Haram.

Despite the book's richness, however, some of the issues discussed, which touch on the book's fundamental premise, require further investigation and discussion. This review focuses on only two such issues. The first of these is the relationship between Muhammad Yusuf and Shaykh Ja'far Mamoud Adam; here, this reviewer believes that the author needs to do more towards gaining a better understanding of the real issues involved. Secondly, there is a lacuna in the entire analysis of the book, which is the neglect of Muhammad Yusuf's history of active participation in the radical Muslim Brotherhood of Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and the possible influence of that movement on Yusuf's thoughts and career.

As far as the first issue is concerned, the author shows that Yusuf embraced Boko Haram through the "mentorship" of Ja'far Mahmoud Adam. The author struggles to defend this thesis throughout the book, claiming further that Yusuf was "a key protégé of Ja'far Adam: as such he was even Adam's main representative in Maiduguri's Muhammad Indimi Mosque" (p.84); however, the author does not cite any source. Here, it seems as if the author has been influenced by Andrea Brigaglia's "conjecture"<sup>1</sup> which, in an eccentrically unscientific way, tries to portray Ja'far as Yusuf's coach on Boko Haram; it appears that Thurston has unquestionably approved this. However, this thesis is problematic for a number of reasons including the fact that it is built on "conjectures," unsubstantiated and far-fetched "hypotheses,"<sup>2</sup> and often unsubstantiated claims that can easily be debunked with a little investigation. A misleading claim which Thurston himself has cited is the one by Khalifa Aliyu Ahmed Abulfathi, a Sufi detractor of Ja'far, on the role of Muhammad Yusuf at the Indimi Mosque. Abulfathi reports that "Adam once raised the hands of [Muhammad] Yusuf and said, 'if today there are no more scholars in Borno, this man is sufficient for you as an Islamic guide'" (pp.85-6). A statement of this kind needs to be thoroughly interrogated and verified, especially as it is attributed to a well-

known antagonist of Ja'far. An event that happened during Ja'far's lessons at the Indimi Mosque would certainly not have been attended by the renowned Sufi, Abulfathi. When he reports it, then scholars are duty-bound to subject it to authentication in order to establish its veracity.

The author discusses Ja'far's antagonism towards Boko Haram, only to reduce it to a mere "power struggle," relying on an anonymous analyst (p.102). A polemical question may be relevant here: thus, should all the Tijjani, Qadiri and other young and elderly Salafi scholars who challenged Boko Haram also be regarded as people who struggled for power against Muhammad Yusuf? The truth is that Ja'far was concerned about the predictable destructive consequences of Yusuf's call, just as he was worried about how the movement was drawing the Muslim community backwards and also tilting towards radicalization and violence. He was known to motivate the youth to pursue education and to specialize in various fields, especially medicine, engineering, law and other sciences. It is common knowledge that he toured the northern Nigerian universities where he would impress upon students that it is imperative to be serious with their studies of the various specializations of Western-style education and political participation. It is logical, then, that any call for the youth to withdraw from school, abandon politics and take to radicalism would be seen by him as an attack on the very mission that he had taken for himself. He would no doubt be antagonistic towards Boko Haram; a group built on the pillars of attacking "democracy, constitutionalism, alliances with non-Muslims, and Western-style education" (see p.106).

In common with many other scholars, Ja'far could have "mentored" Yusuf for some time on some things he mastered, believed in, practiced and preached. However, a clear picture is needed concerning the impact of each of Yusuf's teachers and "mentors" on his thoughts and approach before any conclusions can be drawn on who coached Yusuf on radicalism and antagonism towards Western-style education, democracy and

working under a “*kufir* government.” Before his first contact with Ja’far, Yusuf was already a popular young preacher, known for his controversial and extremist views. These views related to fighting the constitution, rejecting any participation in the “*kufir* government” and even the necessity of ousting that government by force; these are all views which Ja’far never had, either before or after going to Maiduguri. If Yusuf had really been “incubated” by several scholars at different stages of his career, then this conclusion would only be academically plausible if the influences and impact of each of these scholars and “mentors” were studied against the background of the ideologies and approaches of Yusuf and his Boko Haram group.

The author shows that Muhammad Yusuf “gravitated towards Salafism” in the late 1990s. By then, Salafism “possessed strong networks and mosque infrastructures in Maiduguri and beyond – infrastructures that Yusuf soon sought to both co-opt and challenge” (p.62). This statement raises a number of questions regarding the “whys” of Yusuf’s embracing of Salafism; for instance, was the motive only to use Salafism as a convenient platform for propagating an already crafted agenda which he understood could only be marketed if wrapped in a Sunni-Salafi attire given the popularity of the Salafi scholars? This statement also unveils that Yusuf had a short stay with Ja’far who started annual Qur’ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) in Maiduguri in 1994; however, as the author stated himself, Yusuf only joined Salafism in the late 1990s. Where had Yusuf been before then? What was he doing? What was he preaching? Here, the author has reported that: “During all the days of his preaching, Yusuf presented himself as a mainstream Salafi” (p.98), which implies that he only started preaching in the late 1990s. But this is far from being true, as Yusuf had already been a preacher since the early 1990s. Thus, he actually started preaching and giving sermons and lectures in 1992 as the mouthpiece of El-Zakzaky’s radical brotherhood. It would be useful, therefore, to investigate what he was teaching and preaching and whether it was the general alienation and

rejection of his earlier Zakzakiyya platform by the northern Nigerian Muslim community, and particularly the Borno community, that really brought him into Salafism to use its already-accepted alternative infrastructure in propagating his already established ideologies. Thurston seems to be suspicious of a similarly sinister agenda when he asserts that Yusuf “tried to smuggle jihadist thought into a Salafi community that had originally been oriented more toward non-jihadist Salafism” (p.109). It would have been useful to investigate, in more depth, how and from where he acquired the jihadist thoughts that he smuggled into Salafism. In particular, which of his non-Salafi Nigerian “mentors” could have introduced him to such ideologies and for how long was he attracted by, and preaching these ideologies, before embracing Salafism?

The author analyses Yusuf’s antagonism towards the emirates and traditional authorities and again links this to the influence of Ja’far. However, even the adversaries of Ja’far may find this viewpoint difficult to accept. It is well known that the position of the Salafis, Ja’far in particular, is one of respect, reverence, consideration and regard towards traditional institutions. It was common knowledge in northern Nigeria that he had direct and respectful relationships with most of the emirs such as the Sultan of Sokoto, the late Shehu of Borno, the late Emir of Kano, and those of Dutse, Kazaure, Gombe, Bauchi, Suleja and indeed nearly all of them. Many of his tapes are testimonies to this. This approach should be expected from a graduate of a Saudi Arabian university, bearing in mind the well-known apologetic stance of the Saudi Salafi scholars regarding the relationship between the ‘*ulamā*’ and the leaders. At times, he differed with some traditional leaders on specific issues and he even challenged their positions on certain matters. One example is the case of the Sufi-Salafi rift on the Sabuwar Gandu mosque where he and his fellow Salafis felt that the Emirate authorities in Kano had sided with the Sufis in doing injustice to them.<sup>3</sup> Even in this case, Ja’far specifically accused some elements within the institution, but not the

Emir, for trying to use their influence to mislead the Emir in to acting unjustly against them. He stated:

We do not see the entire Kano Emirate, from its *aliftoya*, from its A to Z, as being (comprised of) our enemies. There are those who love our cause; those who support the truth and justice... We have no doubt that there are those who do all this in the palace. But there are (also) our enemies who use their influence in the palace against us. These people can mislead the emirate to engage in a clash with religion.

And he continued by stating:

Out of our regard and obedience for them, we show reverence to our traditional leaders, we usually go to them and request them to do that (i.e., to give approval and royal blessing to open our mosques) even as we are aware that they have not been given that right constitutionally; it has been confiscated from them (by the colonial authorities), and we want to reclaim it for them...

This example shows that, even when he disagreed with the emirs on some issues, Ja'far usually expressed his disagreement with respect and regard for their status. Thus, he would address them as *Mai Martaba* (Your Highness) and would pray for Allah's protection, support and guidance for them as is the norm in the north. Nearly all Muslim scholars and groups, including the Tijjaniyya, Izala, the Salafiyya, and Qadiriyya, have a loyalty, reverence and a cordial relationship with the traditional institutions. For example, the Salafi organization Izala indicated clearly in its first constitution in 1978, in respect to its Council of Elders, that "the organization has a very high regard for this Council; its leader may be one of the Muslim emirs of this country-Nigeria. All the Muslim emirs of this country may be members of

the Council in their capacity as patrons of Islamic organizations in Nigeria."<sup>4</sup>

The exception to this cordiality is Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and his group. Since the 1980s, in fact, the latter have maintained a clearly antagonistic and disrespectful position towards the traditional authority, declaring an uncompromising stand against the Emirates and the Emirs; this is evident from their recorded songs and especially El-Zakzaky's lectures. In this regard, Bunza has noted that "The Iranian goal of releasing Muslims from monarchical and despotic rulers, as well as from 'imperialist' forces made Muslim youth in Nigeria more receptive to the influences of the Iranian Islamic political movement" (p.229).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the teachings of the movement present it clearly as "a movement of rebellion against the Nigerian state, traditional rulers, emirs and the Sultan of Sokoto" (p.232). On some occasions they even had clashes with the traditional authorities. For instance, in June 2005 they confronted the emirate authorities in Sokoto on the issue of access to the mosque.<sup>6</sup> In reference to the movement, Ashiru T. Umar relates that:

The members regarded all government officials, leaders, traditional title holders, all military and para-military personnel of the nation as agents of *dagutai* (infidels/agent of Europeans and Jews) who are serving the interest of the West at all cost. All sort of names were used against traditional title holders (*masu sarauta*). Names like *masu kahon tsumma* and *dagutai* (people with turbans as horns of rags and idols) were used to describe their persons and titles.<sup>7</sup>

Thurston makes an interesting analysis of the "murky beginnings" of Boko Haram (pp.86-7) where he analyses some important factors that led to the acceptance and popularity of the "founder" of Boko Haram, Muhammad Yusuf. This analysis is preceded by a thorough review of Yusuf's "lifeworld" with the objective of "clarifying how



ideas and environments interacted to produce and sustain Boko Haram.” Here, the interplay between religion, politics and Boko Haram is also examined. Despite this somewhat detailed coverage of the biographical history of Muhammad Yusuf and the social, economic, political and religious environment in which he was born and brought up, there is a major omission in the study, that is the complete avoidance of the Zakzakiyya movement led by Ibrahim Zakzaky, which is arguably the first most significant juncture in the career of Yusuf as an active member of a radical religious group. Thurston is aware of Yusuf’s participation in the Zakzakiyya movement, just as, judging from his references and assertions, he has read many works that have extensively analysed the history of the Zakzakiyya movement. Nevertheless, he seems to have underestimated the possible impact of that movement in framing the thoughts of Muhammad Yusuf and shaping his future career. Indeed, Thurston’s book seems to suggest that the Zakzakiyya movement played no role in defining events in northern Nigeria’s arena of Islamic discourse and activism, as well as no role in shaping intra-Muslim and interfaith engagements. He reduces to a mere claim the historical fact of Yusuf’s earlier “allegiance to al-Zakzaky” and his movement before their split with the *Jama’atu Tajdidil Islam* (JTI) in 1994 (p.66). For instance, Thurston (p.11) writes:

Reading through the historical record, I found many post-colonial northern Nigerian elites – university intellectuals, members of the hereditary ruling class, politicians, and others – espousing antipathy toward Western-style education and secular government. **Few of these figures advocated armed jihad in the 1980s and 1990s<sup>8</sup>** [...]. Nevertheless, it is important to show that Boko Haram’s ideas did not come out of thin air.

Although many points require more elucidation, Thurston moves on to another discussion: if “Boko

Haram’s ideas did not come out of thin air,” where did they come from? If there was antipathy towards Boko, and if some elites had called for armed jihad since the 1980s, then who were they, and how did their “Boko Haram” of the 1980s-90s relate to the second Boko Haram of the 2000s? Who were those major actors advocating for what renowned northern Nigerian scholars and historians such as Mahadi refer to as “the first Boko Haram?”<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, what were the possible influences of the ideological framings of the 1980s “antipathy toward Western-style education and secular government”? What influenced the advocacy for “armed jihad” on Muhammad Yusuf, who, reliably, was an active participant in the movement that openly criticized Boko, fought the “*kufur* government” and advocated for armed “*jihād*” against the security forces and the government? Who was the “incubator” of the first Boko Haram and did he “mentor” Muhammad Yusuf? Is there any evidence to show that the call to abandon Western-style schools as a pre-requisite for entrenching an Islamic State in Nigeria was apparently visible in an earlier youth movement in which Yusuf played an active part? The same applies to calls to withdraw from the employment in Nigeria’s “*kufur*” democratic government, against a background of incessant clashes with the security establishments. In a documentary history book long over than three hundred pages, dedicated to research into Boko Haram, it would seem to be a major oversight not to analyse how Boko Haram of the 1980s could have contributed to the making of Yusuf.

Moreover, El-Zakzaky himself had stressed, during the Shari’ah agitations of the early 2000s, that no Shari’ah could be implemented peacefully and that Shari’ah could only be practiced under a fully-fledged Islamic State established through bloodshed.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Yusuf was clear in his call for armed “jihad” against the government. However, Thurston writes that “Neither Izala nor the Medina graduates felt that Nigeria needed an armed jihad” (p.105).

Thurston traces the origins of the “Boko Haram” of the 1980s and 1990s to the very people



who, at that time, were busy using the media and touring higher institutions of learning to encourage students to pursue excellence in *boko*. He writes that “a more direct influence on Yusuf was Salafis’ mistrust of colonial and Western-style schools” and that, according to him, Abubakar Mahmoud Gumi was the leading Salafis who had this “more direct influence” in encouraging Yusuf to fight *boko*. This is simply misleading. But an even more farfetched analysis is the author’s rather out-of-context reference to the position of Waziri Junaidu (d. 1997; former *wazir* of Sokoto) on Boko, in his doctoral acceptance speech at Ahmadu Bello University; Thurston cites this while trying to buttress his point that Muslim scholars throughout the twentieth century had fanned the “flames of anti-Western sentiment” (p.75).

The book contains a few misprints. For example, *s* is omitted in “Islam itself forbid Western Style education” (p.14); *referred* is written as “deferred;” *al-Maydughuri* is written as “*al-Maydughari*” (replacing *u* with *a*) in footnote 15 (p.89); *to* is missing in “that did little curb elite corruption” (p.124); Buji Foi is addressed as Governor Sheriff’s minister instead of Commissioner (p.126); *is* is repeated in “...what is their reason is...” and *Mohammed* is written as “Mohamed” (p.147); *Kashim* is written as “Kashima” (p.203), and the name of *Imam Gapcia* written as “Dapcia” (p.223).

In all, Thurston has given readers a well-researched work on Boko Haram, which is unprecedented in its depth and rigor. He has demonstrated intellectual stamina, raised fundamental issues and made far-reaching policy recommendations. His work has also shown that there is a lot to be learned from, and still to be discovered, in Boko Haram studies. It has also posed a serious challenge to academics and scholars, especially those in the northern Nigerian universities; it has shown that they need to start seeing the world of Boko Haram as a vast and fertile area for research, with a number of researchable socio-political issues.

Like anybody else, Thurston might not always

be totally correct in his theses and hypotheses, as well as in his analysis and conclusions; however, he is certainly not totally incorrect. In fact, a library without *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* is an incomplete library.

#### Notes

- 1 Brigaglia states in an article that contains many contestable assumptions and conclusions that “...the present author’s *conjecture* is that Ja’far Mahmoud and the Ahlus Sunna leadership initially endorsed the creation of a training camp for militants, believing it would be used to support organizations involved in conflicts outside the country, and without foreseeing that it would be used to fuel an insurrection/terrorist organization in Nigeria.” (p.40). Emphasis added. See Andrea Brigaglia, “Ja’far Mahmoud Adam, Mohammed Yusuf and *Al-Muntada* Islamic Trust: Reflections on the Genesis of the Boko Haram phenomenon in Nigeria,” *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, 11 (2012): 33-44.
- 2 Andrea Brigaglia, “The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram,” *Diritto e Questioni Pubbliche*, 15 (2), (2015): 175-201.
- 3 Alexander Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching and Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017 and Kabiru H Isa, “The ‘triangular politics’ of mosque ownership and Imamship in Kano State: The case of Sabuwar Gandu Juma’a Mosque,” *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 36, 2017:173-195.
- 4 See Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997.
- 5 Mukhtar U. Bunza, “The Iranian Model of Political Islamic Movement in Nigeria (1979-2002),” edited by Muriel Gomez-Perez in *L’islam Politique au Sud du Sahara: Identités, Discours et Enjeux*, Paris: Karthala, 2005, p.229.
- 6 John N. Paden, *Faith and Politics in Nigeria: Nigeria as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*, Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2008.
- 7 Ashiru T. Umar, “A History of *Jama’atu Tajdidil Islamy* in Kano,” unpublished MA thesis, Department of History, Kano: Bayero University, Kano, 2011, p.58.
- 8 Emphasis added.
- 9 Abdullahi Mahadi, *A Memorandum on the Alleged Attack on the Chief of Army Staff’s Convoy by the Islamic Movement in Nigeria*, Gombe: International Institute of Islamic Research and Development, Gombe State University, 2016.
10. The statement was made by El-Zakzaky during an interview with *News Watch Magazine* published in the year 2000. This statement led to a series of rejoinders from various Salafi and Sufi scholars and intellectuals. The then most popular singer/Shari’ah activist, Ahmad Karaye, responded to El-Zakzaky in a popular song titled *Wakar Shari’ah*.

# The “Popular Discourses of Salafi Counter-Radicalism in Nigeria” Revisited: A Response to Abdullahi Lamido’s Review of Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram*

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“According to Fanon, the goal of the native intellectual cannot simply be to replace a white policeman with his native counterpart, but rather what he called, borrowing from Aimé Césaire, the invention of new souls. In other words, although there is inestimable value to what an intellectual does to ensure a community’s survival during periods of extreme national emergency, loyalty to a group’s fight for survival cannot draw in the intellectual as far as to narcotize the critical sense, or reduce its imperatives, which are always to go beyond survival to questions of political liberation, to critiques of the leadership, to presenting alternatives that are too often marginalized or pushed aside as irrelevant to the main battle at hand. **Even among the oppressed there are also victors and losers, and the intellectual’s loyalty must not be restricted only to joining the collective march.**”

“A condition of marginality, which might seem irresponsible or flippant, frees you from having always to proceed with caution, afraid to overturn the applecart, anxious about upsetting fellow members of the same corporation.”

(Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994. Respectively p.41 and p.52.)

In his review of Alexander Thurston’s monograph on Boko Haram, Abdullahi Lamido questions Thurston’s decision to refer to a meeting that purportedly occurred between Shaykh Ja’far Mahmoud Adam (d. 2007) and Shaykh Muhammad Yusuf (d. 2009) in the Indimi mosque in Maiduguri.<sup>1</sup> During this meeting the former, who was the most respected Salafi scholar of his time in Nigeria,

allegedly said about the latter, who would later establish the jihadi organisation known to the world as *Boko Haram*: “if today there are no more scholars in Borno, this man is sufficient for you as an Islamic guide.” Lamido’s position is that this meeting never actually occurred, and therefore Thurston is at fault for relying on a biased source (a Sufi scholar from Maiduguri) who mentioned

this meeting in an online publication<sup>2</sup>. From the empirical point of view, this argument should be easy to settle: according to various oral sources, the video of this meeting was broadcast in the first NTA (Nigerian Television Authority) documentary on Boko Haram, released shortly after the first Boko Haram crisis of July/August 2009. It should not be too difficult for anyone based in Nigeria to have access to this documentary and to verify it.

Lamido, however, moves beyond a mere criticism of an empirical point, and accuses Thurston of following my conjectures, advanced in four articles published between 2012 and 2018, in which, “in an eccentrically unscientific way,” I supposedly tried “to portray Ja’far as Yusuf’s coach on Boko Haram.”<sup>3</sup> This criticism necessitates a more articulate response.

#### *Of Conjectures and Refutations*

I am thankful to Lamido for taking my conjectures seriously enough to deserve his refutation. Conjectures, however – if one follows Karl Popper – far from being unscientific eccentricities, are the very essence of the methodology of a proper scientific enquiry.<sup>4</sup> It is only through conjectures and refutations, argued the German philosopher, that scientific knowledge advances. This does not necessarily mean, however, that if we had to come to an agreement about a specific empirical point (for instance, whether or not the Indimi mosque meeting ever occurred), the ongoing debate about the origins of Boko Haram would automatically be settled. Especially in the human sciences, *interpretation* is as important as, if not more important than, *fact-finding*. And as argued by Hans-Georg Gadamer, partly in response to Popper, such an interpretation (of a text or of a historical event) is determined as much by the hermeneutic horizon of the enquirer as by the object of his or her enquiry.<sup>5</sup>

One has to acknowledge that both Lamido and I are not entering this debate as empty observers, but as engaged participants. We not only have theological and political persuasions, but also genuine (and legitimate) personal and emotional

concerns; after all, the Boko Haram crisis directly and dramatically affected some of the places and the people we care about most in our lives. We thus enter the debate about the origins of Boko Haram with a baggage of theological, political and emotional commitments. These, far from being an obstacle to intellectual enquiry, are the essence of the role of the intellectual as an *amateur* (intended in the etymological sense of the word as “someone who *loves*, who *cares about* the object of his intellectual enquiry”) that Edward Said, in some of the most insightful pages of his celebrated 1993 lectures, proposed as the antidote to the dangers of the professionalisation of the human sciences imposed by modern academia.<sup>6</sup> As the *CCI Occasional Papers* are conceived precisely as a space for such forms of engaged debates, we are happy to host, and participate in, this exchange of “conjectures and refutations.”

Now, the first point that needs to be made clear is that, contrary to what Lamido argued, my conjecture is not, and has never been, that Shaykh Ja’far Mahmoud Adam had anticipated, supported or planned a jihadi insurrection against the Nigerian State like the one waged, shortly after his death, by Boko Haram. As I wrote in 2015, a jihad against the Nigerian government was obviously something that Shaykh Ja’far “would have certainly disapproved of.”<sup>7</sup> In this sense, I share with Lamido the opinion that Ja’far cannot be considered as the coach of Yusuf *on Boko Haram*.

Yet, Ja’far’s closeness with Yusuf, before the two broke away between 2002 and 2003, is so openly discussed by the first in his own speeches,<sup>8</sup> that no one can seriously question it, whether or not the Indimi mosque meeting actually took place. My effort in documenting and interpreting the origins and successive developments of the Boko Haram phenomenon, however, is entirely built on a fundamental scepticism towards *linear explanations*. In trying to explain the choices of the multiple local and global actors that collectively shaped the phenomenon (Muhammad Yusuf; his Izala and Ahlus Sunna critics including Ja’far; the NGO Al-Muntada al-Islami; the Saudi establishment;

War on Terror actors; Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib; Abubakar Shekau; the Islamic State; etc.), my attention was always on the discontinuities, contradictions and hesitations of their individual or collective trajectories. For I believe that our human condition is defined more by the push-and-pulls of multiple, often contradictory commitments, than by linear strategies, limp “worldviews” and direct cause-effect relations.

Now let us move to my actual conjectures. The first conjecture I had advanced concerned the Kanamma camp issue. At the time when I was writing, this camp was considered, in most of the literature, as having hosted a puritanical but pacific Salafi commune, which had migrated from the Indimi mosque and inexplicably turned violent in late 2003 leading to brief clashes with the Nigerian military. My conjecture was that this camp was hosting the first experiment of a Jihadist training camp in Nigerian territory, perhaps (I used a question mark in the original quote) linked to Al-Qaeda. Today, at least two internal sources (a Boko Haram member interviewed by the International Crisis Group, and an article published by the Al-Qaeda official magazine)<sup>9</sup> suggest that the leader of Kanamma, Muhammad Ali, had allegedly received a promise of funding from Osama Bin Laden in order to start a branch of his organisation in Nigeria. The money never arrived at its destination and so the training in the camp never started. This can possibly explain why the Kanamma youth, impatient and frustrated, decided to act. The decision led to disagreements with Yusuf himself, who in contrast, advised patience and a long-term strategy. Yet, the fact that the Kanamma experiment was *meant at* hosting an Al-Qaeda camp, is a widely accepted hypothesis today; therefore, my first conjecture stands stronger now than four years ago, when it was formulated.

My second conjecture was that some of the mainstream Salafi leadership of Izala and Ahlus Sunna, and perhaps even Ja’far himself, had originally agreed to, or silently allowed, the establishment of such a liaison between the Kanamma group and Al-Qaeda, believing that this

liaison would have been used to provide fighters for the jihad they supported in Afghanistan (and then in Iraq), and *not an insurgency against the Nigerian government*. My hypothesis was supported by the fact that at the time, various prominent scholars in the Izala/Ahlu Sunna camp were openly preaching in favour of Al-Qaeda, as well as by the fact that before migrating to Kanamma, the group had originally formed among the public of the Indimi mosque, which was the most popular, mainstream Izala/Ahlu Sunna mosque in Maiduguri. A following section of my response will elaborate more on this. In the meantime, it is important to stress that in analysing the data that demonstrate that a preaching of this nature occurred for various years, I have never advanced the argument that the Izala/Ahlu Sunna leadership comprised inherently “violent, extremist terrorists.” My analysis, in fact, has always deliberately avoided the use of emotionally charged, and politically and empirically elusive categories as “violent extremism,” or adjectives as “terrorist” attributed to individuals (as opposed to actions). Violence, from my point of view, is a universal possibility of human life, and not an immutable and essential attribute of certain individuals or “worldviews.” As for extremism, it is a purely contextual attribution, whose content depends on the specific nature of the “moderation” that a given discourse is trying to promote. Terrorism is a political strategy that can potentially be adopted by insurrectionist movements of any political or religious colour, and even by the very state power that is engaged in counter-insurgency strategies.<sup>10</sup> While better than any of the above, “jihadi” too is a tricky term, not only because Jihad has acted historically, and will probably continue to act, as a powerful symbol for Muslims of all orientation (both as a tool of mobilisation for communities in situations of duress and for states in justification of their expansionist agendas); but more importantly because a jihad is always *under someone’s leadership and against a specific enemy*, an obvious fact that the use of the adjective jihadi as a generic label



tends to obscure. This is why I have always preferred to refrain from using any of these labels whenever possible, and have limited myself to (1) describing ethnographically the multi-layered public discourses produced by the Nigerian Salafis; (2) narrating (and drafting hypotheses on the causes of) their gradual implosion, seen as a historical process that occurred over many years; (3) pointing to this implosion as the necessary background to understand the conflict started in the early-to-mid-2000s between the leadership of Izala/Ahlu Sunna and Muhammad Yusuf.

My third conjecture, strictly linked to the second, was that the break between Muhammad Yusuf and the Izala/Ahlu Sunna leadership was not due to the progressive ideological radicalisation of the former, as suggested by most analysts, but to the progressive de-radicalisation of the public discourses of the latter. These rapidly shifted, between the early and the late 2000s, from endorsement to avoidance to rejection of the global jihad of Al-Qaeda, creating a sense of disorientation in the Salafi public. This shift was probably produced by a mix of external pressures (exerted, for instance, by the Saudi *'ulamā'* loyal to the Kingdom, which from the year 2003 onwards was increasingly invested in the War on Terror), internal politics (the consideration that the *takfir* of the Nigerian government theoretically enjoined by Al-Qaeda's ideology, was not in the political interests nor in the cultural chords of most Nigerian Salafi constituencies) and ethical re-thinking (the rejection of the mass violence that Al-Qaeda promoted as the necessary strategy to achieve its aims). This shift had far-reaching consequences, for it alienated those, like Yusuf, who decided to remain faithful to the promotion of an ideology styled on Al-Qaeda's, even when they were unable to entertain direct links with the leadership of the latter.

Organic connections between Al-Qaeda-Central and the Nigerian arena also existed, but there is no need to exaggerate them. Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that the entire structure of Al-Qaeda was built upon hundreds of loose

connections woven around only a handful of organic ones. This looseness has been Al-Qaeda's strength, as it has allowed it to spread rapidly even in the presence of the massive security apparatus displayed by the various countries engaged in their (often conflicting versions of) War on Terror. But it has also been Al-Qaeda's weakness, as it has prevented it from exerting a full control on the many franchises it has produced. As documented by the many epistolary exchanges between, on the one side, al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden and, on the other side, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, Al-Qaeda-Central could never exert full control even over Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has arguably been its most important and most successful franchise. In Nigeria, we know that a group organically connected to Al-Qaeda-Central tried to emerge in the early 2000s. The experiment was short-lived if not aborted. The same group re-emerged, through a connection with AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Maghrib) in 2009-2012, but it was soon decimated by the combined effects of the repression of the Nigerian security forces and of Shekau's rival jihadi project.

Still, we have to remember that Al-Qaeda in Nigeria was not only an organisation; it was also a discourse and a symbol that had far-reaching effects in the local Islamic arena, featuring for several years in public discourses aired from pulpits of mosques and desks of universities, or in literature circulated and discussed in Muslim students' reading groups. This dimension tends to be forgotten in the debates around the possible extent reached by Al-Qaeda *as an organisation* in Nigeria, as well as in the analyses that read the Boko Haram vs Izala/Ahlu Sunna break as the mechanical and linear outcome of the ideological rift between a supposedly coherent and stable "Jihadi" project as opposed to a supposedly coherent and stable "Quietist" one.

My fourth conjecture, which can be considered to be a corollary of the second and third ones above, was that the origins of the very nickname *Boko Haram* are impossible to understand without looking more carefully at the discourses of the

Izala/Ahlu Sunna scholarly leadership against Yusuf. Here, in particular, one should take note of the curious but conspicuous absence of any reference, in the public engagements between the two groups, to the global jihad of Al-Qaeda. It is – I argued – because they were prevented by their former public endorsement of Al-Qaeda from addressing the issue openly, that the Izala/Ahlu Sunna leaders who critically engaged Yusuf in public debates focused their discourses only on the relatively minor issue of *halaccin karatun boko* (permissibility of acquiring education in the government school system). From these debates, which were meant to hide more than they revealed, the smokescreen nickname *Boko Haram* filtered to the wider Nigerian Muslim public, and from it, to the international press and scholarly community.

My fifth and final conjecture was that the Salafi constituencies of Nigeria imploded naturally, “when a multiplicity of trends and rhetorical registers that had overlapped before, were not allowed to co-exist anymore,”<sup>11</sup> because of Nigeria’s exposure “[to] the pressure created the War on Terror.”<sup>12</sup> In order to clarify what I alluded to with this final point, as well as to reinforce my argument concerning points two, three and four above, my response will now turn to the speeches of Professor Isa Aliyu Pantami, who, more than anyone else in the Izala/Ahlu Sunna camp, can be seen as embodying the “counter-radical” discourses of the Nigerian mainstream Salafis that tried to delegitimise Muhammad Yusuf in the mid to late 2000s.

#### *The Salafi Counter-Radical Discourses in Nigeria Revisited*

In 2012, an anonymous author published a rich analysis of the public debates that took place in the mid-2000s between some prominent Nigerian Salafi scholars and Muhammad Yusuf.<sup>13</sup> One of the main sources of that author was the public debate that occurred on 25 June 2006 between Isa Aliyu Pantami and the first leader of Boko Haram.<sup>14</sup> This article represented a turning point in the literature on Boko Haram, as it was the first

contribution that started to take the ideological dimension of Boko Haram seriously and to submit it to a rigorous analysis. According to the author, Yusuf’s ideas represented a form of Salafi radicalism, while those voiced by Pantami (and by Ja’far M. Adam, whose speeches against Yusuf are also discussed in the same article) were a form of Salafi counter-radicalism. This article extensively analysed the positions of the two camps on the issues of *halaccin karatun boko* (the legitimacy of western-style education) and *halaccin aikin gwamnati* (the legitimacy of working for the [Nigerian] government), but at the same time, as I argued elsewhere, it has failed to take note of, and to try to account for, a curious and conspicuous characteristic of these engagements; that is, the absence of any exchange of arguments on the legitimacy of Al-Qaeda’s project of global jihad. After all, while taking care to avoid threading any organic links with Al-Qaeda,<sup>15</sup> Yusuf had been clear in his speeches: his was “a call to Jihad, and anyone who considers it as a call to preaching or education or teaching, or a call without essence, has not understood this call: for this is a jihadi call and a jihadi movement; a community of fighters, and not a community of preachers only.”<sup>16</sup> Why, then, did Ja’far and Pantami not feel the need to discuss the issue of Jihad in their public engagements with him?

In order to account for this silence and to locate the counter-radical discourses of the Nigerian Salafi leadership in their broader historical and discursive context, I suggest that one should avoid dichotomous and a-contextual categories such as “radical” and “counter-radical,” and look more carefully at the discourses that the same Salafi scholars who were critically engaging Yusuf on *karatun boko*, were voicing, during the same years, on Al-Qaeda and its call for global jihad. In the following pages, I will briefly summarise and discuss three audio documents<sup>17</sup> that, I believe, will help to achieve the above goals.

The first of these documents is from a lecture delivered by Pantami in the aftermath of the Yelwa Shendam massacres (May 2004), when

armed militias of (mainly Christian) ethnic Tarok attacked the community of Hausa Muslim residents, killing hundreds.<sup>18</sup> The conflict was rooted in the tensions between “indigenous” and “settlers” that structurally characterise Nigeria’s ethnic-based federalism, with explosive consequences especially in the Middle Belt. Religion has naturally played a role in solidifying identities and exacerbating this conflict, and both Christian and Muslim leaders have contributed to the process. In his speech, Pantami invites Muslims, especially “Ahlu Sunna” (read Salafis), to be sceptical of politicians and religious leaders calling for peace and understanding, and to retaliate with jihad: “this jihad is an obligation for every single believer, especially in Nigeria” (*hād̄hā jihād fard̄ ‘ayn ‘ala kull muslim wa-khuṣūṣan fī Nijīriyā*). Subsequently, Pantami offers himself as a volunteer to mobilise the Hisba police of the Muslim-majority states and to be appointed as the “commander” (Hausa: *kwamanda*) of a militia ready to travel to Yelwa Shendam to join the fight in defence of the Muslims. The speech, which is about twenty minutes long, concludes with the prayer: “Oh God, give victory to the Taliban and to al-Qaeda” (*Allahumma ṛṣur Ṭālibān wa-tanzīm al-Qā’ida*).<sup>19</sup>

During his speech, Pantami is in tears and his voice is often broken by sighs. The genuineness of his emotional response to what was without doubt a dramatic episode in the history of violent conflict in Plateau State is obvious. This has to be acknowledged in order to contextualise the speech in its historical context, this emotional response providing another striking example of the politics of emotions that Alexander Thurston has correctly identified as one of the main discursive strategies of Muhammad Yusuf.<sup>20</sup>

More interesting, however, is a second speech, delivered by Pantami in 2006. In the speech, Pantami offers his public condolences for the death of the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Zarqawi. His introductory words are as follows:

May God have mercy on Aḥmad al-Fāḍil al-Khalayleh, *rahmatullāh ‘alayhi*.  
May God forgive his mistakes. He is a

human being, he has certainly some mistakes in front of God, so may God forgive his mistakes. Who am I talking about? He is Abū Muṣ‘ab al-Zarqāwī.

He was born in 1966 of the Christian era, that is forty years ago. [...] After some time, he was given responsibility for a camp in Herat. It was the Commander of the Faithful (*Amīr al-mu’minīn*) Mollah Omar – may God preserve him – who personally gave him the authority to run this camp.<sup>21</sup>

This introduction is followed by a brief biography of the deceased, with references to the disagreements between Zarqawi and Bin Laden during the Iraqi war, over which the author prefers not to take a clear position. After discussing his death in an American air strike, the author adds a prayer: “oh God, grant us the death of martyrdom,” repeated three times in Arabic and Hausa. Subsequently, he narrates that two days earlier, he had received an sms message of condolences for Zarqawi from a Professor at Bayero University Kano,<sup>22</sup> bearing the words: “martyrdom for Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi, *insha Allah!*,” and followed by a quote of the Quranic verse on martyrdom (Q2:154). Then, Pantami continues:

To this date, in the Community of the Prophet we have some awesome people, people of awesome faith,<sup>23</sup> who follow the creed of the Sunna and thanks to whom the enemies of God are unable to find rest in this world. They have killed the Shaykh, the martyr Abdallah Yusuf Azzam – may God have mercy on him – but did the struggle end? They went on to strike Chechnya and they killed many of them: did it end? [...] Whenever one goes, another one comes, and he is even more awesome than the first. The mother of Abū Muṣ‘ab – may God have mercy on her – died in 2002 of the Christian era. Before she passed



on, she prayed to God that her son may die as a martyr, so as to prevent the enemies of God to lay their hands on him. [...] Did God answer her prayer or not? May God, then, take our lives too, as well as the lives of our teachers, as martyrs on the path of the creed of the Sunna. In a hadith reported in the collection of Muslim, the Prophet (sAws) said “whoever asks God martyrdom in sincerity, God will give him the station of the martyrs even if he dies on his bed.”<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps even more interesting than the second audio of Pantami’s lectures is the third and last one that I submit in this response. This is a lecture entitled *Suwaye Taliban* (Who are the Taliban), delivered by Pantami on 19 Sha’ban 1427 (12 September 2006). In the introduction, the author states that the lecture was prompted by the love that the “people of the Sunna” (in this context, meaning the Salafis) have for the Taliban of Afghanistan, “due to all the signs of goodness that the latter display (*al’amomin alheri da ake gani tare da su*),” as well as in response to the efforts of “some western unbelievers” (*wasu kafirai daga western world*) who seem to have no other goal than to spoil the image of the Taliban by spreading false information about them.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, continues Pantami, many Salafi youth in Nigeria, because of their extreme passion for political struggles (*tsabar so ga harkar gwagwarmaya*), have used the name of the Taliban to draw people towards sinful actions (this being obviously a reference to the “Nigerian Taliban” of Kanamma). The lecture, therefore, aimed to correct, on the one side, those in Nigeria who misuse the name of the Taliban, and on the other side, those who criticise them based on the false information provided by the western media. After this lecture, “if we see something that is worth imitating in them, we will imitate them based on certain knowledge (*‘ala ‘ilm wa-yaqīn*)”. Pantami perceives all of this as a “purely academic *al’amari* (issue)” aimed at

responding to a demand for reliable information on the topic emanating especially from the base of Salafi youth in University campuses. And this is why, he continues, a few years before he had already delivered many similar lectures on the topic: in 2001, on the campus of the University of Maiduguri; in 2002, on the campus of the College of Legal and Islamic Studies, Misau; and, also in 2002, on the campus of the Veterinary Research Institute, Vom.

After the introduction, the lecture describes the context of the emergence of the Taliban in the Afghan Jihad of the 1980s against the Soviet forces. The author mentions all the major factions of the Afghan *mujāhidīn* in remarkable detail. His reconstruction, however, is partly vitiated by the lack of any mention of the most popular Afghani militia leader (at least in the north of the country), Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was killed by two Al-Qaeda suicide bombers on 9 September 2001. Likewise, there is no mention of the early, joint US, Saudi and Pakistani involvement in the conflict. In Pantami’s “purist” reading of world geo-politics (a kind of reversed clash-of-civilizations scenario), there is no place to account for the killing by Al-Qaeda’s bombers of a hero of the Afghan resistance, nor for the multiple alliances across Muslim and non-Muslim countries that characterise the conflicts of the Middle East and Central Asia, but only for Muslims versus unbelievers.

The Arab foreign fighters who helped the Afghani resistance, and who would later develop into the Al-Qaeda network, have, on the contrary, a prominent role in his reconstruction. The Afghani resistance, in fact, according to Pantami was helped by the man who “is considered as the scholar of all the militants of this era, [...] *al-duktūr al-shaykh al-mujāhid* Abdallah Yusuf Azzam – may God have mercy on him, pardon him, sanctify his secret and accept him among the martyrs.” This statement is followed by a brief biography of Azzam (d. 1989), with emphasis on the good relationships entertained by the latter with the Saudi scholars Bin Baz (d. 1999), Ibn al-‘Uthayimin (d. 2001), Salman al-Ouda and Safar al-Hawali.

Osama Bin Laden is also mentioned in various instances in this section, with his name always followed by the formula *hafizahu 'Llāh* (may God preserve him). At the same time, however, the government of Saudi Arabia is also the object of unreserved praises, being described as “our *qibla*” and “the original abode of faith.”

The author mentions the Saudi and Pakistani involvement in the Afghani conflict as starting only after the end of the first Afghani war, in a section titled “the post-Soviet era.” It was the leadership of the Arab *mujāhidīn* – Pantami continues – who invited Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to be involved in the post-war peace agreement, and not Saudi Arabia and Pakistan who, in coordination with the United States, had funded the *mujāhidīn* for years. References are made to a meeting held between all the leaders of the Afghani factions in Medina, with quotes from a book authored by the Saudi scholar Mūsā al-Qarnī, who is one of Pantami’s main sources (and who would later, in 2011, be handed a 20-year prison term by the Saudi government). Similarly, the anarchy that followed the end of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan is not attributed by Pantami to the contrasting agendas of the various political actors involved (the Afghani factions, the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab foreign fighters), but to the “divide and rule” policy of the *kuffār* (unbelievers).

It was in response to this anarchy that “the Commander of the Believers, Mullah Mohammad Omar, may God preserve him,” entered the scene. The formation of the Taliban, on 1<sup>st</sup> Muharram 1415, corresponding to 24 June 1994, is reconstructed through accurate historical detail fused with some hagiographic data: the 313 scholars who first established the Taliban, for example, correspond to the 313 companions who fought the Battle of Badr (624) alongside the Prophet. The ultimate goal of the Taliban was to bring peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan by “establishing an Islamic leadership, a Caliphate and the Sharia, as every Muslim is commanded to do.” Here Pantami relies not only on the book by

al-Qarnī but also on *The Rise of the Taliban*<sup>26</sup> and on a book by the Nigerian Salisu Shehu, *Who are the Talibans*.

Pantami feels that the Taliban are not immune from error. His particular concern is that “about 5% of them” have a penchant for Sufism, which obviously is, in his eyes, an imperfection in their credentials. The remaining 95%, however, are rooted in the “purest Sunni doctrine” (*tataccen akidar Sunna*): “they are people raised in the religious way, may God enable us to imitate their good” (*mutane masu tarbiya ta addini, Allah ya ba mu ikon koyi da alheransu*). In particular, Pantami feels that the Taliban are to be praised and imitated in three respects. The first is the destruction of the two “idols of the Buddha” at Bamiyan. In imitating them, the Nigerian Muslims should long for the day in which every “idolatrous image” will be erased from the Nigerian currency, and no picture will be used on passports and electoral posters, for photos and images are contrary to the Sharia. The second is their effort to impose a strict adherence to the Sunna in the dress code of Afghani women (full face-veiling) and men (fist-long beard and trousers cut at the length of the ankle). The third is the protection offered to Osama Bin Laden after the Americans rushed to accuse him of being responsible for the events of 9/11, by arguing that not only was there insufficient proof of his involvement, but also that “even if he had done it, according to the Sharia he should not be handed to you.”

The section concludes with a quote from Safar al-Hawali which is also a favourite scare-quote in the reservoir of contemporary islamophobes, according to which “hating America is part of our creed.” This is followed by prayers for the success of the Taliban; new comparisons between the Taliban and the Prophet’s Companions; and prayers for Bin Baz, al-Albani, Ibn al-‘Uthayimin and Azzam. Finally, there is an invitation to learn from the Taliban’s experience by studying hard “medicine and engineering” while patiently preparing for the moment when Nigeria will be ripe for a leader of the stature of Mullah Omar.

For further referencing, Pantami invites his public to read the following books: *Join the Caravan* and *al-Difā’ ‘an arāḍī al-muslimīn* by Abdullah Azzam; *Amrīka allatī ra’aytuha* and *As’ila ‘an Amrīka* by Salman al-Ouda.

The three audios summarised above provide a perfect illustration of my point that in the early-to-mid-2000s there were various, contradictory levels of discourses and ideological allegiances coexisting within the public preaching of the Izala/Ahlu Sunna leadership. One level was promoting Al-Qaeda’s Global Jihad; a second level was promoting the “politico-Salafi” ideas of the likes of Salman al-Ouda and Safar al-Hawali, encouraging political participation in Nigeria; while a third level was expressing loyalty to Saudi Arabia. As I argued in 2015, the three categories of “Jihadi, politico, and quietist Salafis” might have some heuristic value in the context of Saudi Arabia’s absolute monarchy, but become virtually meaningless for the global Salafi constituencies, where the three levels of discourse emanating from the three competing canons overlap, creating unpredictable hybridisations.

Nothing prevents, in fact, a group of Salafis in a specific country to rely on some early fatwa by Bin Bāz or al-Albānī to cautiously advocate participation in their national politics, while at the same time promoting (openly or secretly) the cause of jihad somewhere else in the world (yesterday Iraq or Chechnya, today Syria or Libya), but also recognizing the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy.<sup>27</sup>

As I have already stated above, my point in referring to the preceding speeches is not, and has never been, to argue that scholars such as Pantami and his fellow Izala/Ahlu Sunna leaders were “violent Jihadis,” for I do not believe in the usefulness of this label in the first place. What I insist in pointing out is that Izala’s “counter-radical” discourses against Muhammad Yusuf and his associates (discourses to which we owe the very label “Boko Haram” with

which the group came to be known) were a castle built on the sand of the unsustainable co-existence between multiple and contradictory levels of symbolic and ideological allegiances. Through lectures such as the ones discussed above, the mainstream Salafi clerics were presenting to the Nigerian public an imaginary scenario where al-Hawali and al-Ouda (icons of the politico-Salafis), Bin Baz and the Saudi government (symbols of the quietist Salafis), Bin Laden and al-Zarqawi (epitomes of the jihadi Salafis), appeared as one single entity engaged coherently in a conflict with the “unbelievers” (the Soviet Union and subsequently, the United States) and the *Rafidites* (the Shia and the Iranian government). Yet, at the time, al-Hawali and al-Ouda had already spent five years (1994-1999) in Saudi prisons, having been arrested by the Saudi government for their political activism, with the blessing or the silence of Bin Baz who was the *mufti* of the country. And in 2003, Al-Qaeda had started a campaign of bombings against the *ṭāghūt* (idolater, tyrant) Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is easy to see how, to an inquisitive mind such as Yusuf’s, a little additional research into the geo-politics of the Middle East and the cleavages of Saudi Arabia’s internal politics, or some first-hand reading of the literature produced by the Al-Qaeda-aligned scholars, would result into a state of *cognitive dissonance* and encourage him to question the authority of the scholars from whom these lectures emanated.

Indeed, the Nigerian Salafi public, which is passionately inquisitive by nature and nurture, was not passively receiving the knowledge provided by Pantami’s lectures. The inherent ambiguities, as well as the possible unintended consequences of his lectures, are perfectly represented in the three questions asked by the audience after his lecture on the Taliban. The first questioner asked how one should respond to those Salafis who reject Osama Bin Laden because of his killing of innocent unbelievers; this is probably a reference to the quietist and Saudi-loyalist strand of Salafi thought in Nigeria, represented by scholars such as Muhammad Sani Umar Rijiyar Lemo. Pantami

responded to the questioner by saying that yes, these scholars have some truth, for Bin Laden is liable to make mistakes, but “I still consider him as a better Muslim than myself.” “We are all happy whenever unbelievers are being killed,” continued Pantami, “but the Sharia does not allow us to kill them without a reason.” “Our zeal (*hamasa*) should not take precedence over our obedience to the sacred law.” The first question, which tried to push the author to take a clear position on the strategy and the ethical legitimacy of Al-Qaeda’s Jihad, was thus evaded.

The second questioner asked how a jihad could take place in Nigeria when there is no consensus over a leader, in contrast to the consensus that (if one has to believe to the lecture) existed in Afghanistan around the figure of Mullah Omar. Pantami answered that this was precisely the goal of his lecture; in other words, to point out the need to establish in Nigeria an overall Islamic leadership similar to Mullah Omar’s, before moving to the next step. *In Nigeria*, continued Pantami (emphasis added), this is the time for correction (*gyara*) and preparation (*isti’dād*): “How can you start a jihad, when your father is still going around without a beard? When your mother is still going around with a mere transparent veil (*gyale*) rather than with a full-length *hijab*?” Any effort to start a jihad without having established correct Islamic practices is doomed to failure, and this is precisely the main lesson to draw from the Afghan Taliban, whose success was established upon their unwavering attachment to the Sunna. This is the reason, concluded Pantami with a new reference to the “Kanamma affair” and to his critical engagement with Yusuf, why “any attempt to start a struggle that you have seen me rejecting so far, [it was because] it was not led by scholars and there was no understanding of the Sunna.” Thus the second question, focused on the possible implementation of jihad in Nigeria, was answered with a call for postponement (*irjā’*, Yusuf would say).

The third questioner asked how to make sense of the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the western countries fighting Al-Qaeda, such as the United

Kingdom and the United States. Unfortunately, the recording stops before one can listen to Pantami’s answer. As Pantami is not an outsider to Saudi Arabia (he holds a teaching position in the Faculty of Computing and Information Systems of the Islamic University of Medina), it would have been particularly interesting to hear his position on the matter.

The documents discussed above, together with similar ones published elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> should have now conclusively demonstrated that until the mid-2000s, it was ordinary for Nigeria’s mainstream Salafis to endorse Al-Qaeda publicly in their speeches and lectures. In this respect, Nigeria was probably a unique case in the Muslim world. It is difficult, in fact, to imagine any other country in West Africa or in the Middle East where similar public endorsements of Zarqawi and Bin Laden, during the same years and aired in the halls of public universities, would be so uncontroversial (to the point of passing unnoticed to most outsider observers).

As historians and anthropologists writing on Boko Haram (a movement that emerged during the same years and at least partly overlapped with the public that attended Pantami’s and Ja’far’s lectures), we should not have failed to notice, or swept under the carpet, the Nigerian anomaly of a “counter-radical” Salafi organisation that continued to preach in favour of Al-Qaeda well into the year 2006. By doing that, we have done an unexpected favour to the terrorism study experts we accuse, rightly or wrongly, of being obsessed with the threat of Al-Qaeda.<sup>29</sup>

It is only by taking these diffuse pro-Al-Qaeda discourses into consideration, and by putting them in their authentic historical and discursive context (just as we should be ready to document the growth of islamophobic discourses in the West, and seriously take into account the possibility that they have provided an ideological rationale for anti-Muslim violence in the West), that our writings as historians can reflect the analytical depth and the ethical integrity we claim for our disciplines.



Does the existence of these discourses, by itself, prove beyond any doubt the most contentious of my conjectures, i.e. that when a feeble liaison with Al-Qaeda was being established by a small group of Nigerians which was mainly composed of university students and which, before migrating to Kanamma, was based in the major Salafi mosque of Maiduguri, their project might have originally received the blessing or the tacit support of at least *some of the mainstream Salafi scholars*? Certainly not. A second, possible conjecture is that the Izala/Ahlu Sunna scholars were merely using their references to Al-Qaeda as a symbolic and rhetorical resource, without any awareness of the fact that at the same time, a small network of their Salafi public was threading those links. What is certain, however, is that one should now serenely dismiss the third conjecture that holds that Muhammad Yusuf was the only major Nigerian scholar to act as the mouthpiece for the ideology of global Jihad, and that this led to his immediate marginalisation from Izala.<sup>30</sup> While the halal-ness of *boko* was indeed a matter of debate between Yusuf and Pantami, in fact, the legitimacy of Al-Qaeda was not; after all, that organisation had made its entry in the discourses of the Nigerian Salafi circles with a huge “halal stamp” provided by years of open, public endorsements by mainstream Salafi clerics.

*Of Scapegoating, Utopia and Tragedy*

Likewise one should serenely dismiss a fourth conjecture recently emerging from the Boko Haram studies and holding that Yusuf’s ideas mainly derived from the influence of Shiism. The bulk of Lamido’s review is based on this fourth conjecture, and argues that the responsibility for Yusuf’s “radical” ideas lies squarely in the preaching of Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and of his Shia movement, the IMN (Islamic Movement in Nigeria), in which Yusuf had a brief history of activism in the early 1990s, before he left it in anger when El-Zakzaky had made his Shiism public.

El-Zakzaky was well-known for his (at times reckless) calls to Islamic activism, especially during the 1980s and the 1990s. He had paid a huge price

for them, serving long prison terms under the military governments of Babangida and Abacha. The new millennium, however, was characterised by the emergence of a virulently anti-Shia form of global jihadism as the one represented by the ideology of Al-Qaeda first and of ISIS later. This naturally provided the context for the mitigation of El-Zakzaky’s revolutionary rhetoric. It is certainly possible that the early involvement of Yusuf in El-Zakzaky’s organisation (at the time known as Muslim Brothers) left a psychological mark on him, and especially on his anti-establishment views. However, it is sufficient to browse through the many speeches and documents by Boko Haram leaders translated in the recent volume *The Boko Haram Reader*,<sup>31</sup> to realise that at the theological and ideological levels, no trace of El-Zakzaky or other Shia sources remains in the movement we know today as Boko Haram. These speeches and documents, on the contrary, are literally replete with references drawn from the classical Salafi canon (from Ibn Taimiyya to Bin Baz) as well as, of course, from contemporary jihadi sources.

There is obviously a political (at the same time local and global) background to the recent wave of attempts to overstate the link between Yusuf and El-Zakzaky. In what appears to be a picture-perfect Girardian scenario,<sup>32</sup> the internal pacification of the Muslim community of northern Nigeria, after the shock and the devastation of the Boko Haram crisis, has required the scapegoating of a victim. Only through this process has it been possible to establish a new social order, that is, the current *pax Americana* between former Al-Qaeda apologists turned icons of counter-radicalism, and faithful Saudi loyalists. In order to grasp the size that this macabre political ritual has taken, it is sufficient to remind the reader that little more than three years ago, hundreds of Shia members of the IMN were killed in a military operation prompted by the offense of causing public nuisance through illegal roadblocks,<sup>33</sup> and that in spite of an order by the Nigerian Federal High Court prompting his release, El-Zakzaky has been jailed without trial since that day.<sup>34</sup>

In arriving at a conclusion to this paper, I feel that, instead of falling into the classical War of Terror game and pitching El-Zakzaky against Ja'far as the embodiment of a "good Islam" as opposed to a purported "bad Islam," it is more fruitful to propose to look with simultaneous distance and empathy at the similarities shown by the trajectories of the two, when seen in a long-term perspective. While obviously divided by political and theological commitments, the life-trajectories of these two outstanding figures of contemporary northern Nigerian Islam display the characteristic features of a classic tragic hero, showing the potential and the limit of the utopias that they so passionately embraced.

At the beginning of their careers, Zakzaky and Ja'far owed their fame not only to their intelligence and charisma, but also to the enthusiasm with which they embraced a global religious utopia, which they proposed to the northern Nigerian Muslim public as the simple solution to its specific, local predicament: under-development; educational backwardness; corruption; lack of credibility of the political leadership; and the like. For Zakzaky, this utopia was Iran and the Islamic Revolution. For Ja'far, it was global Salafism and the University of Medina. Their respective utopias provided both Zakzaky and Ja'far with a powerful platform to articulate a wholesome critique of their surrounding, Nigerian religious and political environment. Inevitably, however, tensions emerged when utopia and pragmatism, global canon and local context, started to pull each of the two figures in opposite directions at the same time.

At its core, Ja'far's ideal would probably have been to craft for himself a space in Nigeria as a reformist politico-Salafi à la Salman al-Ouda. Nigeria would have needed such a figure, but in times of War on Terror and of their political manipulations, politico-Salafis are often doomed to pay a high price. This is shown by the case of al-Ouda himself who, after a brief co-optation in the Kingdom's "counter-radicalisation" programmes, has become the victim of the aggressive Saudi campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood: today,

al-Ouda is detained without trial, facing a call by his prosecutors for death penalty.<sup>35</sup> Ja'far's embryonic vision, too, was soon crushed between, on the one hand, the extremism of his most idealistic students, who betrayed him to fully embrace Al-Qaeda's global jihad and, on the other hand, the *diktats* of Saudi (foreign and internal) policy, which imposed on the Kingdom's scholars a religious ban on democracy and elections to counter the Muslim Brothers, and a simultaneous embrace of the War on Terror to please the American ally. According to Ja'far's long-time confidant Shaykh Ibrahim Khalil, during his last years before his tragic assassination, Ja'far was constantly torn between a public that expected him to make statements more radical than he actually intended, and local and international mentors who pressured him in the opposite direction.<sup>36</sup>

As for El-Zakzaky, utopia showed him a tragic face for the first time in 1994. This was when some of the most radical members of his organisation, whose militant attitude he had helped to nurture, turned their backs on him after his embrace of Shiism became known to the public. On that occasion, he barely escaped a lynching attempt during a lecture at the campus of Bayero University, Kano. A second tragic turning point in Zakzaky's career, less visible but of deeper implications, occurred after the emergence of an alternative Nigerian Shiism in the form of Nura Dass's Rasulul A'zam Foundation, causing Zakzaky's IMN to experience a gradual marginalisation within the Nigerian Shia community that he had struggled so hard to establish. The gradual shift of the main object of Iranian patronage away from the revolutionary IMN towards the more pragmatic Rasulul A'zam Foundation, has been a discrete but significant aspect of the broader context preceding the crackdown of the Nigerian military forces on the IMN and the arrest of Zakzaky.<sup>37</sup>

The careers of Shaykh Ja'far Mahmoud Adam and Shaykh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky show that utopias continue to have the power to shape the social imaginaries of outstanding individuals, but also that like a Roman Janus, glimmering utopias often

hide a second, tragic face. Nigerian Muslims will continue to create their future by negotiating between utopias and lived realities, and both Salafis and Shiites can play a positive role in this process. For this to happen, three steps seems to be necessary: (1) the Nigerian government should strive to relate to both Iran and Saudi Arabia (as well as Russia and the US) with cautious cordiality, carefully avoiding being turned into a new playground for Middle Eastern geo-politics and sectarian wars; (2) Zakzaky should be released and undergo a fair trial, while the IMN should be reintegrated into the wider Muslim community and allowed to contribute to the national debate (being also freely criticised by other Muslims when necessary); (3) the mainstream Nigerian Salafi leadership should undertake a honest process of clarification to its own public, of the tumultuous ideological shift of which it has been the theatre over the last two decades. I am sceptical that any of the above is bound to happen any time soon.

#### Notes

- 1 Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, pp.85-86.
- 2 Khalifa Aliyu Ahmed Abulfathi, “The metamorphosis of Boko Haram: A local’s perspective” (<http://www.sheikhahmadabulfathi.org/content/metamorphosis-boko-haram-0>).
- 3 Abdullahi Lamido, “Boko Haram: The history of an African Jihadist movement: A Review,” published in the current issue of *CCI Occasional Papers*.
- 4 Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 2002.
- 5 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1989.
- 6 Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, Chapter 4: “Professionals and Amateurs.”
- 7 Andrea Brigaglia, “The volatility of Salafi political theology, the War on Terror and the genesis of Boko Haram,” *Diritto & Questioni Pubbliche*, 15 (2), 2015, p.195.
- 8 Ja’far M. Adam, *Fadakarwa game da halalcin boko dagamarigayi Sheikh Ja’afar* (audio recording of an April 2007 lecture), available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiM1ZUhmLAU>.
- 9 Discussed through pp.161-64 of Thurston, *Boko Haram*.
- 10 The political history of Italy during the Cold War provides one of the best-documented examples of the

use of terrorism by a national state intelligence (in co-ordination with international partners), a reconstruction that is now widely accepted by historians. See Daniele Ganser, *Gladio: NATO’s Secret Armies: Operation Gladio and Terrorism in Western Europe*, London: Routledge, 2005. On an opposite geo-political front, the argument that the growth of Chechen terrorist networks in the 1990s was encouraged by the Russian intelligence as part of a strategy to undermine the Chechen rebellion, has been famously voiced in the many writings of journalist Alexander Litvinenko, later poisoned in 2006. For an example closer to our context, one can cite the argument that the expansion of Islamic terrorism in the Sahara was the direct product of a joint strategy of the Algerian and US governments to establish their control over the region: see Jeremy Keenan, *The Dying Sahara: US Imperialism and Terror in Africa*, London: Pluto Press, 2012.

- 11 Andrea Brigaglia, “‘Slicing off the tumour’: The history of global Jihad in Nigeria, as narrated by the Islamic State,” *Politics and Religion Journal*, 12, 2, p.218.
- 12 Brigaglia, “The volatility of Salafi political theology,” p.198. Due to a typo in the original quote, the word “to” was missing.
- 13 Anonymous, “The popular discourses of Salafi radicalism and counter-radicalism in Nigeria: A case study of Boko Haram,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 42, 2012, pp.118-144.
- 14 See also Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa (eds.), *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*, London: Hurst, 2018, pp.11-33, where large sections of the debate are translated in full.
- 15 Brigaglia, “‘Slicing off the tumour,’” pp.205-208.
- 16 Brigaglia, “‘Slicing off the tumour,’” p.205.
- 17 I wish to express my thanks to Tahir Lawan Muaz (Department of Arabic, Bayero University Kano), for making these recordings available to me.
- 18 Tume Ahemba, “Nigerian Muslims struggle to cope after village massacre,” *The Guardian*, 8 May 2006 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/may/08/2>).
- 19 Audio file saved at the repository: <https://uct.figshare.com/s/27cb648f0997f4e8f205> (DOI: 10.25375/uct.7479530).
- 20 Alexander Thurston, “‘The disease is unbelief’: Boko Haram’s religious and political worldview,” *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Analysis Paper*, no. 22, January 2016.
- 21 Audio file saved at the repository: <https://uct.figshare.com/s/11445cac14fdcacb0ca9> (DOI: 10.25375/uct.7479425).
- 22 I have preferred to withhold this name as the author, in his public lecture, was referring to a private exchange.
- 23 In the original audio text, the author uses the Hausa expression *bala’i* (‘*yan bala’i, masu imanin bala’i*). In order to reproduce the meaning of the original Hausa term, which literally means “terrible,” but which in this case has obviously a positive connotation, I use the English “awesome,” similarly suggesting “awe-inspiring” in the positive sense.



- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Audio file saved at the repository <https://uct.figshare.com/s/24b062b3973c7e498d6c> (DOI: 10.25375/uct.7479401).
- 26 Probably a reference to Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2002.
- 27 Brigaglia, "The volatility of Salafi political theology," p.193.
- 28 On the case of Shaykh Aminu Daurawa, see Abdulbasit Kassim, "Shaykh Aminu Daurawa, Boko Haram and the theological discourse on suicide bombing" (<https://medium.com/@ak61/shaykh-aminu-daurawa-boko-haram-and-the-theological-discourse-of-suicide-bombing-a8e5941c5035>). On the case of Shaykh Abubakar Gero, see Brigaglia, "Slicing off the tumour," pp.217-221.
- 29 This is the substance of the critique to the work of Jacob Zenn contained in Adam Higazi, Alex Thurston, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed and Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, "A Response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12, 2, 2018, pp. 174-190.
- 30 This line of argument is followed, for the most part, by Thurston in his otherwise excellent book on Boko Haram, as well as in large parts of his (otherwise excellent, too) *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, where this dimension of the *preaching* and the *politics* of the mainstream Salafis in Nigeria is virtually absent.
- 31 Edited by Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, London: Hurst, 2018.
- 32 René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- 33 See the report of Amnesty International on the Zaria massacre available at the following link: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/04/nigeria-military-cover-up-of-mass-slaughter-at-zaria-exposed/>. It has to be said that IMN's police-style control over an entire neighbourhood had effectively become a reason for concern for many residents of Zaria city. However, the repressive action taken by the Nigerian military was too incommensurate with the problem to believe that there was nothing behind it.
- 34 Ikechukwu Nnochiri, "Court dismisses FG's position, orders unconditional release of Shiite leader," *Vanguard*, 2 December 2016 (<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/12/breaking-news-court-orders-unconditional-release-detained-shiite-leader-el-zakzaky/>).
- 35 "Saudi Arabia: Public Prosecution Demands Death Penalty for Cleric Salman al-Ouda," Middle East Monitor, 4 September 2018: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180904-saudi-arabia-public-prosecution-demands-death-penalty-for-cleric-salman-al-ouda/>. During the last years, al-Ouda had become one of the brightest reformist Salafi scholars in Saudi Arabia, taking courageous positions in defence of the Sufis, the Shias and the Muslim Brothers as fellow Muslims.
- 36 Interview with the author (Kano, 6 October 2018).
- 37 In no way am I trying to argue here, that Nura Dass and his group, or the Iranian government, had any direct or indirect political responsibility in the military crackdown on the IMN. My point is that similarly to Ja'far in the Salafi camp before his assassination, El-Zakzaky had remained *de facto* tragically isolated, while outwardly iconised, in the Shia camp, and this largely because he, just like Ja'far, was too independent to fit squarely into the categories imposed by the rapidly changing local and global context in which he operated. I am thankful to Kabiru H. Isa and Sani Y. Adam for helping me reconstruct and make sense of the internal cleavages of Nigerian Shiism through a number of exchanges, as well as through their co-authored published article, "A history of Shia and its development in Nigeria: The case-study of Kano," *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 36, 2017, pp.226-256.

# In Search of a Plausible Theory to Explain the Boko Haram Phenomenon: Analysis of Intellectual Discourses on Insurgency and Violent Extremism in Nigeria<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

This paper is based on presentations made during an academic conference held in Kano city between 13 and 15 November 2018. At this conference, scholars and experts from various parts of the world and from different disciplines deliberated on the topic “Insurgency and Boko Haram Phenomenon in Nigeria.” The conference offered me an opportunity to collect and analyse divergent views and discourses about Boko Haram, provided by academics with different biases. In this article, I draw from various papers presented as well as from post-presentation discussions, in order to examine various trajectories shaped by intellectual conversations on the Boko Haram phenomenon.

About seventy paper presentations were recorded during the conference but my analysis focuses mainly on the eight ‘lead papers’ for obvious reasons. While the leading papers were selected based on the conference theme, their contents were envisaged to make and drive new narrative(s) about the Boko Haram phenomenon. With this in mind, the scholars in the category of ‘lead paper presenters’ were given adequate time to present in the plenary sessions and even more

time for discussions. Although the other papers in the parallel sessions were equally important, only 10-15 minutes were allocated for both the presentation and discussions; this was a constraint when compared to 90 minutes allocated for each of the lead speakers in the plenary sessions. In total, the presenters of the lead papers accounted for half the time of the entire conference.

I also included in my analysis the views of some scholars such as Andrea Brigaglia, Roman Loimeier and Abdulbasit Kassim who did not participate in the conference. This is because the conference was partly a response to the school of thought represented by these three scholars. In the following section, I place discourses about Boko Haram into four categories. After discussing the main schools of thought in each of the categories, I present my own views about them in the summary and concluding section.

## **Four schools of thought in understanding the Boko Haram phenomenon**

Apart from the political speeches by politicians during the inaugural session, there were 4 school of thoughts, as described below:

1. According to the first school of thought, represented by Brigaglia, Loimeier and Kassim, Boko Haram is essentially a by-product of both global and localised Salafism. For Brigaglia, in particular, the context created by the War on Terror also had a huge impact on the Nigerian Salafi arena that should be taken into account to understand the intra-Salafi conflict that led to the emergence of Boko Haram in Nigeria.
2. The second category is represented by those who are trying to alienate Boko Haram from global jihadi movements by treating it as an entity of its own that is to be explained mainly in terms of Nigeria's social, economic and political structures.
3. The third category, somehow related to the latter, is represented by those who are trying to deconstruct the theory linking Boko Haram to the Salafi movement in Nigeria and beyond.
4. The fourth category is represented by those who perceive Boko Haram as the product of an ideology that started in the early history of Muslims in northern Nigeria and beyond, which is ongoing and transforming in contexts and contents.<sup>2</sup>

The absence of the representatives of the first school of thought from the conference does not diminish the contributions of the participants in advancing our efforts in understanding the Boko Haram phenomenon. In fact, the trajectories emphasised during the conference have generated and would continue to generate further conversations that would add to our understanding of the Boko Haram phenomenon and other forms of Islamic radicalism in Nigeria. I summarise these trajectories below.

### **Boko Haram as a by-product of both global and localised Salafism**

Arguably, the most influential literature on the history of Boko Haram besides the works of Alexander Thurston, in terms of citations, is the one written by Andrea Brigaglia and Roman Loimeier. In 2012, Brigaglia wrote an article on

the history of the Wahhabi *da'wa* in West Africa focusing on the career and the murder of an influential Salafi scholar, Shaykh Ja'far Mahmoud Adam (d. 2007).<sup>3</sup> He highlighted the close relationship between Shaykh Ja'far and the slain founder of Boko Haram, Muhammad Yusuf. The latter was associated to the former and became a member of the Salafi movement before breaking away from him and starting his call against the Nigerian state. It is widely alleged that Shaykh Ja'far, who at a later stage harshly disagreed with Muhammad Yusuf's ideology, was killed by one of the two groups headed either by Muhammad Yusuf or Muhammad Ali; the latter was a Sudan trained Salafi scholar and leader of the Taliban group of Kanamma.

In 2015, Brigaglia wrote a thought-provoking article titled "The volatility of Salafi political theology, the war on terror and the genesis of Boko Haram."<sup>4</sup> In this piece, he linked Boko Haram to some influential writings and fatwas of Salafi scholars with international influence.

In an August 2018 article, "Slicing off the Tumour": The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as Narrated by the Islamic State," Brigaglia consolidated his argument of linking Boko Haram ideology to global jihad and identified Boko Haram's disagreements with the mainstream Nigerian Salafi group (also known as *Izala*)<sup>5</sup> as the fruit of the latter's ambivalent messages on global jihad – on the one hand, supporting it outside Nigeria; on the other hand, repressing it inside the country.<sup>6</sup>

In the same vein, Roman Loimeier (2012) takes a historical approach, looking at Boko Haram as a movement that resulted from social, political and generational dynamics within the larger field of northern Nigerian radical Islam, as represented most prominently by the *Izala* movement.<sup>7</sup> According to Loimeier (2012: 142), membership of *Izala* entails "breaking with established society, including parents, and rejecting all manifestations of allegedly un-Islamic character (Arabic: *bid'a*), including social customs such as the bride price, extensive mourning (Arabic: *bika'*), and

supererogatory prayers, often in the context of Sufi ritual.” According to Loimeier, this theological dimension of extremism and excommunication of other Muslims manifested in the dispute between Boko Haram and its Muslim opponents and represent the different stages of militant activity through which this movement has gone so far.

Later, Abdulbasit Kassim seemingly joined this school of thought with his 2015 article “Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of jihādī-Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram.”<sup>8</sup> Kassim seems to follow Brigaglia in showing that the ideological foundation of Boko Haram lies in the history and transformation of Salafism in Nigeria.

The Kano conference, as mentioned by some of its organisers in a radio programme, was intended to respond to the first school of thought as espoused by Brigaglia, Loimeier and Kassim. According to the conference organisers, the narratives of those three scholars “are misrepresentations of facts against the local Salafi scholars” or *Izala* movement.<sup>9</sup> Thus, based on the outcome of the conference presentations and discussions, I summarise the additional three trajectories below.

**Boko Haram as a local terrorist organisation that emerged out of the local Muslim contexts**

The second strand of argument, as mentioned earlier, is made of scholars who try to alienate the Boko Haram phenomenon from the global jihadi movement and who treat it as a local entity informed by local intrigues. Among the leading scholars who support this strand of argument, was Alexander Thurston, who was the first presenter in the plenary session of the Kano conference. His paper was titled “International Connections and Internal Disputes in Boko Haram.” Thurston posed some critical questions in his attempt to interrogate whether or not such connections exist. He specifically asked the following questions: Is Boko Haram local or global; and what types of contacts exist between Boko Haram and global jihadist after the 2009 uprising? If there is any

contact, how does that relate to the internal dispute experienced by Boko Haram?<sup>10</sup>

Thurston is the author of a monograph on Boko Haram published in 2017<sup>11</sup> and of many thoughtful and influential articles on the topic.<sup>12</sup> According to him, the debate about Boko Haram’s international connection “has been very very furious.” One side advanced the thesis that Boko Haram has been purely local, with no ties to the broader or global jihadi movement. In contrast, people on the other side of the debate argued that Boko Haram is merely an extension of al-Qaeda; that it has been so since its early years, and that it is now allied to the so-called Islamic State.

Thurston’s position aligns with the argument that Boko Haram is local although he acknowledges that some international connections have played important roles, especially whenever there were some serious struggles within Boko Haram. According to him, in order to understand which of the two theses presents a stronger case, we need to ask different questions about different periods of Boko Haram’s history. The first question is what role did al-Qaeda play in the genesis of Boko Haram? Do we date that role back to 2002 or to the 1990s? Secondly, in the case of the so-called Nigerian Taliban that emerged in 2003 in Yobe State, what roles were played by al-Qaeda and what role was played by the Nigerians connected to al-Qaeda, in generating the violence?<sup>13</sup>

According to Thurston, none of the sources that he has seen has linked Muhammad Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, to any international terrorist organisation. Some of the arguments trying to connect Boko Haram with al-Qaeda centre upon the role of Muhammad Ali al-Barnawi; according to Thurston, however, not much is known about him. Some of the sources mention that he studied in Sudan and had contact with Bin Laden when the latter was there; that he received money and returned home to start a jihad movement in Nigeria. However, Thurston pointed out that there are many conflicting accounts, even from the Boko Haram sources, about the relationship between Muhammad Ali al-Barnawi

and Muhammad Yusuf; thus, it is not certain whether they were friends or enemies. These contradictions extend to the role of Muhammad Ali in the formation of Boko Haram. Therefore, in the absence of hard evidence to establish connections between the Nigerian Taliban and the global jihadi movement, one is left with no choice but to accept the position that the Nigerian Taliban in Yobe State was merely a local movement.<sup>14</sup>

The third period that requires questions is the time after the uprising of 2009, which was after Abubakar Shekau took over the movement. Thus, what kinds of contacts exist between Boko Haram and global jihadi movements, and how much have those contacts changed the trajectories of Boko Haram and Abubakar Shekau in particular? Thurston stated that he has not come across any sources showing that AQIM or al-Qaeda played a role in the 2009 uprising. Whenever sources from al-Qaeda talked about Abubakar Shekau, they did so by observing from a distance. Thus, he took the position that Boko Haram was born as a local terrorist organisation with no links to any other organisation beyond Nigeria.<sup>15</sup>

However, after the 2011 suicide bombing of the UN office in Abuja, the Nigerian government, the US government, some analysts, and journalists started to consider the possibility that external organisations such as al-Qaeda and al-Shabab may have played a role in transforming Boko Haram. The problem, according to Thurston, is that researchers could not go beyond the statements of the government officials and journalists to prove the possible ties between Boko Haram and other external organisations. Based on the lack of evidence during this period, Thurston took the position that Boko Haram was, for most of its history, a purely local phenomenon.<sup>16</sup>

Thurston mentioned that the situation began to change in 2015 when the Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau, pledged allegiance to an external organisation, ISIS, under Abubakar al-Baghdadi. Earlier on, when Osama Bin Laden was killed in Pakistan, many documents were recovered from his house in Pakistan. Among

them was a letter that Abubakar Shekau had sent to the central command of al-Qaeda, around 2009 or 2010, asking Bin Laden's permission to join his al-Qaeda network. According to Thurston, there is no evidence to prove that this attempt to establish a working relationship was successful because there was no indication whether Bin Laden had responded. If he had indeed responded, there was no evidence whether he agreed or not. This gap is yet to be filled. There is also another leaked document showing that Abubakar Shekau has sent a letter to AQIM requesting them to provide communication training and money to them. In both cases, one could also ask the question of how were Shekau's epistles able to reach Osama Bin Laden and AQIM, if no links existed between the Nigerian jihadi leader and his global counterparts.<sup>17</sup>

However, Thurston referred to more recent evidence suggesting the existence of correspondence between Boko Haram and global jihadists, particularly Boko Haram dissidents, who were unhappy with Abubakar Shekau's leadership. This correspondence should, however, be understood within the context of the period when it was produced. The first of those documents was released by AQIM and entitled "Legal Advice and Guidance from Shaykh Abul Hassan Rashid to the Mujahidin in Nigeria." The second was an essay released in 2018 by al-Barnawi's faction of Boko Haram and was titled "Removing the Tumour of Shekau's Khawarij through Paying Allegiance to the People of Generosity." According to Thurston, the transnational ties were more important to second-tier leaders, suggesting that Boko Haram was purely a local movement while its international connections, which started at a later stage, are not directly connected to its origin.<sup>18</sup>

The last item of correspondence suggesting international links between Boko Haram and other jihadi organisations was written when Boko Haram were pushed back by the military operation carried out by the armed forces of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger. At that time, some Boko Haram members expressed the view that



Shekau was too authoritarian and there was a need to find a better leader in the person of Abu Musab al-Barnawi. After considering all the evidence at his disposal, Thurston restated his position that Boko Haram is purely a local organisation that established international connections at a later stage of its history.<sup>19</sup>

Thurston concluded his presentation and strengthened his position by drawing a comparison between Boko Haram' leadership and that of other terrorist groups in North Africa and Asia. He pointed out that the difference between Boko Haram and other movements is that the former is run locally by local leaders and with local membership. In contrast, both the leadership and membership of a movement such as Al-Qaeda in the Maghrib (AQIM) are international. Thus, their leaders and members come from across the globe; for example, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Somalia and Egypt. On the contrary, Boko Haram is 90 percent local with a 10 percent international influence only manifesting itself at a later stage of its history.

The debate that followed Thurston's presentation was very lively. While some participants, especially the conference organisers agreed with him, many respondents, mostly Nigerians, disagree about the claim that Boko Haram is purely local. They also challenged the veracity of his approach of treating Boko Haram as an independent entity, in view of the cross-border attacks and the different nationalities of Boko Haram members arrested in Nigeria. Thurston responded that he does not consider Nigerians, Malians, Chadians, and Cameroonians to be foreigners as they belong to the same Chad basin region. In the middle of the heated discussions following Thurston's presentation, Muhammad Kyari made the valid intervention that "Boko Haram is a local organisation with international appropriation." Appropriation in its artistic form entails taking something from another source and changing it in ways that will suit the appropriator's need. Thus, this debate is yet to be settled.

### **Boko Haram and other violent extremism as rooted in the Iranian Revolution of 1979**

The third school of thought, which was ably represented at the conference, is the one trying to deconstruct the theories linking Boko Haram to the Salafi movement in Nigeria and beyond. This trajectory was captured in the second lead paper presented by Salisu Shehu from Bayero University, Kano. In his paper,<sup>20</sup> Shehu started with providing the idea that "Boko Haram is a phenomenon that has undergone some kinds of metamorphosis." It began as a *da'wa* (preaching) organisation; then transformed into a "rag-tag militia group"; and eventually grew into an international terrorist organisation.

The main questions Shehu addressed through his paper were as follows: how does the *'aqida* (doctrine) of Boko Haram/Halal start; at what points has it transformed; and who is responsible for this transformation? He mentioned that his answers to these questions were based on the existing literature which he reviewed before stating his position. The literature on Boko Haram keeps increasing, and its emphasis changing, but the main emphasis of early literature was a debate about whether *Boko* (modern, western-style education) is *halal* (Islamically permissible) or *haram* (Islamically impermissible). This debate should, however, be understood in the framework of different periods and their contexts. What is common to all these periods vis-à-vis the doctrine of Boko Haram is the presence of what he termed "value conflicts" which led to the declaration of Boko (western education/civilisation) as *haram*. The conflict led to the crisis facing "our traditional education system" and is evident in how "Quranic and Islamic schools are disorganised," said Shehu.<sup>21</sup>

Moving onwards, Shehu mentioned that contemporary narratives about Boko Haram do not capture some crucial segments in the history of extremism and radicalism in Nigeria. He cited the works of some prolific writers about Boko Haram, specifically Loimeier, Brigaglia, Kyari and Kassim. Shehu reported that he has read their works,

which, according to him, tend to depart from “the current bus stop — that is the relationship between Salafism, extremism, and militancy.” In response to this hiatus, Shehu claimed that it is not possible to talk about Islamic radicalisation in Nigeria without mentioning the role of Iran after the 1979 Islamic revolution. Although radicalism started earlier through Zakzaky’s Muslim Brotherhood’s “Islam only” slogan, the Iranian Revolution was the catalyst, because there was a marriage of convenience between the Nigerian MB led by Ibrahim Zakzaky and the Islamic revolution ideology, when the latter was officially exported from Iran to other parts of the world, including Nigeria.<sup>22</sup>

According to Shehu, Ibrahim Zakzaky, the leader of a Shiite group evolved from the Nigerian MB and known today as the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), can be regarded as the first proclaimer and advocate of Boko Haram in a radical sense; in other words, in the sense of a rebellion against the constituted authority and the Nigerian state. According to him, radicalisation started when the Zakzakiya<sup>23</sup> brainwashed Muslim students into withdrawing from universities and urging them not to take part in the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC).<sup>24</sup> He mentioned that this radicalisation by the Zakzakiyya culminated in the Funtua Declaration, when Zakzaky “openly declared an uncompromising rebellion against the Nigerian state.” Since then, followers of the Zakzakiya movement started confrontations with armed Nigerian security agents. According to Shehu, many Boko Haram members were inspired by the Zakzakiya and the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN). This scenario, according to Shehu, has never been mentioned, especially in the writings of Roman Loimeier on Boko Haram.<sup>25</sup>

Shehu stated that the issue of withdrawal from politics, as emphasised by Brigaglia (2018),<sup>26</sup> is “totally unconnected with *Izala*.”<sup>27</sup> He mentioned that while Zakzaky was promoting *bara’a* (rebellion), Shaykh Abubakar Mahmud Gummi, a prominent leader in the *Izala* movement, enjoined his followers to influence change by joining

government security formations (military and police), as well as by active participation in politics rather than withdrawing from them on religious grounds. Thus, Shaykh Gummi founded the slogan *a shiga a gyara*, a Hausa phrase that can loosely be translated as “join to change.” In contrast, Zakzaky coined the contrasting slogan of *a shiga a narke bara’a ita ce mafita*, which could loosely be translated as “if you join you become like them; withdrawal is the best option.”<sup>28</sup>

Shehu added that since Boko Haram began, the verbal intellectual responses to their doctrine came from Shaykh Ja’far Mahmud Adam (died 2007), Shaykh Auwal Albani Zaria (died 2011), as well as Shaykh Dr. Isa Ali Pantami, Shaykh Abdulwahab Abdallah, and Dr. Mansur Isa Yelwa, all of whom are [or were] prominent scholars with Salafi affinity. According to Shehu, the “written intellectual response to Boko Haram has been very minimal and the little done was by the *Da’wa* Cooperation Council and *Da’wa* Institute of Nigeria,” both of which are Salafi-based organisations.

This trajectory was supported in many other presentations at the conference, notably “From Zakzakiya movement to Boko Haram: The history of Muhammad Yusuf’s journey to violent extremism” by Abdullahi Lamido.<sup>29</sup> In the same context, there were similar presentations that defined Boko Haram as Kharijites vis-à-vis the mainstream Muslims. This trend of using the label of Kharijites has become controversial because some mainstream Muslims use it to condemn Boko Haram, but the latter uses it as well to condemn its various splinter groups. One such example is the recent (2018) treatise released by the al-Barnawi group, which labels Shekau’s group as Kharijites.<sup>30</sup>

The papers presented by Dr Bashir Aliyu Umar (titled “Insurgency and the abuse of the concept of jihad”) and by Dr Muhammad Sani Umar Rijiyar-Lemu titled (“The position of Muslim scholars on violent conflicts and transgressions”) were based on the same line of argument that seeks to deconstruct the viewpoint linking Boko Haram and other global Salafi-jihadi movements.<sup>31</sup> The



scope of Dr Bashir Aliyu Umar's presentation was as broad and complex as the concepts he dealt with: *jihad*, *takfir*, *darul hijra*, *darul harb* and *al-wala' wal-bara'* etc., discussed with references to the works of both theologians and academics. Dr Umar discussed the verses and hadiths that insurgents (non-state actors who have taken up arms) use in advancing their cause. According to him, the matter of *jihad* is not everybody's concern. He cited Ibn Taymiyyah in the *Fatawa al-kubra*, who wrote that only one category of people out of three is supposed to talk or give *fatwa* about it. Those are:

the people of upright and sound religion who also have deep awareness of the affairs of the people of the world." He said "but as for the people of the world who do have some acquaintance with matters of religion or the people of religion who do not have any acquaintance with matters of the world, it is not their business to delve into the field of *jihad*.<sup>32</sup>

According to Umar, *jihad* entails the spilling of blood, which goes against one of the fundamental objectives of Islam: protection of life. The latter is so sacred that it is sometimes given prominence over the protection of religion. So, if *jihad* entails spilling the blood of the fighter and the one who is fought, then declaring and waging it is a very serious matter. Umar tried to highlight that it is the erroneous interpretation of the Quranic verses and hadiths on *jihad* that led to the current state.

Umar pointed out that some *ulama* have become victims of their emotions by issuing *fatwas* that were wrong, such as those claiming the legality of suicide bombing. While he condemned most of the interpretations made by the *jihadi* groups about those verses, he pointed out that *jihadis* all over the world have made a declaration which they have turned into *aqa'id* (principle of *fiqh*) about making *fatwas* on *jihad*. That declaration is *la yufti qa'idun li-mujahid*, meaning "the one who has stayed behind without going out to fight, is not

entitled to give a *fatwa* to the one who has gone out to fight a *jihad*." This principle is based on the Quranic verse that states, "those who stay behind are not the same as those who go out to fight in the cause of Allah;"<sup>33</sup> thus, the former is not in the position to give *fatwa* to the latter. The *Jihadis* also cite a statement credited to Imam Ahmad when he was asked: "What is the best way for you to memorise hadith?" He replied: "Practice it." Based on this, anybody wanting to know about *jihad* and becoming a scholar of *jihad* should practice *jihad*. Thus, only people who practice *jihad* would understand what it is and give *fatwa* about it. This misconception, according to Dr. Bashir is one of the greatest crimes against *jihad*. He argues that with the notable exception of Shaykh Abdallah Azzam, most of the *jihadi* ideologues are not trained Islamic scholars. They are specialists in different disciplines who delved into *jihad* and give *fatwas* about it. He gave the examples of Muhammad Abdulsalam Faraj who was a graduate of engineering, Osama Bin Laden (an economist) and Ayman al-Zawahiri (a surgeon). According to Dr. Bashir, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi was a scholar of *usul* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) and later became an ideologue of ISIS; as such, he is also out of the mainstream *ulama*.

The bottom line, as expressed during the discussion session, was that some verses about *jihad* are clear. One of the delegates to the conference pointed out that the meanings of some of the verses used by the *jihadis* are unambiguous. However, where the meanings of verses are ambiguous, controversial interpretations were made by scholars such as Ibn Taimiyya. The interventions made by Dr. Bashir Aliyu Umar, Professor Salisu Shehu and Malam Nuru Lemu were that the contexts under which some of those *fatwas* were made, justified them. However, whenever the context changes, then the perspectives of the *ulama* and their *fatwas* may also change.

To summarise: there is no monopoly on the subjective interpretations of religious texts. While everybody attending the conference seemed to agree that the interpretations by the

jihadis are wrong, it should be noted that Boko Haram members believe that the interpretations of *Malaman Gwamnati* (ulama working for emirates, kingdoms, and governments) or those who gathered at the conference (including the mainstream Salafi ulama) are also erroneous.

### **Boko Haram ideology as cutting across different ideological divides**

The fourth school of thought is represented mainly, but not exclusively, by historians of religion looking at the history of Boko Haram as a product of an ideology that started in early Islamic history, but which is ongoing and transforming in both contexts and contents. One example reflecting this school of thought was a third lead paper presented by Professor Kyari Muhammad and titled “Historicising the Boko Haram phenomenon.”<sup>34</sup> Kyari made an authoritative statement to the effect that history is written in the language of the victors, meaning that narratives and discourses about Boko Haram are constructed in favour of the speaking subject. Although the jihad of Usmanu Dan Fodio was the main jihad that challenged the state successfully in Nigerian history, there were attempts by earlier or later jihadists which were not successful. He gave an example of Rabeah and his reign of terror in the old Bornu empire in the name of jihad, during the late nineteenth / early twentieth centuries.

However, the current ideology of Boko Haram in the Nigerian context started, continued Kyari, at the beginning of the twentieth century, when people in northern Nigeria, including the emirs, perceived the colonial project and Boko (western education) as two sides of the same coin. To avoid both, many people embarked on *hijra* (migration) toward the east with the ultimate aim of reaching Mecca. Kyari gave the example of Attahiru Ahmadu and his followers, who migrated to Sudan to avoid the invasion of their Islamic land by the British, as well as to unite with other parts of the Muslim *umma*. Ahmadu was, however, killed on his way. Even as far back as then, there were *fatwas* to the effect that whoever kills a European will go

to heaven. These were similar to the ideologies or *fatwa* of the contemporary jihadis within Boko Haram.

The Europeans were also not innocent. During colonialization, they deliberately excluded from government service anybody educated in the traditional religious system. Thus, people who memorised Quran and could read and write in Arabic but did not hold a certificate could not be employed. This practice, which prevailed until the present time, has compounded the situation. Thus, the activities of contemporary Boko Haram fighters, for Kyari, are not new, and Muhammad Yusuf (the founder) and his subordinates have built upon the dominant narratives about jihad, Islamic state, and western education to win the sympathy of many people.

One notable feature in the discussions at the conference related to the issues of climate change and poverty. Many people agreed that those two issues are the catalysts of the Boko Haram menace. A third issue that most of the discussions avoided, because of its religious sensitivity, was that of population explosion; both Emir Muhammadu Sanusi II and Professor Salisu Shehu, however, described this as a time bomb which, when exploded, would be more devastating than the current Boko Haram.

### **Summary and conclusions**

Competing discourses about the Boko Haram insurgency are characterised by different conceptions and contextualisation of how the ideology of violent extremism is nurtured and spread in Nigeria. One prominent point of contention is whether its origin lies in Salafism or ‘other movements.’ There is an established school of thought (represented by Andrea Brigaglia, Roman Loimeier, and Abdulbasit Kassim), according to which the Boko Haram ideology is rooted in Salafism and connected to global jihad.

The Kano conference arose from the need, felt by some scholars, to respond to this school of thought. During that conference, three other schools of thought were emphasised.

These include the one expounded by Alexander Thurston who is of the view that Boko Haram is a local movement that developed international connections comparatively recently, when the Nigerian government was about to defeat them militarily. Consequently, its members started having internal leadership disputes and both the main body and splinter groups within Boko Haram started reaching out to external jihadi movements for support.

According to the third school of thought, movements other than Salafism and countries other than Saudi Arabia are responsible for the rise of Boko Haram. For the proponents of this view, the Muslim Brotherhood of Nigeria, which derived its inspiration from its Egyptian counterpart, and the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (also called Zakzakiya), which is an offshoot of the Iranian Revolution, established the foundation of religious militancy in Nigeria and paved the way for the Boko Haram insurgency.

According to the fourth school of thought, Boko Haram is the product of the combination of universal jihad ideology, Mahdism (millenarianism), as well as injustices of the colonial and postcolonial systems. The history of religious rebellion against the state predates the jihad of Usmanu dan Fodio. This was compounded by the British occupation of northern Nigeria and made worse by the injustices suffered by common people at the hands of the western-educated elites of postcolonial Nigeria.

I do not subscribe to the idea of isolating Boko Haram from other global jihadi movements. The reason for this viewpoint is that, since the importation of various brands of Islam to Nigeria from the Maghrib and Middle East, the people of these regions have maintained for centuries physical contacts and scholarly exchanges in various forms. The regional boundaries that we impose are more imaginary than real, and have no effect on most Islamic actors, especially on those involved in the propagation of global jihad. This became clear during the conference from the responses of many attendees and contributors,

to the idea of creating a boundary between, for example, the plight of the Palestinians and the reaction of Nigerian Muslims who feel connected to the global Muslim *umma*.

Similarly, I observe some shortcomings in the attempts by those scholars who regard Boko Haram as being exclusively a product of Salafism, as well as by those trying to dissociate the latter with Boko Haram completely. The discussion on Boko Haram during the conference revealed the difficulties that arose whenever an attempt was made to treat the Boko Haram ideology differently from the activities of its members and their complex networking beyond a particular sect. In the process, some of the conference organisers have become victims of the same mistake they were criticising the first school of thought of. In my opinion, we should not seek to understand Boko Haram as being a separate entity, entirely independent from the body of texts that drive the (global) jihadi ideology and its various trajectories that produce local jihadis. For example, while there is synergy, in many ways, between those scholars who treat Boko Haram as a local rather than a global jihad movement and those who separate Salafism from Boko Haram, I find contradistinctions in their cases. The arguments of the latter group, in fact, seem to be also underpinned by an attempt to internationalise Boko Haram. Thus, many papers in the conference, while attempting to de-emphasise the links between Boko Haram and global Salafism, insisted on linking it with Zakzaky's Shiism and the agency of Iran. Similarly, this group of scholars attempts to show the abuse of the concept of jihad and debunks the erroneous interpretation of some verses by the local and global jihadi groups. In these attempts, however, they also inevitably drive attention to the "dotted lines" that seem to connect Boko Haram and global jihadi movements to common sources of interpretation, thus paradoxically (and perhaps unintendedly) reinforcing the views of Brigaglia, Loimeier and Kassim. In other words, while Thurston tried to alienate Boko Haram from the rest of the transnational jihadi movements, Shehu

traced the history of radicalisation of its founder Muhammad Yusuf to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Zakzakiya Movement which have their roots in Egypt and Iran respectively. In the same vein, Umar's submission connected all jihadi groups worldwide, by pointing out how they receive their inspirations from one source: the "erroneous" interpretations of Quranic texts by their global jihadi leaders and *fatwa*-givers.

Thus, based on this observation, I come to the conclusion that the papers of Shehu and writers with similar views commit the same mistake they accused their counterparts of doing; in other words, singling out a particular sect or movement. And in doing so, they end up coming closer to the school of thought they seek to oppose, because they both emphasise the links between Boko Haram and global jihadism, the main difference relating to whether the inspiration supposedly came from Saudi Arabia's Salafism or from Iran's Shiism. I regard myself as an external observer, observing from a distance and without having been drawn into the Sufi, Salafi, and Shia theological conundrum among the academia. As such, my viewpoint is that all the key players in nurturing and spreading violent extremism in Nigeria are the product of the same religious system that has existed for centuries. As aptly captured by Muhammad Kyari, all Islamic sects or movements (in the categories of Sufi, Izala, and Shia), as well as individuals or groups of ulama in Nigeria, have appropriated the jihad of Usman dan Fodio in one way or another in ways that benefit their respective agendas. This is in addition to the fact that all contemporary Salafis, including those who reinvigorated the jihadi ideology, or the Sharia system in the late 1990s, are former members of the Sufi brotherhoods, just as some members of Boko Haram are disenchanted members of the *Izala*/Salafi movement.

These shortcomings, in my view, make the fourth school of thought stronger. Those scholars regard Boko Haram as the product of activities of different movements that predate the nineteenth-century jihad in what is today known as northern

Nigeria. The history of Islamically motivated religious insurgencies in Nigeria is a long one, that passed through various stages such as the jihad of Usman dan Fodio, Mahdism, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafi movement in Nigeria, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, and many other overlapping trends. All of these movements have gradually transformed the idea of religious insurgency against the state into what we are discussing today as the Boko Haram phenomenon. Moreover, as 'Islam' (I am not sure if this is the right term to use here) or the sources of Islamic ideas are universal, the ideologies of these movements are also inevitably universal, but with local appropriations. All these movements share the identifier Islam even though the members, their activities and their different narratives have kept changing. These changes are in response to internal influences as well as external influences from Middle Eastern countries (specifically Saudi Arabia and Iran) on the one hand, and the western world on the other. In other words, the contemporary northern Nigerian culture, of which religious extremism is a significant component, is a product of information or knowledge that is organised and transmitted to its consumers (religious subjects) in such a way that it benefits the political interest of the region's colonisers, regardless of whether these be Saudi Arabia, Iran or the West. This activity takes place through the coloniser's 'covert agents,' in other words, religious leaders or intellectuals of all kinds.

Finally, I accept that proffering solutions to Boko Haram and other violent extremism is a very complex matter and beyond the scope of this paper. However, I see a danger in framing discourses that exclude or single out specific groups in charting a course out of the associated difficulties. The exclusionary approach suggested by some of the scholars who contributed to the discourses<sup>35</sup> at the conference could create the danger of reinforcing a vicious circle where marginal groups are pitted against the dominant one. Already, we are observing increased animosity between Muslim ideological groups such as Salafis against Sufis and



the majority Sunni against minority Shia and/or vice versa. This portends the danger of aggravating the situation to a full blown intra-religious crisis – a replica of what is happening in other Muslim majority societies. Thus, I do not subscribe to the exclusionary approach, whatever form it might take, as a way of countering ‘others.’ I feel that the way out for our communities is to teach tolerance not only between different Muslim groups but also towards non-Muslims, including Christians and followers of traditional religions. After all, we all share the same land called Nigeria, northern Nigeria or any other geographical identifier.

### Notes

- 1 This article is based on the presentations made at the International Conference on Insurgency and Boko Haram Phenomenon, Kano (Nigeria), 13-15 November 2018. My participation was sponsored by the Centre for Contemporary Islam (CCI), University of Cape Town, South Africa.
- 2 The perspective of scholars looking at Boko Haram from the contemporary formation and the political relationship between northern and southern Nigeria was not represented in the conference and thus, is outside the purview of this paper.
- 3 Andrea Brigaglia, “A Contribution to the History of the Wahhabi Da’wa in West Africa: The Career and the Murder of Shaykh Ja’far Mahmoud Adam (Daura, ca. 1961/1962–Kano 2007),” *Islamic Africa* 3 (1) (2012):pp.1-23.
- 4 Andrea Brigaglia, “The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram,” *Diritto & Questioni Pubbliche*, 15, (2015):175.
- 5 The name *Izala* is a short form of a longer name in Arabic: *Jama’at Izalat al-Bid’a wa-Iqamat al-Sunna*, meaning “The Community for the Eradication of un-Islamic Innovations and the Establishment of the Sunna.”
- 6 Andrea Brigaglia, “ ‘Slicing off the Tumour’: The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as Narrated by the Islamic State,” 12(2), 199-224.
- 7 Roman Loimeier, “Boko Haram: The development of a militant religious movement in Nigeria,” *Africa Spectrum* 47 (2-3) (2012):137-155.
- 8 Abdulbasit Kassim, “Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of Jihādī-Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 16(2-3), (2015):173-200.
- 9 As mentioned in a post-conference radio programme titled *Duniyar mu a yau*, broadcast on Freedom Radio 99.5 and anchored by Usman Usman on Monday 19 November 2018 between 2.00 and 4.00 pm.

- 10 Alexander Thurston, “International Connections and Internal Disputes in Boko Haram,” paper presented at the International Conference on the Boko Haram Phenomenon, Kano Grand Central Hotel, 13-15 November 2018.
- 11 Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.
- 12 See also Alexander Thurston, “Nigeria’s mainstream Salafis between Boko Haram and the State,” *Islamic Africa* 6(1-2), (2015):pp.109-134.
- 13 Thurston, “International Connections and Internal Disputes in Boko Haram.”
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Thurston, “International Connections and Internal Disputes in Boko Haram.”
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Thurston, “International Connections and Internal Disputes in Boko Haram.”
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Salisu Shehu, “Islam, Education and Politics: A Critical Engagement with the Ideological Framings of Boko Haram,” paper presented at the International conference on the Boko Haram Phenomenon, Kano Grand Central Hotel, 13-15 November 2018.
- 21 Shehu, “Islam, Education and Politics.”
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 The name Zakzakiya is derived from the name Zakzaky and is used by some people to refer to the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) founded by Shaykh Ibrahim Yaqub el-Zakzaky.
- 24 This is a national policy mandating every university graduate to render one year of service to the Nigerian government at a place other than his or her origin, in the spirit of national unity. Based on the constitutional provision, without completing the NYSC, the university certificate is not valid. In Hausa, NYSC is called *bautar Kasa* which literally translates as “worshipping the nation” and implies “rendering service to the nation.”
- 25 Shehu, “Islam, Education and Politics.”
- 26 Brigaglia, “Slicing off the Tumour.”
- 27 Shehu, “Islam, Education and Politics.”
- 28 Shehu, “Islam, Education and Politics.”
- 29 Abdullahi Lamido, “From Zakzakiya Movement to Boko Haram: The History of Muhammad Yusuf’s Journey to Violent Extremism,” paper presented at the International Conference on the Boko Haram Phenomenon, Kano Grand Central Hotel, 13-15 November 2018.
- 30 See Brigaglia, “Slicing off the Tumor.”
- 31 Bashir Aliyu Umar, “Insurgency and the Abuse of the Concept of Jihad,” paper presented at the International Conference on the Boko Haram Phenomenon, Kano Grand Central Hotel, 13-15 November 2018.
- 32 Umar, quoting ibn Taymiyya’s *Fatawa al-kubra*. From 0hr:5m:58s to 0hr:6m:53s of his presentation.

- 33 See Quran Chapter 4:95.
- 34 Mohammad Kyari, “Historicizing the Boko Haram Phenomenon,” paper presented at the International Conference on the Boko Haram Phenomenon, Kano Grand Central Hotel, 13-15 November 2018.
- 35 For example, in addition to Boko Haram, some scholars identified Zakzakiya or Shiite as being outside the mainstream Muslim community and thus, argued that Shiites should not be involved in the process of finding solutions to the problem; this is forgetting that they are key actors in the religious sphere in Nigeria.

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