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Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons from the Rise of Boko Haram

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Introduction

On 26 July 2009, Boko Haram launched its first series of attacks on several police stations across northern Nigeria, culminating in a four-day standoff with security forces that ended with the death of hundreds of its members including founder and first leader, Muhammed Yusuf. As surviving members went underground to plan a deadly insurgency, Nigerian authorities expressed confidence that the group had been defeated. The following summer, Boko Haram returned under new leadership with an official name and a fresh mode of operation that would prove to be far more sophisticated and lethal than the original.

Over the past 12 years, Boko Haram has grown into one of the most influential and dominant terrorist groups in the world. Though the group has gained notoriety for its violence and mass kidnappings in Nigeria's North East, Boko Haram is today a transnational threat that has sustained an insurgency despite both regional and international military counterterrorism efforts. Around the Lake Chad Basin, including in Niger, Cameroon and Chad, the militants of Boko Haram stage daily attacks and raids. This is further complicating efforts to manage other conflicts across the Sahel, creating a complex jihadist problem encasing either side of West Africa.

The threat from Boko Haram became more acute following its splintering into three distinct factions between 2012 and 2016, and the past three years have proved the deadliest ever for security forces battling the group. While international actors have long been driven by the view that Boko Haram and its constituent factions would be weakened by the defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS), this has not come to pass and efforts to defeat the group have fallen short. In fact, the ISIS-allied faction of Boko Haram became stronger after the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2019.

Boko Haram started as a local Islamic movement when a group of radical preachers infiltrated religious, social and political circles in northeastern Nigeria. Nearly 20 years later, the power that Boko Haram wields at the local level continues to sustain it. Our report examines the roots of Boko Haram by highlighting key phases in its evolution. It explores the roles of the four individuals who formed the group, defined its ideology, framed its policies and recruited its early followers, eventually commandeering them into violence.

We show how Boko Haram is inherently a homegrown group that has emerged from the socioeconomic, political and religious milieu of North East Nigeria but whose influence can also be traced to the Middle East, where the global jihadist movement originated. We reveal how the founders leveraged mosques and religious networks to build a footprint locally and establish credibility while cleverly exploiting their ethnic heritage to enhance recruitment beyond ordinary Islamic followers – and facilitate expansion beyond Nigeria. We delve into the ways Boko Haram identified social vulnerabilities in and around the Nigerian city of Maiduguri, particularly among those communities lacking education or with low literacy to enable a sweeping radicalisation campaign across the North East. These at-risk communities became integral to Boko Haram's funding channels, with militants soliciting donations from locals including prominent and respected figures.

Finally, we describe the internal disputes and operational divergences that gave rise to the three distinct terrorist factions active in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin today. Despite numerous changes in leadership and rank, defections to and from groups, variations in territorial objectives and differing affiliations to global jihadi organisations, these factions all sprang from the same violent ideology that arose in Nigeria's North East almost 20 years ago. This ideology still strives for Islamic systems and government to replace secular ones, with militants fighting under a belief that their violent campaign is a divine project not only sanctioned by Islam but handsomely rewarded by Allah.

As part of the Tony Blair Institute's Africa Frontiers series, this report draws on primary Hausa, Kanuri and Arabic-language evidence and eyewitness accounts, including the author's extensive interviews with former classmates and associates of three of the four founders – Muhammed Yusuf, Muhammed Ali and Mamman Nur. Our report benefits from deep personal and professional knowledge of Boko Haram.¹ Hailing from some of the same towns as the group's leaders, the author is in a unique position to examine first-hand evidence from friends and neighbours who sadly went on to join Boko Haram.

INTERNATIONAL FACE, LOCAL ROOTS

Sub-Saharan Africa's jihadist landscape is today characterised by myriad al-Qaeda and ISIS factions operating in the Lake Chad region and the Sahel; ISIS-backed insurgencies in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania and Mozambique; and the 18-year-long al-Shabaab campaign in Somalia, which is also facilitated by al-Qaeda. While these jihadist threats have an international face, the enemy is a local one. To comprehensively defeat it means understanding the ethnic, social, religious, political and economic contexts within which each faction operates. Like Boko Haram, many emerged from local mosques and community circles, evolving into violent factions by exploiting similar social grievances and channelling gaps in welfare to their advantage. Boko Haram set a precedent in the early 2000s when it showed how a radical Islamic group could become a dominant force for change by radicalising at scale and employing a sustained terrorist agenda. While the Taliban was successful in creating a homegrown violent extremist group, its movement was born out of conflict and war, with militant members benefitting from decades of military expertise. By contrast, Boko Haram's scholarly founders and ideologues had to learn to love war.

From its origins as a local religious movement to its emergence as one of the biggest threats in the Lake Chad Basin, Boko Haram's path to dominance isn't one that jihadi organisations have always followed. But a new wave of Islamist terrorist groups is now emulating the homegrown tactics employed by Boko Haram. Across Africa, the Middle East and Asia, jihadist ideologues are radicalising a new generation en masse, infiltrating mosques and other social establishments, and forging a presence as leading voices in their communities. These contextual realities are what prop up jihadi groups and sustain them in the face of multilateral military efforts.

For counterterrorism and counterextremism policies to succeed in the long term, including prevention programmes, they must recognise the ways in which societies are manipulated into the extremist fold. Boko Haram was the first major terrorist group to emerge in Africa. Two decades on, it is one of the most dangerous in the world. Understanding the story of how its members got there and how they sustain their presence to this day is crucial if we are to defeat Boko Haram and jihadi groups elsewhere.

Charting the Causes, Identifying Solutions: Key Findings and Recommendations

Boko Haram, comprising three factions that emerged from a grassroots Islamic movement during the early 2000s, has grown to incorporate thousands of followers with an identity and brand that holds it together even as affiliations to global jihadi organisations flux and change. It is this structure that has sustained the group and enabled the launch of its violent terrorist campaign. So, what are the factors that enabled this rise?

Finding: Violence sprang from a limited understanding of the Islamic canon coupled with a rejection of Western values and systems. Boko Haram was founded by four individuals whose backgrounds and early relationships laid the foundations for their future roles as terrorist leaders. They had strict Islamic upbringings but limited education – and lacked an understanding of Islamic law and jurisprudence. Their main leader and teacher, Muhammed Yusuf, was a graduate-level student in Islamic studies, with weak Arabic language skills. Their interactions with the Salafi circle of northern Nigeria – which was led by graduates of Saudi Arabia’s Islamic University of Madinah, who advocated strict adherence to the early Muslim generations or “pious predecessors” in all spheres of life – played a crucial role in cementing their understanding of Islamism as well as the importance of building a network of followers among the masses. But the future leaders were not grounded in the Salafi canon. None of them studied for an extended period in Nigeria or elsewhere. At the same time, they were taught to loathe Western values and principles from a young age even though they had limited understanding of the associated systems and institutions. Their Sufi upbringing, their active membership of the Muslim Brothers (a group inspired by Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood) and their participation in the Nigerian Salafi circle all shaped Boko Haram’s ideology – essentially a conglomeration of elements derived from the various groups the leaders had come into contact with. These roots shaped the movement and eventually contributed to Boko Haram’s long-term objective of establishing an Islamic state in Nigeria and across the Lake Chad Basin.

Recommendation: To comprehend the strategies of a terrorist group and undermine its appeal, governments and policymakers should study the early histories of leading members. Many of the formative experiences of the Boko Haram leaders, which are referred to in their speeches and literature, give an indication of the conditions underpinning their local societies and the systems that enabled violent movements to grow, leaving individuals vulnerable to radicalisation. With the answers to be found in the stories of these movements and the people who established them, this approach can be applied to any policy work undertaken to understand other Islamist extremist groups – who are equally products of their own societies.

Finding: Low literacy rates and education gaps served as tools and opportunities for recruitment. Boko Haram became adept at attracting and manipulating followers from low socioeconomic backgrounds, many of whom lacked a solid education. The northeastern states of Borno and Yobe, for instance, have the lowest literacy rates in Nigeria. While there were a handful of recruits who had either obtained a qualification to high-school-certificate level or who came from well-to-do families, they counted as few among the many – and remained the exception. For those unfamiliar with formal study, Boko Haram’s preaching sessions and well-rehearsed stories of Islam and gloried Islamic societies served as a primary source of education. Indeed, slow development has continued to hinder literacy and education in the North East, and Boko Haram has built a robust system of proselytisation by targeting those who are most vulnerable to their rhetoric. The group’s deliberate destruction of schools and displacement of teachers, which is driven by its ideological belief of eliminating competing worldviews, has led to further deterioration of this dismal literacy record.

Recommendation: Prioritise soft-power policy programmes that aim to equip communities with the basic skills to dispute and counter extremist narratives. While it is difficult to overhaul entire education systems and improve access rates in underdeveloped areas such as Borno and Yobe, more work could be done to equip individuals with the basic skills to consciously disrupt Boko Haram narratives. This could be in the form of existing development programmes run by organisations such as the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), which educates communities in Africa who are vulnerable and hard to reach. Building resilience through the teaching of “critical thinking skills” could compensate for the high illiteracy rates seen in Borno, Yobe and other Nigerian states as well as across the Lake Chad Basin where Boko Haram is still attracting potential followers.

Finding: Boko Haram preachers exploited Kanuri language and ethnicity for recruitment and mobilisation. From its inception, Boko Haram's ideologues have been able to build an exceptionally powerful movement by methodically exploiting their ethnic Kanuri lineages. While framing their group as an Islamic movement, Boko Haram's founders, most of whom were Kanuri or versed in the dialect, effectively channelled the language to their cause. Literature in Arabic and Hausa languages was translated into Kanuri and disseminated to members of society in rural Borno and Yobe, many of whom were both illiterate and monolingual. This mobilised Kanuri populations to Boko Haram's terrorist agenda. Eventually, this calculated strategy along ethnic lines enabled the group to manipulate populations beyond their religious fold and to facilitate cross-border recruitment of other Kanuri communities outside Borno, including in the neighbouring countries of Niger, Chad and Cameroon. This is not to say, however, that the Kanuri language is synonymous with Boko Haram or that Boko Haram was an ethnic-focused uprising. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of Kanuris have opposed Boko Haram and fought against it both ideologically and militarily. Consequently, they remain the group's biggest victims.

Recommendation: Assess how ethnic-based radicalisation has enlarged a group's footprint and driven its operational expansion from an anthropological perspective. Since linguistic assimilation has allowed Boko Haram's founding leaders to target specific communities, counterterrorism and counterextremism efforts need to include anthropological evaluations as part of any planning of operations to combat Boko Haram in Nigeria and across the Lake Chad Basin. As Boko Haram recruits and infiltrates society by channelling its ethnic heritage and expertise, governments and international actors would benefit from an anthropological analysis of cultures and traditions to effectively prevent this exploitation and protect at-risk communities. The authenticity and legitimacy of those challenging Boko Haram on the front lines are essential to a successful countercampaign. Counter-messaging programmes in the Kanuri language such as those on the USAID-backed radio station Dandal Kura should be upscaled and improved. Meanwhile, satellite television channels such as AREWA24 that promote peacebuilding through dramas, movies, documentaries and sports in the Hausa language should integrate Kanuri as well.

Finding: Boko Haram and its network embedded themselves in social, religious and political channels at a local level. As is the case across northern Nigeria, the rise of Salafism in Maiduguri (Borno State's capital) in the late 1990s led to a surge in sociopolitical Muslim groups based in the city, providing a platform for future Boko Haram ideologues including Muhammed Yusuf. Boko Haram came to prominence in the early 2000s through its use of local Islamic networks and establishments.

The group rooted itself in mosques, gradually transforming these religious institutions into vessels not only for radicalising local populations but also for building credibility and legitimacy across the state. Over time, the founders of Boko Haram were appointed to positions of power in sharia commissions, consolidating their status as voices for the people and also as exponents of an ultraconservative, Islamic way of living. This became more radical and extreme as Boko Haram figures gained authority within Maiduguri's social and Islamic circles, leading to lines being blurred between what could be considered conventional Islam and the distorted ideology they propagated.

Recommendation: Consider implementing monitoring frameworks to facilitate evaluation of local Islamic networks and emerging religious leaders as part of any countercampaign. The Nigerian state needs to improve its awareness of local dynamics and emerging personalities at a community level. Policymakers should therefore consider legislation that empowers and enables local authorities to evaluate leadership changes at mosques while also keeping track of rising religious movements and organisations in the area. One specific tool worth considering would be the reintroduction of a pre-1979 local council arrangement giving emirs, chiefs and other traditional Muslim rulers a formal role in administrative, security and religious matters, specifically in assisting with the maintenance of law and order. By establishing this type of close relationship with traditional authority figures and people at the grassroots, such an arrangement would act as a warning system for any potential extremist movement such as Boko Haram emerging at the local level. Given that most jihadi groups around the world are now emulating Boko Haram's homegrown strategy by rooting themselves in local Islamic, social and political circles, national-level prevention and countering strategies attempting to tackle extremism should also be informed by similar guidance.

Finding: Preachers glorified historical events and played into anti-establishment public sentiment, pitting populations against their official representatives. Boko Haram garnered a strong base of followers and sympathisers from its preaching sessions in which idealistic, local Islamic empires and prosperous Muslim societies from the past were described. Based on Boko Haram's radical, Islamist perspective, its preachers were able to deliver sensationalised storytelling that effectively and falsely presented its terrorist agenda as a project by which undervalued populations in the North East could return to such glorious moments in history. This approach in turn created resentment towards the modern Nigerian authorities, which were identified as the major cause of the plight of these struggling communities. The sermons became integral to romanticising the Boko Haram mission and are still used today to build and maintain a loyal support base.

In addition, the leaders of Boko Haram aggressively exploited perceptions held by local, conservative Muslim populations in the North East that Western-style schooling was a colonial assault on their identity. By regularly playing on the post-colonial history of Lake Chad-based countries, describing it as corrupt, violent and oppressive, Boko Haram has continued to use this narrative to recruit in the region. Furthermore, when sharia law was not effectively accommodated in North East Nigeria, Boko Haram's founders were able to lead the call for the Western-based secular government to be supplanted by an Islamic one.

These factors and others fed into negative local sentiment, which already existed because of ineffective governance, corrupt politicians and scandals, all of which combined to emphasise the impunity of the state. This weaponisation of public feeling resulted in the successful recruitment of sympathisers into Boko Haram's ranks. Allegations of police brutality and disproportionate use of force by state actors in Borno were also used to sow division between local populations and their government representatives. Tensions with the police partly facilitated Boko Haram's transition to violence in 2009, and police ineffectiveness has been cited as a motivating factor for several of their offensives. Similarly, alleged human-rights abuses by the state are regularly seized upon by Boko Haram to mobilise potential recruits.

Recommendation: Any counternarrative model needs to win the war of ideas and respond to the precise contextual conditions and socioeconomic grievances that pave the way to radicalisation. For governments and international organisations to effectively defeat Boko Haram, a strong counternarrative model needs to be developed. Such a model should be specifically tailored to Boko Haram by identifying and understanding the precise contextual elements that transformed the group's messaging into a persuasive and compelling tool for localised radicalisation and support. While structures to decipher extremist material and narratives do exist, a dedicated country- and group-specific operation should be assembled to study and translate Boko Haram statements, audio, communiques, videos, literature and propaganda. Winning the war of ideas and working to immunise populations from radicalisation is more important today than it has ever been. Any addressing of the socioeconomic grievances exploited by Boko Haram needs to happen in coordination with the support of "changemaker" Muslim clerics and wide-reaching organisations such as book publishers and media organisations (Darul Andalus and Dandal Kura Radio among them). International, domestic and local government bodies can only benefit from a two-way relationship with religious scholars, journalists and youth as they seek to institute a strong counternarrative programme in areas where Boko Haram is rooted and active. Ultimately, though, the best way to prevent exploitation by Boko Haram and similar groups is to address socioeconomic

and political grievances, taking steps to strengthen the social contract and effectively remove the route to radicalisation. Additionally, by noting how Boko Haram has harnessed use of history – both ancient and modern – while simultaneously exploiting long-held grievances in its communities, policymakers can move to counter similar psychological coercion by other global jihadi organisations in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Finding: Donations fundamental to Boko Haram’s take-off came from local community members – including individuals not officially affiliated with the organisation. Boko Haram raised their initial funds by soliciting donations not only from their members but also from communities who sympathised with – and were manipulated by – the group’s causes. This grew into a sophisticated funding channel as Boko Haram became more influential in Maiduguri’s religious and social circles. In addition to regular financial contributions from members during Friday services and daily prayers, individuals from the community, including those who weren’t official Boko Haram affiliates, also donated to the organisation – driven by their desire to aid “the course of Allah”. A substantial part of this came from “Zakat”, an annual charitable payment made by wealthy Muslims, which Boko Haram then used to cultivate farms and properties as well as empower those who gave parts of their profits to the group. Boko Haram was able to expand its preaching activities using these funds, namely by building mosques, purchasing vehicles and audio equipment, and completing major property transactions. When the group started to transition to violence, it used donations and contributions to purchase weaponry in the early days of the insurgency, and this income eventually became a vital source of sustainability as the group diversified its operations and expanded its territorial footprint. While funds and supplies from 2011 onwards largely came from the vast land and water resources around Lake Chad, as well as raids or taxation on communities in the region, it is worth noting that the group also used members in disguise and middlemen to smuggle in items they could not produce themselves – including medicine and ammunitions.

Recommendation: The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and similar bodies operating across the Lake Chad Basin need to acknowledge that a significant proportion of Boko Haram’s revenue is sourced from local channels, and not solely via transnational means nor global wire-transfer (such as Hawala networks). Therefore, financial task forces should be educated on the particular local dynamics of terrorist financing in addition to the international dimension. Furthermore, local authorities should vet and run due diligence on large transactions in their jurisdictions, and flag when unusually large payments are made or buyers raise suspicions. Security forces should step up efforts to block Boko Haram’s finance and supply routes because this is an integral part of any strategy to combat the group.

Finding: Although they never gained first-hand experience in the Middle East, Boko Haram's leaders took direct inspiration from Salafi-jihadi groups in the region. Boko Haram's founders neither studied nor fought outside of Nigeria prior to establishing the group. Muhammed Ali's connection to Saudi Arabia is often overstated, as are claims that he studied in Sudan and with Osama bin Laden, and that he subsequently fought in Afghanistan. Similarly, Muhammed Yusuf's alleged period of study in Saudi Arabia never took place. Nonetheless, Boko Haram's founders were inspired by Salafi-jihadi groups and their ideologues from the Middle East, often plagiarising or mimicking their literature and operational strategies to shape their own movement. Boko Haram's transformation in the early 2000s from localised Islamic movement to organised terrorist group was directly influenced by those same Salafi-jihadi groups making strides in the Middle East. The early influence that Middle East thinkers and literature had on Boko Haram's founders also paved the way for the correspondence and relationship-building that would come later on with al-Qaeda and then ISIS.

Recommendation: In challenging the ideology of groups like Boko Haram, policymakers need to understand they are challenging Salafi-jihadism and political Islamism as well. While localised approaches and counternarratives are important, it is crucial not to lose sight of the shared ideological characteristics that form the foundations of these groups' worldviews. Islamist terrorist organisations around the world today often reference the work of Salafi-jihadi groups in the Middle East. High-ranking officials in Boko Haram and other jihadi groups in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and East Asia were bred on the literature of Middle Eastern terrorist leaders. It is essential therefore that policymakers begin to acknowledge that there is an enhanced threat when leading extremists openly admit, or it is found, that they have drawn inspiration from the Middle East.

Finding: Boko Haram benefited from alliances with al-Qaeda and ISIS, but transnational support was – and is – not essential to its survival. Boko Haram's alliances – first with al-Qaeda, and then with ISIS – produced material, logistical and financial support as well as capacity-building benefits that elevated the group's operations and standing. Consequently, the success of Boko Haram factions especially the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has in turn benefited ISIS and its bid for global territorial dominance. As such, ISIS regularly draws on the achievements of ISWAP to venerate its own global brand and make stronger appeals for fighters to join one of its insurgencies in other parts of the world. Yet it is an overstatement to portray Boko Haram as a mere puppet or representative of transnational jihadi organisations. ISIS does not essentially control Boko Haram.

While al-Qaeda's support between 2009 and 2010 was vital to the group's transition to insurgency, ISIS's support from around 2015 until today has not been instrumental to the survival of the group. Thus, defeating al-Qaeda or ISIS elsewhere will not automatically bring an end to or even weaken Boko Haram. Because of its inherent, homegrown attributes, Boko Haram will survive without such affiliations. The group's influence via ethnic, religious, social and political channels means their influence around the Lake Chad Basin is more entrenched than ever, irrespective of any global jihadi association. Furthermore, Boko Haram's major sources of funding remain local whether from farming, fishing and logging or raids on communities in order to secure cattle, food, medicine and taxation from residents.

Recommendation: Homegrown groups such as Boko Haram (and its most active faction) are standalone threats that should be considered beyond the transnational links they hold with ISIS. Policymakers need to make a distinction between Boko Haram (and its factions) and the Islamic State in counterterrorism and counterextremism programming. The present threat is from ISWAP, who are internationally recognised and supported by ISIS. But ISWAP's homegrown and localised attributes are more lethal and destabilising than their transnational links with ISIS alone. With significant influence in rural parts of the Lake Chad Basin, ISWAP will remain immune to counterterrorism and counterextremism efforts that aim to defeat ISIS in other parts of the world. Therefore, the Multinational Joint Task Force, France, the UK and the US, all of which are actively engaged in the fight against ISWAP, should aim to target both the Boko Haram roots from which ISWAP grew and the supporting Islamic State elements. This could be the basis upon which to tackle other jihadi groups whose alliances with al-Qaeda and ISIS disguise their more hazardous homegrown and localised powers.

Finding: Factional splits led to more, not less, violence with Boko Haram's ideology retained despite the divisions. Boko Haram's splintering into the Ansaru faction in 2012 and then ISWAP in 2016 (the original faction JAS also remains present) did not diminish the terror threat – but enhanced it. All three splinter factions share operational and ideological histories, with networks built over many years. This divergence has only served to create additional modus operandi and growth strategies beyond the initial plans outlined by Muhammed Yusuf. Between 2018 and 2020, for instance, 1,868 security personnel were killed – a number almost equal to the total casualties between 2011 and 2017.

ISWAP, led by Muhammed Yusuf's son Abu Musab al-Barnawi between 2016 and 2019, symbolically continues the Boko Haram legacy and is responsible for much of the violence in the Lake Chad Basin, while Abubakar Shekau's rogue JAS faction has pivoted to a criminal-like operation that targets civilians and engages in systematic looting of property – despite its leader's recent death.

In the North West, meanwhile, Ansaru is engaged in a long and dangerous game of winning the hearts and minds of locals by mimicking al-Qaeda's so-called civilian-friendly model. Yet each essentially remains driven by the same ideology of their founding fathers.

Recommendation: Do not mistake factional disputes and changes in leadership as “operational crises” for terrorist groups. Global jihadi factions are now more prone to splintering and operational divergence than they were 20 years ago. Yet policymakers need only look to Boko Haram to see how it has grown stronger following its factional splits – an approach that can apply equally to jihadi actors emerging in the Sahel and parts of Syria. Efforts to tackle Boko Haram factions should be tailored to the individual entities that are operating but all bodies, including the UN and military forces involved in the fight against ISWAP, need to recognise that the group's founding ideology, relationships and local influences still matter today. Whatever incarnations the separate factions might take in the future, they will always carry their Boko Haram doctrines and heritage with them. Policymakers can therefore futureproof their strategies by acknowledging that splinter factions will remain Boko Haram at their core.

A CALL FOR COORDINATION

As our final recommendation, we call for all governments directly affected by Boko Haram activities, including those in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, to do more to synchronise their military, deradicalisation and prevention programmes. Terrorism today extends its reach beyond the kinetic and physical – and governments suffering under the presence of homegrown Islamist organisations have much knowledge to share that illuminates how localised social, political, economic and religious channels are used to nurture jihadi movements. Through improved coordination and information-sharing, leading counterterrorism and counterextremism organisations will be better placed to prevent the emergence and, ultimately, work towards the defeat of jihadist groups such as Boko Haram.

The Founding of Boko Haram

Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s in the city of Maiduguri in Borno State, North East Nigeria, in the wake of a popular call for the introduction of a sharia law-based justice system. After the enactment of sharia law in the Nigerian state of Zamfara back in 2000, major Muslim groups came together to put pressure on newly elected governors in other northern states to follow suit. Within this context, extensive preaching and public meetings aimed at promoting sharia and putting pressure on politicians were organised by different entities in major towns and cities across northern Nigeria, with volunteer youth groups forming to campaign for the law, educate other youngsters and encourage community engagement. One such group was Shabab or “youths” in Arabic (not related to extremist group al-Shabaab), which was established around 1999 at Maiduguri’s Indimi Mosque, a Salafi centre where Muhammed Yusuf became leader. It was in this group that Yusuf boosted his status and met his some of his future lieutenants.²

Consequently, 11 other northern states including Borno and Yobe – Yusuf’s native state – adopted the sharia justice system that had been in operation before colonialism. Yusuf was made a member of the sharia implementation committee in his native state, where fornication, drinking alcohol and gambling were criminalised and brothels, beer parlours and casinos shut down. Various state governments set up new sharia courts with criminal jurisdiction or expanded the jurisdiction of existing ones while establishing sharia commissions and societal reorientation agencies.³ The dramatic socioeconomic transformation that was expected to follow the “re-introduction” of this divine justice system did not materialise, however. Disappointment, scapegoating and frustration set in. Yusuf resigned his position and blamed the failure on politicians who politicised sharia. He and liked-minded individuals arrived at the conclusion that the failed experiment showed why sharia cannot be implemented in a secular system, therefore underlining the need for an Islamic government. The way forward, they argued, was for Western secular systems and institutions – including democracy and Western-style schools – to be replaced with Islamic versions. And the only way to achieve this was through armed jihad. This position brought Yusuf and his lieutenants into conflict with the Indimi Mosque and the broader Salafi leadership.

Yusuf and younger recruit Muhammed Ali began a movement towards Islamic reform simply known as *dawah* – the act of inviting people to embrace Islam – which became the nucleus of Boko Haram. For Yusuf, a pivotal turning point came with an incident of “blasphemy”, as he called it, committed by Isioma Daniel – then a 21-year-old Nigerian journalist who had graduated in the UK.⁴ In November 2002, she wrote an article about the Muslim community’s move to stop the Miss World beauty pageant, which coincided with Ramadan, from being hosted in Nigeria. Addressing the opposition in a piece published by Nigerian newspaper *ThisDay*, Daniel wrote: “The Muslims thought it was immoral to bring 92 women to Nigeria and ask them to revel in vanity. What would Mohammad think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from one of them.” These words angered Nigerian Muslims, provoked religious riots that left more than 200 dead and resulted in a fatwa being issued by the government of Zamfara, which called for Daniel’s execution.⁵

Having been triggered to form a group that would promote violence as a legitimate means of achieving their political goals, Yusuf and Ali leveraged their existing socioreligious status and networks to build the group. After recruiting their first few followers including Abubakar Shekau, who became Yusuf’s deputy, and Mamman Nur, who became a leader and major ideologue of the group, Boko Haram’s founders worked methodically to root themselves in mosques and social circles, gradually transforming these institutions into vessels not only for radicalising local populations but also for building credibility and legitimacy across northern Nigeria. They tapped into socioeconomic and political grievances, local history and global events to recruit others to their newfound ideology as well as to raise funds and organise. The group rapidly grew, becoming a leading voice in Nigeria’s northeastern Islamist community and establishing a network of six mosques inside Maiduguri as well as across 12 other towns and cities. By 2009, the congregational community had surged into several thousands.

Nur provides a good example of how existing social and religious contacts were exploited by Boko Haram. Motivated by the revivalist preaching of the Salafi clerics based in Maiduguri, Nur set up an Islamic adult literacy school called Ibn Umar (named after the Prophet Muhammad’s second successor) with the aim of teaching the Arabic language, Islamic theology and the Quran. To allow the target audience to participate, classes ran from 6pm to 10pm. The premises of Gwange II primary school, a public facility, was used as the venue. Within months, between 200 and 300 adults ranging from traders, civil servants, students and workers had enrolled. This school made Nur popular in Maiduguri’s youth circles. Using contacts from the school, he mobilised resources to build a mosque in 2002, which doubled as an Islamic centre named Ibn Mas’ud (another companion of the Prophet Muhammad).

Serving as its director and imam, he preached from here and invited others such as the Ibn Umar school secretary, Mallam Usman (who the author interviewed for this paper), and Muhammed Yusuf to come and teach Islamic theological and creedal texts. Yusuf held a weekly session where he translated *Al-Aqida al-Tahawiyya* (a popular Sunni Muslim doctrine written by the 10th-century Egyptian theologian, Abu Ja'far Ahmad at-Tahawi) from Arabic to Hausa. As time passed, Nur became mesmerised by Yusuf's radical ideology, passionate rhetoric and eloquence. Ultimately, Nur joined Yusuf's group bringing his students and resources – and becoming his disciple.⁶

THE TRUE ACCOUNT OF THE ROAD TO RADICALISATION

Our original evidence, including from extensive interviews carried out with four friends and associates of Yusuf, Ali and Nur, reveal that none of Boko Haram's founders or leaders studied or trained outside Nigeria before founding the group.⁷ This is contrary to the popular narrative that suggests Ali, in particular, studied in Sudan where he met Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants before fighting in Afghanistan and going on to win a grant to establish Boko Haram. Two of Ali's high-school classmates at the Federal Government College Maiduguri maintain that he was a visible presence around the city from before his graduation almost up to his death in 2009. They recall stumbling into him occasionally, chatting briefly about life after graduation and even debating him on his ideology. Ali's associate in the Salafi circle (today a university lecturer) remembers meeting Ali at various gatherings in Maiduguri between 1999 and 2002. Indeed, he specifically recalls a time in around 2002 when Ali visited his house to discuss his newfound perspective and his rejection of secular governments and institutions. According to these unanimous accounts of his earlier years, when Ali was already supposed to have made his trip to Sudan and met Bin Laden he was in fact a 16-year-old teenager in the final years of his secondary-school education.⁸

As for Muhammed Yusuf, it is true that he visited Saudi Arabia several times but these trips were for short pilgrimages. On one such occasion, around October 2003, Yusuf stayed for about five months in Saudi Arabia on a self-imposed exile because he was fearful of being arrested back at home by the Nigerian authorities for his involvement in the Kanamma incident, which we explore below. There is no evidence that he studied (even informally) there, much less in the Islamic University of Madinah, nor is there proof that he met any extremist ideologues, leaders or even ordinary members of the school. But this is not to suggest that Yusuf's trips to Saudi did not play a role in his long journey to radicalisation. According to his sons, he was on pilgrimage to Mecca when the 9/11 attacks occurred. Yusuf interpreted this as a divine call to establish a group, similar to al-Qaeda, which would save Nigerian Muslims from the perceived persecution and humiliation meted out to them by Nigerian Christians while replacing his country's secular government with an Islamic one.⁹

In terms of Nur, rather than training in Somalia after Boko Haram's first violent clash with authorities in 2009 (as is often reported), he instead fled to his mother's village in Cameroon where he lived until 2014. From there he recruited Boko Haram's inaugural Cameroonian members, joining his brothers-in-arms in the Sambisa Forest, a reserve that would become known as a stronghold for the group.¹⁰ A Cameroonian professor of history, who has extensively researched the group's roots in the country, has corroborated this account.¹¹

According to unanimous accounts, when Ali was already supposed to have made his trip to Sudan and met Bin Laden, he was a 16-year-old in the final years of secondary-school education.

It is essential to clarify the true extent of the founders' experiences outside of Nigeria because if Boko Haram had started as a franchise of a foreign group, the policy approach to it would be drastically different. Rather it is a homegrown entity that later benefited from the support of foreign jihadi organisations, as this report demonstrates. Our original evidence shows that Ali never met Bin Laden or fought in Afghanistan, just as Yusuf never studied in Saudi Arabia. Instead, they all studied, got radicalised and trained locally. They were inspired, however, by jihadi groups and leaders in the Middle East and across the world. Furthermore, Arabic-language literature from the Middle East played a big role both in their radicalisation journey and in their recruiting and mobilising of other fighters.

ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Even though Boko Haram's founders did not have direct theological training or combat experience in the Middle East, ideologues and events in the region played a profound, if indirect, role in the formation of Boko Haram. Yusuf and Ali got the very idea of establishing their group from the Middle East. As keen observers of developments in Afghanistan, Iraq and other key countries – mostly through Hausa and Arabic news outlets – Boko Haram's founders were captivated by the images and speeches of al-Qaeda personnel including Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri as well as Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Yusuf was so influenced by these ideologues that he would print and recite their rhetoric during conversations with friends,¹² while Ali cited them so frequently in his speeches and teaching sessions that some of his students

believed he was trained directly by prominent Middle Eastern jihadi figures.¹³ In fact, Yusuf's sons claim, in their book written for the Islamic State, that al-Qaeda's 9/11 attack was the major inspiration behind their father's decision to establish Boko Haram. They recount that Yusuf saw the concurrence of the attack with his visit to the "House of God" in Saudi Arabia, during which he searched for spiritual guidance, as the divine inspiration driving him to form a group with similar motives and methodologies.¹⁴

Having decided to establish a group in a similar vein to al-Qaeda, Yusuf and Ali started scouting around for Islamic literature that would validate their views and help them to recruit others. Again, they looked to the Middle East: they read and cited the works of jihadi ideologues such as the Islamic theorist and leading member of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb; the Jordanian-Palestinian jihadi, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who was the first person to declare the Saudi monarchy to be apostates; and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian jihadist who founded the group that would become ISIS. But they also cherry-picked non-violent extremist scholars from the Middle East as well as establishment Salafis, including the former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz. They, as well as historical activists such as the 13th-century Syrian and forceful Islamic theologian Ibn Taymiyyah, were copiously referenced not only in the groups' preaching campaigns but also in its 169-page manifesto.

During recruitment campaigns, the group consistently and systematically invoked such issues as the Israeli-Palestinian question, the Iraq war and US foreign policy in the Middle East to feed their narrative. They used these issues to paint a picture of a Muslim community (*ummah*) that is under imminent threat of destruction and to place Boko Haram within the context of the cosmic struggle to fight back. For example, in his Hausa-language exegesis of the Quran during Ramadan in the spring of 2008, Yusuf states:

*"Look at what they are doing to Muslims in Guantanamo. Look at the Abu Ghraib prison inside Iraq. The prison was built with the money of the Iraqi people in their own land and property, yet they are the same people that are being incarcerated in the prison. They would put people in as prisoners, and a dog to assault the prisoners, while they were completely naked. They would also force a dog to sleep with the female prisoners ..."*¹⁵

Yusuf's sons claim, in their book written for the Islamic State, that al-Qaeda's 9/11 attack was the major inspiration behind their father's decision to establish Boko Haram.

Boko Haram's members nicknamed themselves and called their children after such figures as Mullah Omar and al-Zarqawi while mirroring the operational strategies of these Middle Eastern and Taliban leaders to shape their own group. This influence was reflected in their manner of dressing like the Afghan Taliban as well as the names of their mosques and schools. Outwardly, the mimicry was so evident that locals and the Nigerian media named the Kanamma commune (see below) "the Nigerian Taliban", even though this is not an identity that the group itself ever used. As we discover below, this influence got even stronger after Boko Haram had turned to violence. For it was after this that the group developed direct relationships with jihadi groups in the Middle East, drew on their theological and operational expertise, and obtained material assistance.

From Local Preachers to Transnational Terrorists

An early differentiator of the particular *dawah* movement, nicknamed “Yusufiyya” (after Yusuf), pursued by Boko Haram’s founders was the emphasis placed on jihad and the permissibility of violence against Christians, Jews and agents of the state. It is easy to forget, given the scale of Boko Haram attacks against Muslims, that the group originally regarded these civilians as the *ummah* or ideologically protected as long as they weren’t agents of the state. It is no surprise that Boko Haram’s early skirmishes with law enforcement and the state benefited from a strong degree of popular support given the context of police brutality, suppression and abuses of human rights in a part of the world where anti-establishment, pro-Islamist sentiment is rife. This picture changed over time, though, as violence came to dominate the group’s activities. As with al-Qaeda and ISIS, the acceptance of violence against Muslims and the definition of who counts as part of the *ummah* have become parts of the ideological fault line between the three successor factions of Boko Haram.

Since forming in early 2003, Boko Haram dramatically evolved from a group of local preachers peddling violent rhetoric to the deadliest terror group in the world – just over a decade later.¹⁶ After disagreements that culminated in a major splintering in 2016 and having suffered territorial losses at the hand of state troops from 2015, the group has regained the initiative in the last three years, bouncing back with more sophistication and lethality than before and committing some of its deadliest attacks on forces and civilians. Before examining where Boko Haram is today, it is important to understand the historical context in which it emerged and evolved because this is central to the crystallisation of the group’s ideology and its move into violence. Our report breaks down this evolution into five broad periods: the non-violent preaching phase; reorganisation and insurgency; allegiance to ISIS and the declaration of a caliphate; internal schism and splintering; and its present phase.

THE DAWAH MOVEMENT AND NON-VIOLENT PHASE (2003–2008)

During this phase, Yusuf, Shekau and Nur, along with other ideologues, engaged in aggressive recruitment and radicalisation in Maiduguri and across northern Nigeria. Boko Haram ideologues taught their audiences that the Nigerian government was anti-Islamic both for its secular system and for conniving with Nigerian Christians and the West to persecute Muslims. They framed democracy and secular laws as ‘disbelief’ and idol worship, suggesting that Western-style schools intended to promote secular Western values, polytheism and the recruitment of Muslim children away from Islam.

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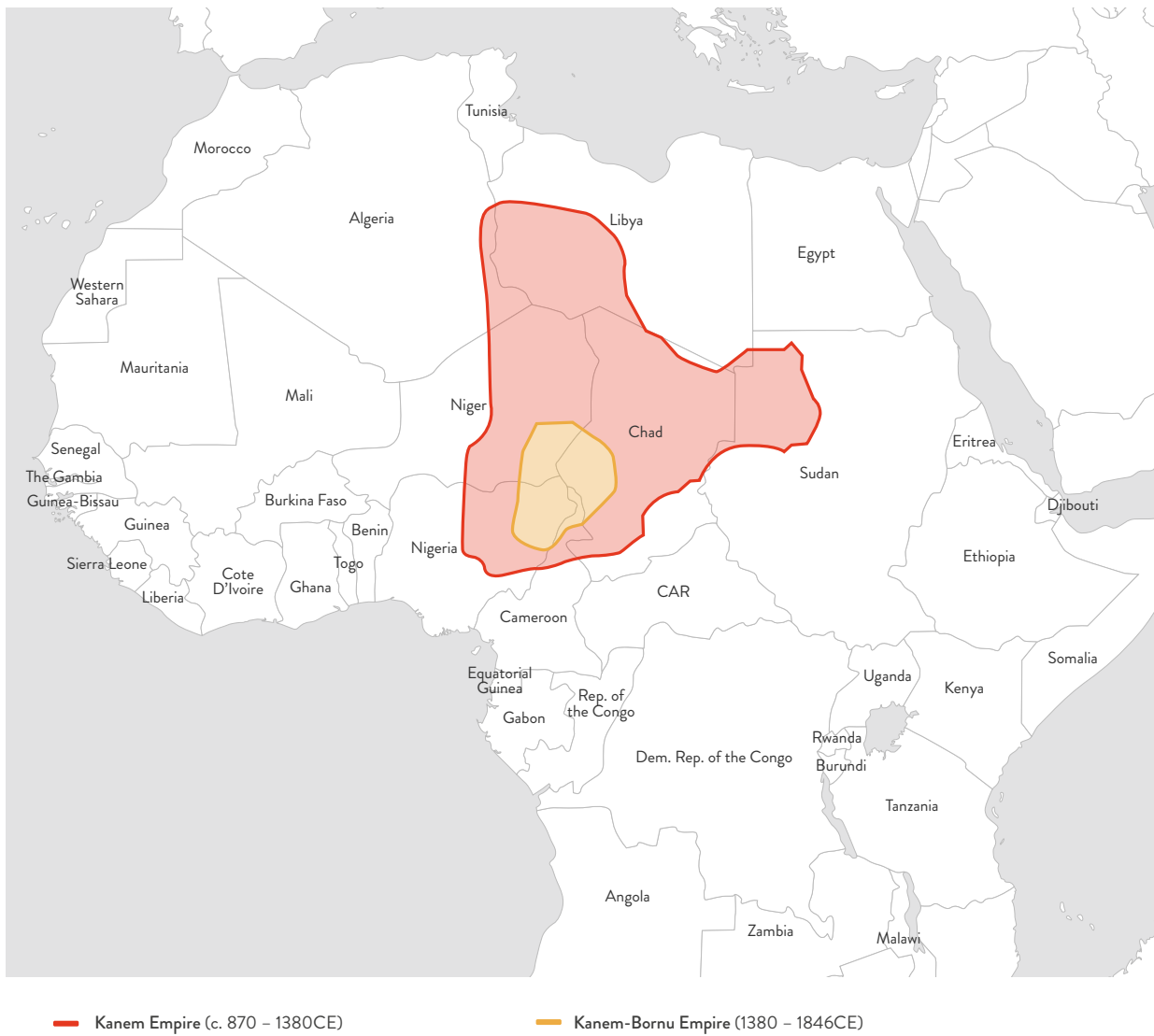
Many different and interrelated factors came together to create a market for Boko Haram’s ideas. They included the region’s history as the location of two powerful Islamic states that existed before British colonialism (the Kanem-Bornu empire from the 9th to 19th century and the Sokoto Caliphate of the 19th century); the populations of the Lake Chad region, many whom were educated in Arabic or other local languages, and whose relevance had waned since the introduction of Western systems and institutions; repeated ethno-religious violence that had flared up with Christian communities since the 1980s, driven by opposing narratives; increasing intra-Muslim fragmentation and tensions exacerbated by the introduction of pro-Saudi Sunni and pro-Iranian Shia groups in the 1980s who both aggressively challenged traditional Sufi Islam; socioeconomic frustration with the new civilian regime that was then led by President Olusegun Obasanjo, a southern Nigerian who came from a Christian background; police brutality and powerful politicians and their cronies behaving with seeming impunity, which in turn reinforced anti-establishment sentiment; and, finally, events around the world including the Iraq war, the occupation of Palestinian lands and the war on terror – which was framed as a Judeo-Christian war on Islam with the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda seen as heroes and freedom fighters.

The group's preachers translated Arabic texts into Hausa and Kanuri, gave Friday sermons and conducted exegeses of the Quran during Ramadan in these local languages. They strategically selected Kanuri as the language with which to address a mainly Kanuri audience, especially in rural Borno and Yobe States where they went on preaching tours. Yusuf, for instance, translated the Quran into Kanuri every Thursday night at the mosque in the Millionaires Quarters area of Maiduguri. He repeated this with the classical Islamic book *The Meadows of the Righteous (Riyāḍ aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn)*, containing verses of the Quran and statements (*hadith*) of the Prophet Muhammad, every Saturday evening in the city's Lawan Bukar neighbourhood. He also translated each line of the group's manifesto, a 169-page Arabic treatise he wrote and called *This is Our Creed and Method of Proclamation (Hadhihi Aqidatuna wa Manhaj Da'watina)*, into Hausa and Kanuri. Preaching took place in the group's headquarters, Markaz Ibn Taymiyyah, named after the medieval Muslim scholar so often cited by the group, as well as the group's five other mosques in Maiduguri and during tours. It was at this stage that Boko Haram initiated and developed its ideas. These sessions were recorded on cassettes and sold in towns and villages across the Lake Chad region.

Exploitation of Ethnicity, Language, History and Social Ties

At preaching sessions, a mainly Kanuri audience – many of whom had low literacy rates and were monolingual – learnt about the history of their defunct Islamic empire (the Kanem-Bornu, a powerful Islamic state that existed for a millennium from the 9th century) in their mother tongue. Yusufiyya missionaries evoked (and heavily edited) this history to describe a prosperous Kanuri Muslim empire that was conquered, exploited and dismembered by European invaders. They referred in similar terms to the Sokoto Caliphate, a confederation of emirates headquartered in northwestern Nigeria that was established at the beginning of the 19th century in the wake of a jihad led by Sheikh Usman dan Fodio.¹⁷ The preachers contextualised these stories as part of a wider Islamic history, making direct comparisons to Nigeria's post-colonial era that had been bedevilled by corruption, violence and oppression. They were the reason for a project that would return society to the glorious past and a saying to this effect became popular: "The future of this *ummah* will not be prosperous unless it is based upon our prosperous past." An idealised history of local Islamic empires combined with radical Islamism became an effective recruitment and radicalisation tool primarily because it underpinned the collective ethno-religious identity of audiences and instilled a shared sense of victimhood and purpose.

Figure 1:

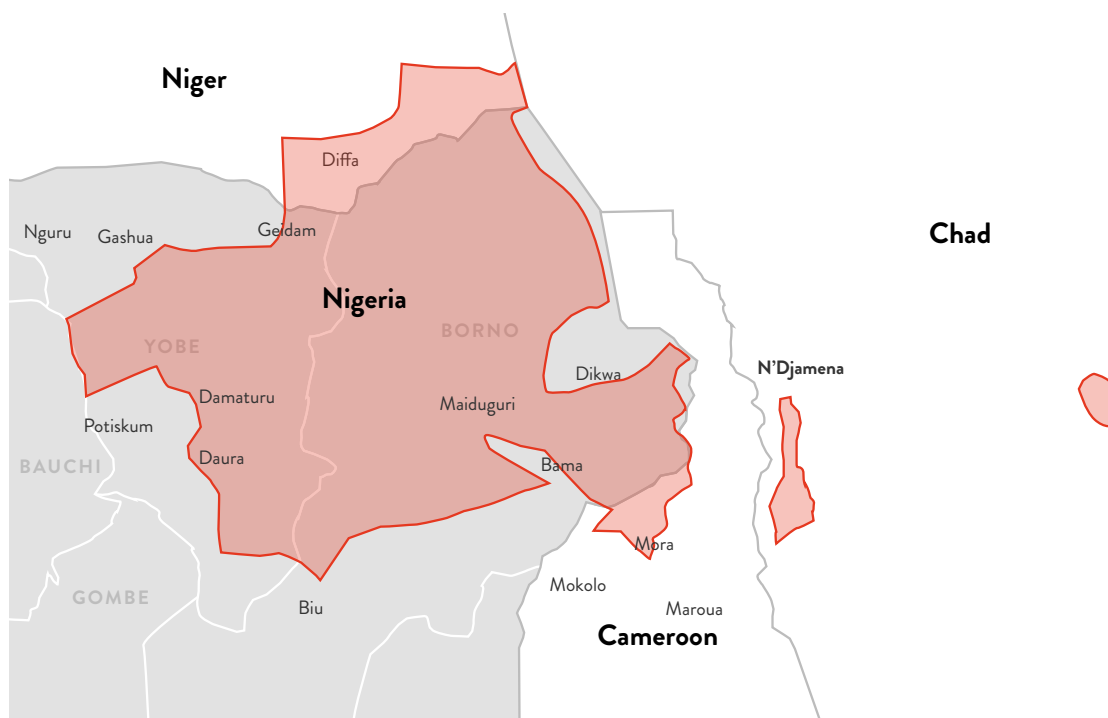
THE ANCIENT ISLAMIC EMPIRES GLORIFIED BY BOKO HARAM'S FOUNDERS

Source: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change

The fact that most of Yusuf's prominent Salafi opponents from outside Maiduguri did not speak the local language gave the group an edge among its largely Kanuri audience. Yusuf's teacher Jaafar Mahmud Adam, for example, who later became his most vocal opponent, and the current Nigerian Minister of Communications and Digital Economy, Dr Isa Ali Pantami, who debated Yusuf in 2006, do not speak Kanuri and consequently could not reach audiences that only spoke the language. Yusuf's ethnicity (shared by the group's other early ideologues) also gave him credibility among audiences, and the group was able to recruit and radicalise ethnic Kanuris not just in Nigeria but in Chad, Cameroon and Niger too. As a result, it is Kanuris that remain the most powerful in both main factions to this day. Since the group's leaders and members shared ethnicity with border communities around the Lake Chad region, they could easily communicate with and blend in with them. This facilitated cross-border radicalisation during this non-violent phase but also smoothed the way for mobilisation and operations later on, with the smuggling of weapons and equipment as well as movement of stolen cattle and fish to major markets in the region all sustaining Boko Haram campaigns.

Figure 2:

LOCATION OF KANURI-LANGUAGE-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES AROUND THE LAKE CHAD BASIN



As the same time, Yusuf exploited social ties to support his group. For instance, he married into the family of Baba Fugu Mohammed, a wealthy community leader, and leveraged this link to raise funds for his group. Boko Haram's headquarters was donated by Fugu, for example. Similarly, Baba Buji Foi, another wealthy individual with whom Yusuf had cultivated a close personal relationship, became one of the group's major financiers. Some of these individuals used the influence of Boko Haram to campaign for and attain political office, with Foi serving as the elected chairman of Kala/Balge Local Government between 1999 and 2002 followed by the posts of commissioner of lands and survey for Borno State and commissioner of religious affairs, a role he stepped down from in 2009. The resignation came just before Boko Haram's first major confrontation in July of the same year, in the wake of which he, along with Yusuf and Fugu, were all extrajudicially killed by Nigerian security forces.

Boko Haram's exploitation of ethnic and tribal affiliations mirrors the practice of other groups across sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere around the globe. For example, al-Shabaab used this approach to mobilise fighters not just in Africa but also from the Somali diaspora in the US and Europe.¹⁸ Mozambique's Ansar al-Sunna meanwhile has consolidated by finding the majority of its support among the Kimwani, a minority ethnic group that has been growing increasingly marginalised.¹⁹ And the same can be seen with the Taliban's mobilisation of the Pashtun in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Over the passage of time, Boko Haram's message spread, via preaching tours, debates, recorded audio cassettes and publications of books and pamphlets, to other states in the North East including Yobe and Gombe, and then across northern Nigeria. Inroads were additionally made into non-Kanuri-speaking communities based in places such as Bauchi and Potiskum as well as Wudil where it attracted numerous followers.

Harnessing Anti-State Sentiment

Boko Haram's entry point into its anti-Western and anti-establishment policy was its opposition to Western-style schooling, which was positioned as a colonial assault on local Muslim identity. Among northern Nigeria's conservative Muslim population, including in Maiduguri, it was a widely held sentiment that rapidly escalated into opposition against all state institutions including the civil service and particularly the police and military. Adding fuel to the fire was the series of extrajudicial and arbitrary police activities in the region, from thuggery to bribery and other human rights abuses, which meant this message resonated. Indeed, at least several thousand people enlisted to the cause because they agreed with Boko Haram's initial ideas of opposing Western education and rejecting corrupt government, particularly during this non-violent phase.

As its ideas hardened to embrace the promotion of violence, into the mid-2000s, other Muslim groups started to question Boko Haram's approach, entering into fierce debates that involved passionate polemics and the pitting of one group's so-called Muslimness against the other. Boko Haram's moderate supporter base started to fall away, this in itself contributing to an increasingly hardline stance. The rejection of state authority and disdain for law enforcement and intelligence agencies resulted in Boko Haram's founders being invited for questioning and sometimes leading to arrest. In this atmosphere, the group's views crystallised with violence increasingly underpinning its dominant ideological concept and preparations being undertaken for jihad. In 2008, Yusuf delivered a seminal address hinting at this transition as he reframed the *dawah* formation story and history of the group as one founded from the get-go for the purposes of violence and for ridding the region of its secular government and values more broadly. As he declares:

*“The only thing that will stop them [the Nigerian government and Christians] from insulting the prophet or killing Muslims is jihad ... [but] we must first and foremost embark upon preaching for Islamic reform. Then, we will have to be patient until we acquire power. This is the foundation of this preaching towards Islamic reform [da'wa]. It was founded for the sake of jihad and we did not hide this objective from anyone ...”*²⁰

In the address, Yusuf also identified those he regarded as legitimate targets of violence including Christians, Sufis, Shias and those Sunni Muslims who were considered agents of the state.

It is worth noting that even in this non-violent phase, the stage was punctuated with skirmishes and clashes. This included disputes with Salafists over the ownership of mosques and polemical debates leading to violent confrontations, injuries and loss of life. Tensions with the police escalated as the group's members disobeyed and defied laws including those governing road traffic and the right to assemble. The biggest violent confrontation during this period, however, is the Kanamma episode, which became a landmark in Boko Haram's history.²¹

An Early Warning Sign: The Kanamma Incident

In late 2003, an ideological split divided members into two main camps, one led by Muhammed Ali. The disagreement revolved around part theological, part practical questions: first, whether a Muslim is permitted to live in Nigeria; and, second, the timing for the launch of armed jihad.

On the first issue, both Ali, Yusuf and their respective followers viewed Nigeria as the land of so-called disbelief (*dar al-kufr*) because it is not ruled by sharia law (*hukm bi gyari ma anzala Allah*) and permits adultery, gambling,

alcohol and so on. But they differed on the practical implications of this perspective and the next steps. While Ali felt it was obligatory for members to migrate from “dirty” city life and wage a jihad, Yusuf contended that members could continue to stay in Nigerian towns and cities as long as they publicly rejected and dissociated themselves from secular government and institutions (*al wala wa al-bara’* and *izhar al-din*).

The second issue focused on whether Nigeria was ripe for jihad in 2003. Ali felt that all pre-conditions had been met because although the group had preached sufficiently to convince people to repent and implement sharia, the call had been refused. Thus, the logical next step was to use violent means to force this implementation. Yusuf disagreed. He argued that there was a need to gain more power and “establish proof” (*iqamatul hujjah*), which meant further preaching against “un-Islamic” society in an attempt to call it back to the religion before initiating jihad against it. Yusuf also felt it was tactically more beneficial for members to stay in cities so they could radicalise more people.²²

This led to the first notable splintering of Boko Haram, with about 70 members including women and children following Ali while the majority, most likely numbering several hundred, remained with Yusuf. Ali’s camp migrated from Maiduguri and other cities to Tarmowa and then Kanamma, both desert villages in the northeastern part of Yobe State, close to the border with Niger.²³ The migrants (who called themselves “*muhajirun*”) established a commune on the outskirts of Tarmowa village, which they named the place of exile or migration (*dar al-hijrah*) and from where they erected huts and a *jumu’aat* mosque from tree branches and leaves, also digging a well.²⁴ They ran religious classes for members and went on preaching tours to surrounding villages inviting people to join them and set up an Islamic government while condemning Western-style education, democracy and the traditional emirate system. The group’s migration paid tribute to the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad and early Muslims who had fled from Mecca to Medina in 622AD to escape persecution – providing yet another indication of the role of religious ideology in Boko Haram’s actions. It was also a sign that the group was preparing for violence as exile or *hijrah* is, according to some Muslim jurists, one of the conditions of armed jihad – and even considered an act of jihad itself.

Members moved to the outskirts of Kanamma after they had been banished from the village by local authorities who feared that they were building a separatist community or a state within a state. Before leaving, they announced to residents that they (like earlier Muslims who fought) had been denied their right to practise their faith and therefore would start a jihad. A day after their arrival on the outskirts, Ali’s faction attacked a police station and the home of the local council’s chairman, also looting a gun and vehicle.

This resulted in a failed crackdown by the Nigerian police on 25 December 2003 and subsequently by the military on 1 January 2004, which killed about 20 members. The remaining members of Ali's faction dispersed and some rejoined Yusuf back in Maiduguri. Ali was among those who fled but he was killed a couple of weeks later by a vigilante group.²⁵

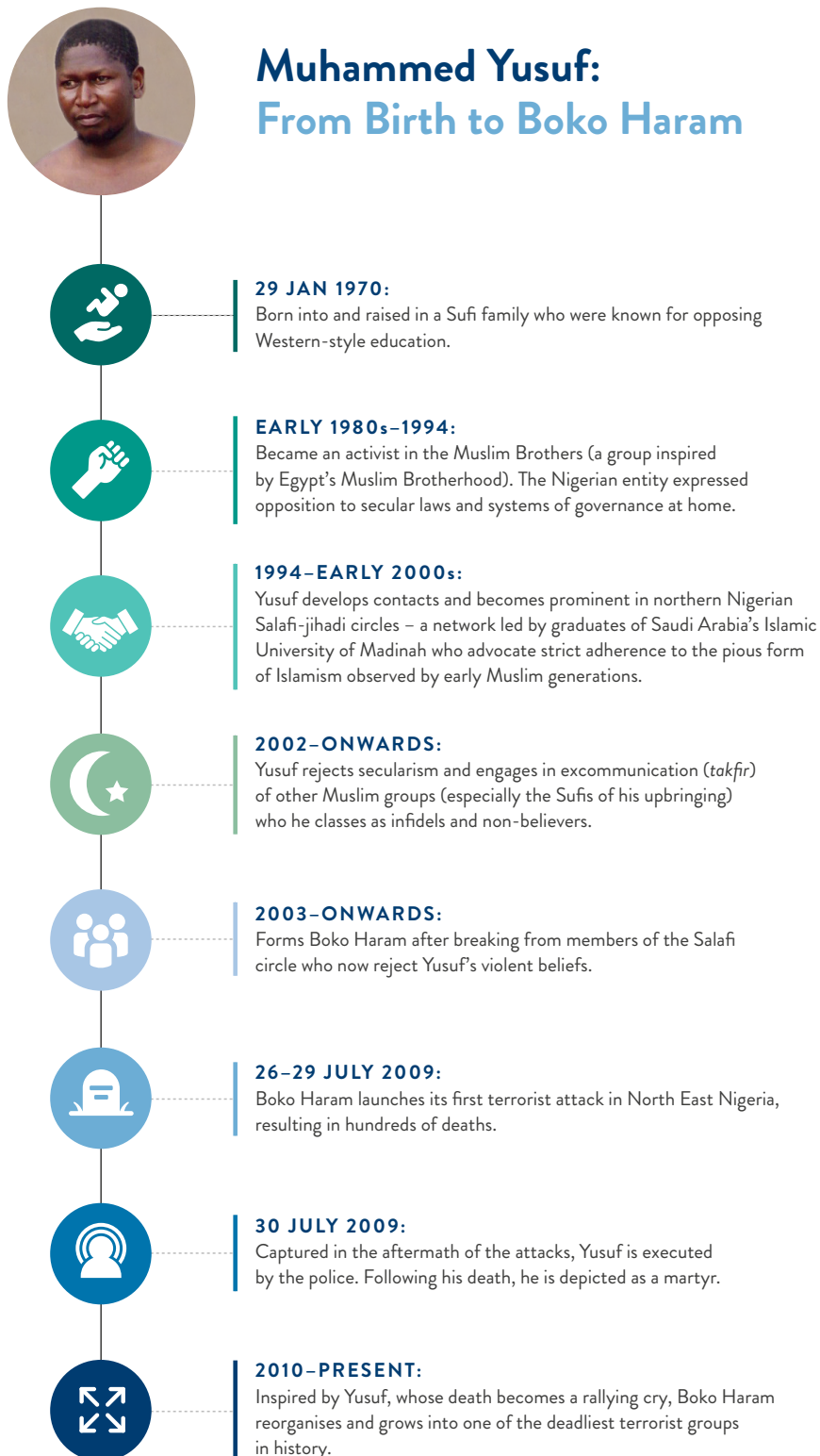
Making headlines as the “Nigerian Taliban” in domestic and international media, the group's hoisting of its black-and-white flag on the outskirts of Kanamma, its denunciation of political and traditional institutions and its attack on the police station (and later on government buildings) were clear signs of the violent trajectory to come. The event was exaggerated by Western media and scholars who were preoccupied with the war on terror, with some peddling ideas of operational links between the commune and the Taliban in Afghanistan.²⁶ Internally, the Nigerian government downplayed the incident and mistakenly equated the killing of the group's most active members with the crushing of its ideology. Detained members, mainly women and children, were released without proper investigation or rehabilitation, with the authorities missing the opportunity for preventative measures.

Yusuf's Transition to Violence

Boko Haram ideologists continued to preach, recruit and radicalise to their cause across towns in northern Nigeria. In Borno, membership swelled to several thousand with some describing Boko Haram as a mass religious movement. Videotapes of the group's gatherings at this time show thousands in attendance, with hundreds lining the streets to welcome Yusuf back from his last detention in Abuja. The group's continuing tensions with law enforcement reached a violent turning point in June 2009. While attending a funeral procession of fellow members who had died in a car accident, followers refused to obey a stop-and-search operation being carried out by a joint task of security forces. During “Operation Flush”, which was already a source of constant tension, the police shot 19 members of Boko Haram – none of whom died. Yusuf interpreted this incident as the most obvious attempt yet to eliminate his group and, days later, delivered his “Open Letter to the Federal Government”. On Friday 12 June 2009, Yusuf effectively initiated a “declaration of war”,²⁷ stating that his main grievance was the group's persecution by a government that was out to destroy individuals for “being true Muslims” – a situation that called for steps to protect them and Islam. Yusuf felt he was now prepared to confront the government: he had radicalised enough followers who were ready to sacrifice their lives and property, training them and securing the resources to buy weapons.

Figure 3:

KEY DATES IN THE LIFE OF MUHAMMED YUSUF, FOUNDER AND FIRST LEADER OF BOKO HARAM



What followed was the practical and spiritual preparation for war including raising money, the acquisition of weapons, and constant night prayers and fasting to extol God's help and ask for endurance. In marathon-length indoctrination sessions held at group headquarters, members were urged to sell their possessions and donate money towards the procurement of weapons and ammunition. Written by Yusuf in Arabic but delivered in Hausa by Mamman Nur, one such lecture entitled *Come to Jihad (Hayya Ala al-Jihad)* outlined its justifications and etiquettes. Breaking down in tears and with a voice filled with sighs, Nur incited members to "sell whatever you have and donate the money to Allah ... donate your houses, cars, motorcycles in the service of God ..." He cited examples of earlier wealthy Muslims including the Prophet Muhammad's successors, Caliphs Abu Bakr and Uthman, who, he said, sacrificed everything they had for jihad. He urged members to follow suit, underlining that Abu Bakr had not even left a "nickel for his family's subsistence". Similar lectures by Yusuf, Abubakar Shekau and other ideologues in centres such as Wudil and Bukuru went on for weeks. Members that gave contributions were publicly praised during sessions. Recounting the results of this campaign, Yusuf's sons stated in a book published by the Islamic State:

"The brothers responded to this call with unprecedented zeal, and they went offering what was dear and precious, so the businessman sold his entire business and spent it in God's path, and another putting it in accordance with jihad, and the owner of a taxi offering it cheaply in God's path, and the woman sold her jewellery and most possessions of her house and offered it in God's path. And the sheikh – of course – was not among those who order and do the opposite, but rather he was at the forefront and spent all he owned in God's path, imitating [Abu Bakr] al-Sadiq [sic] in the days of adversity."²⁸

Weapons and ammunitions were smuggled to Maiduguri through the Republic of Niger border,²⁹ possibly from Libya. It was this arsenal that the group deployed in its first clash with security forces in July 2009. Headquarters coordinated with Boko Haram centres across northern Nigeria. A month later, police stations in several towns including Maiduguri, Potiskum and Bauchi were attacked. This culminated in a clash with Nigerian security forces that lasted for five days between 26 and 30 July, resulting in the death of at least 200 Boko Haram members and displacement of another 3,500, mostly from Maiduguri, where the main violence had taken place.³⁰ The group's headquarters was demolished by state troops. Yusuf was arrested during the clashes and executed by the police on 30 July.

Yet contrary to what the Nigerian government had hoped, Yusuf's death did not end Boko Haram. In fact, it became a key moment in the group's identity formation and a rallying cry for retribution. Yusuf was portrayed as a martyr who had willingly sacrificed his life and family for the cause, and he became an embodiment of Boko Haram's values. His successors built on the ideological and operational foundations he left behind. The dozens of recordings and publications he released became the authoritative documents underpinning Boko Haram's ideology. And his sons took on the mantle, becoming the next generation of senior commanders and leaders.

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Retribution, Reorganisation and Insurgency (2010–2014)

Although there are unsubstantiated reports of earlier international links, first-hand evidence shows that 2010 was the first time Boko Haram brought in support from outside Nigeria. Surviving members of Boko Haram, who had regrouped under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau and moved to the Gwoza hills southeast of Maiduguri, close to the border with Cameroon, reached out to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) seeking financial and technical assistance to “launch a jihad”. Documents released later by Nigerian intelligence agencies revealed that al-Qaeda gave Boko Haram at least €200,000 (\$243,418). It is also likely that AQIM trained Boko Haram militants including on how to make the improvised explosive devices that would later become a major feature of the group's violence.³¹

In hindsight, this assistance was pivotal not only to the start of the group's insurgency but also to its very survival after the July 2009 clash. The death of Yusuf and other senior commanders had severely disrupted Boko Haram, with many members detained and material possessions lost. Without AQIM's intervention at this time, the group may have faded away. The relationship also signalled a significant recognition of Boko Haram's Islamist credentials, transitioning the group from a local presence to a member or associate of the global jihadi circle.

Towards the end of June 2010, Shekau appeared in his first video since July 2009 to refute claims that he had been killed in the clash. He stated he was still adhering to the principles of Boko Haram and declared a jihad to end persecution, revenge the killing of Yusuf and other members, and impose sharia in Nigeria. He became Boko Haram's leader, its spokesperson and public face. As is explained in more detail below, Shekau receded to a factional leader from 2016 when he broke from the group to lead his own splinter entity. This he continued to head until his recent death in May 2021.

In each of his audios and videos prior to his death, Shekau made a point of explaining his group's ideology and objectives, citing Islamic texts, doctrines and scholars. Shekau gave Boko Haram its first official name, *Jamaat Ahl al-Sunna lil-Dawa wal-Jihad* (JAS), and announced himself as the imam or overall leader, requiring each member to swear allegiance (*baya*) to him and insisting on complete loyalty. Shekau preferred the religious credentials implicit in the name he had given the group and role he had chosen for himself, especially given that an imam is a more powerful leader than the alternative *amir*.

Unlike Yusuf who was more open and promoted Boko Haram as a collective project, Shekau shaped JAS in his own image and emerged as its sole public face and spokesperson. As he stated: "The only valid opinion is that of the imam" (*al-ra'yu ra'yu a'-Imam*).³² On this basis, Shekau held that all members must obey him without question and he claimed exclusive ownership of the loot the group had plundered. This aspect of Shekau's leadership is not only influenced by his personality but amplified by his age. In his mid-fifties, he was old enough to have fathered most of the group's senior commanders and therefore expected them to blindly follow him. He was raised in acute poverty and "did not know the colours of luxury."³³ In his youth, Shekau earned a living working on the farms of fellow villagers and grazing animals. This, by Shekau's own account, negatively impacted his psychology and bred "rudeness, avarice and estrangement" within him.³⁴

JAS or Boko Haram's first major attack under Shekau's leadership came on 7 September 2010 to liberate more than 100 members – who had been arrested during the July 2009 clash – from Bauchi prison. What then followed was a string of assassinations targeting religious, traditional and political leaders who opposed Boko Haram. From this point, the group started to initiate indiscriminate attacks on civilians in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States while also committing high-profile attacks in the capital Abuja and Kano, the second most populous city in Nigeria. In June 2011, Boko Haram carried out the first suicide bombing in Nigeria's history when a powerful blast struck the police headquarters in Abuja, killing at least six people including the bomber. The attack demonstrated the dangerous and growing confidence of the group, which was now willing to extend its reach.

But it was Boko Haram's attack on the United Nations that first propelled the group into the international arena. On 26 August 2011, a suicide bomber detonated a vehicle filled with explosives outside the UN headquarters in Abuja, destroying several floors and killing at least 23 people.³⁵ While both this attack and the bombing of the Nigerian police headquarters were deeply political and represent a step change, it was in fact the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls, mostly Christians, from their school dormitory in the Nigerian village of Chibok and their subsequent forceful conversion, marriage and enslavement that turned the real page and catapulted Boko Haram into the international media spotlight. Between April 2011 and June 2017, Boko Haram deployed 434 bombers to claim over 2,200 lives across markets, mosques and churches – signalling a new chapter in violence against civilians.

Intensification of Violence Against Civilians

After years of Boko Haram violence, it is easy to forget the group did not start this way. Previously, members had given civilians early warning as to the location of their imminent attacks on state institutions, allowing them to withdraw and avoid being caught up in the assaults on buildings. The hardening of Boko Haram's policy on permissible targets was a product of different factors including the bolstering of security efforts by state forces. For instance, the group did not start assassinating local community leaders until after the July 2009 clash when it chose to punish and deter such individuals from working with the security and intelligence agents who were seeking to fish out Boko Haram's members from the community. Although destroying schools had always been part of the group's modus operandi, it did not target children until there were reports of Quranic students being profiled and even killed by state forces on the basis that they were suspected Boko Haram members. In the first quarter of 2014, Shekau issued a statement saying Boko Haram would start targeting pupils of Western schools in response to the government's focus on Islamic schoolchildren. Furthermore, Boko Haram did not make Chad a primary target for the first five years of its operation until the country abandoned its hitherto neutral stance and joined fighting against the group in 2015.³⁶ While the bolstering of state security efforts against the group does not justify or rationalise Boko Haram's horrific attacks in any way, the situation did serve to heighten tension and increase its violent output.

As military efforts against Boko Haram intensified following the proclamation by Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan of a state of emergency in affected areas, the group became increasingly desperate and ruthlessly resorted to more brutal measures such as the burning of school buildings, attacking of telecommunications facilities, killing and kidnapping of foreigners, the slaughtering as opposed to shooting of opponents, killing of health officials at routine vaccination clinics and the random shooting of pupils and teachers

at schools. Boko Haram raided villages and abducted hundreds of women and girls whom it turned into sexual and domestic slaves while forcefully taking boys and making them kill in order to stay alive. During this phase, the group consistently exploited Islamic texts and teachings to justify its increasingly indiscriminate violence. It was at this stage that Boko Haram became a full-blown terror group.

By 2014, Boko Haram had displaced much of the leadership of at least 17 local government areas and had taken control of swathes of territory equivalent to the size of Belgium.

By 2014, Boko Haram had displaced much of the population and leadership of at least 17 local government areas in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa and had taken control – or at least rendered inaccessible to state forces – large swathes of territory equivalent to the size of Belgium. In August of the same year, the group declared that it had established a caliphate and imposed on the people remaining there its strict version of Islamic penal law, which included the whipping of alleged alcohol drinkers, amputating the hands of thieves and stoning adulterers.³⁷ A video comprising 18 hours of footage of the newfound caliphate, obtained by Voice of America, showed how the group executed supposed drug traffickers even after they had denied allegations, whipped drug users and killed alleged homosexuals.³⁸

The group also used land and water resources in the territories it had captured to produce food and raise revenues. The labour of forced and voluntary members to farm vast agricultural lands abandoned by displaced locals produced food for the group's leaders and commanders. It was also sold in local markets to raise funds to procure other supplies and weapons. Members used boats, fishing nets and other equipment confiscated from fleeing residents to catch fish from the lake. They dried or smoked their fish yields and disguised themselves as traders, or employed middlemen, to sell to local traders who then conveyed the catches to towns and cities.³⁹ To counter this network, governments across the Lake Chad region banned fishing, trading and the transportation of fish from the relevant areas in 2015. This was followed by the arrest and detention of traders suspected to be working for the group and the confiscation, burning and diversion of fish consignments by state forces. In at least one instance, Niger's air force conducted strikes targeting a convoy of trucks suspected to be transporting fish to JAS in Nigeria.⁴⁰

This socioeconomic hardship on communities earning a livelihood from fishing exacerbated unemployment and caused a surge in prices, forcing some traders to cooperate with JAS to fish in the lake or to sell the group's products for a commission.

Thus, by the end of this phase, Shekau had consolidated his grip on vast swathes of the Lake Chad region where he claimed to have built a caliphate and secured income and enough supplies to sustain the group. He commanded thousands of experienced fighters with sophisticated weapons and equipment capable of seriously threatening each of the countries around Lake Chad. He had also consolidated Boko Haram's status in the global jihadi community and the eyes of the international media.

The Rise of Ansaru

The alliance with al-Qaeda was not straightforward, however. The brutal policy adopted by Shekau of indiscriminately targeting civilians seemingly violated al-Qaeda's strategy on both ideological and practical fronts. Members of Boko Haram who preferred a softer approach towards Muslim non-combatants wrote several letters to al-Qaeda reporting Shekau's so-called deviation. In a letter dated from 2011, 11 of the group's leaders including three members of its council (*shura*) outlined three specific objections: first, they accused Shekau of unlimited excommunication (*takfir*) of Muslim civilians and of attacking them; second, they condemned his demand for absolute loyalty; and third, they accused Shekau of indiscretion and of revealing Boko Haram's secrets through excessive releases of public statements. Following these reports, al-Qaeda wrote to Shekau on several occasions expressing dissatisfaction with his *ultra-takfirism* and unbridled violence. He remained defiant, though, and as Shekau moved away from al-Qaeda, Boko Haram began to fracture. In July 2012, the disaffected members announced the formation of a new faction called "Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in the Black Africa" (*Ansar al-Muslimeen fi Bilad al-Sudan*) or Ansaru.

The inclusion of Bilad al-Sudan or "the lands of the blacks" – a term used historically by Arabs to describe the African region to the south of the Sahara, stretching from east to west – in Ansaru's name suggests that this faction had more ambitious territorial objectives. In line with al-Qaeda's policy, Ansaru favours a "hearts-and-minds" approach that it hopes will ultimately convince Muslim populations in its areas of operation to revolt against the government and support the implementation of an Islamic system. Thus, Ansaru's policy does not involve attacking Muslim civilians but instead preaching to them and helping them with micro money loans. Attacks meanwhile should focus on "infidel" governments, Nigerian Christians and their foreign allies in the West. In their debut message, Ansaru's leaders positioned themselves as the

vanguard of the movement for the protection of the Muslim *ummah* against the existential threat posed by national governments who were supported by the West, and were intent on destroying Islam both physically and morally while promoting Christianity.⁴¹ Indeed, Ansaru consistently portrays the ethnoreligious crises of the 1980s and 1990s as an attempt by Christians to eliminate Muslims, with the failure of the government to bring any perpetrators to justice as evidence of its support for the former. Ansaru aims to use these narratives to stoke further division and violence between Muslims and Christians.

In addition to the ideological disagreements and rivalry expressed by Ansaru's leaders, there appears to be an ethnic undertone in the opposition to Shekau. The majority of the 11 members that signed the letter to AQIM – including *shura* members Abu Muhammad al-Hawsawi, Abu Ahmed al-Keshnawi and Abu Muslim al-Ibrahimi – were part of the Hausa-Fulani people from northwestern Nigeria. Others included Ansaru spokesperson (also possible leader) Abu Usama al-Ansari as well as individuals known as Abu Ubaidah al-Kanawi, Abu Nusaiba al-Bushawi and Auwal Kontagora (who also identified himself as Abu Darda). Having served as a JAS spokesperson during the period in which the faction claimed attacks including the fatal suicide bombing of the UN headquarters in Abuja, Abu Darda was arrested and interrogated in 2012. During this interrogation, he reportedly revealed that Shekau's selection of non-Kanuris for suicide missions (refusal to accept was "punishable by death") alienated members based on ethnicity and led to the formation of Ansaru.⁴²

In hindsight, a JAS attack initiated on Kano State in January 2012, which killed at least 178 people including civilians, was the most likely catalyst for Boko Haram's split. The leaders of the Ansaru faction were shocked by Shekau's targeting of Kano, a historical centre of the Hausa ethnic group, and felt it was time to publicly denounce him. In return, Shekau subsequently declared Ansaru leaders as apostates, with his JAS faction pursuing and killing rival commanders including Muhammad Auwal al-Gombawi, a Fulani, in his home state of Gombe. Senior Ansaru figures fled from North East Nigeria, where Shekau held sway, to the northwestern regions from where most of them originated. Ansaru has been based in northwestern Nigeria since. After initial activity such as the abduction and subsequent execution of a UK and then Italian national, followed by the kidnapping in December 2012 of a French man, Ansaru's media releases and operational activity diminished. This could have been the result of the reported arrest and killing of its leaders. Despite this, Ansaru continued to attempt to recruit and radicalise members in the North West through religious preaching, including in the Fulani language, and the provision of small agricultural loans to farmers.

ALLEGIANCE TO ISIS AND EXPANSION OF THE CALIPHATE (2015–2016)

When the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant claimed that it had established a global caliphate in June 2014 with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its head, some Boko Haram leaders saw it as a religious duty for their group to pledge allegiance. Shekau resisted the idea because he wanted to maintain independence and full control of his group. After long theological debates, the majority of Boko Haram's council members favoured such an oath (*bayah*) to ISIL (or ISIS). Shekau reluctantly agreed and the group swore allegiance on 7 March 2015.⁴³ The way in which he chose to announce this loyalty, by framing it in a statement of the Prophet Muhammad,⁴⁴ affords another example of Boko Haram's attempt to portray its violence as having a basis or justification in Islam. On 12 March 2015, ISIS accepted the pledge in an audiotope made by its spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani who positioned Boko Haram's allegiance as an expansion of the caliphate to Africa, saying: "We announce to you the good news of the expansion of the caliphate to West Africa because the caliph ... has accepted the allegiance of our brothers."⁴⁵

This in turn led to the rebranding of JAS as the Islamic State West Africa Province (*Wilayat Gharb Afriqiyya*), or ISWAP for short, and the changing of Shekau's designation from imam of JAS to the governor (*wali*) of ISIS in charge of ISWAP. Soon, there came notable improvements in Boko Haram's communications strategy both in terms of professionalism and channels.⁴⁶ Beyond this, ISWAP is also likely to have benefited from technical and material assistance from ISIS. After initial theological and military training completed remotely, ISIS provided ISWAP with significant financial support while reportedly deploying trainers to the Sambisa Forest to personally train ISWAP commanders in strategy and tactics.⁴⁷

While some observers regard Shekau's oath simply as a means of saving face in light of the losses Boko Haram was suffering at the hands of the state, others believe the group regarded it as a religious duty – one that Shekau had in fact initially resisted. Further evidence shows that the conversation about the potential alliance with ISIS had in fact begun in 2014 when Boko Haram was at its peak – just a few months after the emergence of ISIS and through a go-between, the Tunisian radical Abu Malik Shayba al-Hamad.⁴⁸

Boko Haram's allegiance to ISIS completed the group's adoption into the global jihadi movement and gave ISIS a foothold in the Lake Chad region. But a 2014 letter about the rivalry between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State – which mentions Shekau along with the leaders of al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Ansar Dine of Mali⁴⁹ – and the wider context of this contest raises an important issue regarding the role of African groups in shaping the global jihadi community. While previous analysis has focused

on how Boko Haram benefited from these relationships, it appears that the Nigerian group made a significant contribution in return. As al-Qaeda and ISIS were competing over moral leadership of the Salafi-jihadi cause, winning alignment of a major group outside the Middle East would be significant. Thus, Boko Haram's allegiance must have been a big win for the Islamic State not only in terms of its competition with al-Qaeda over moral authority but also in its broader propaganda efforts and objective of expanding the caliphate beyond the Middle East. In the end, Boko Haram has played an important role in shaping the global jihadi movement.

Boko Haram's allegiance must have been a big win for the Islamic State not only in terms of its competition with al-Qaeda over moral authority but also in its propaganda efforts.

Boko Haram did not become a puppet of ISIS as claimed by some analysts and news outlets (as evidenced by headlines and commentaries stating that ISIS was "imposing" leaders on and controlling ISWAP). While ISWAP did consult with ISIS on major decisions, the relationship is characterised by rhetoric and Boko Haram maintains its independence when it comes to decision-making and operations. Even during ISWAP's leadership tussles, the group's council selected its own candidates and sent notifications to ISIS central for public announcement. It is true that ISIS may have influenced ISWAP's modus operandi but the relationship is more reciprocal than this suggests. One area in which ISWAP has in fact influenced ISIS's policy is in the treatment of humanitarian workers. On 13 August 2020, ISIS issued a declaration calling on its provinces to directly target these workers, labelling them "partners in combat even if their personnel do not carry weapons or participate in combat." This shift in ISIS policy, which endorses such hostility, followed weeks of ISWAP targeting aid workers. ISIS not only defended ISWAP but went on to urge other provinces to adopt the same practice.

INTERNAL SCHISM (2016–2018)

Shekau's relationship with ISIS did not last long. While the parties portrayed the disagreement that led to his deposition and the subsequent splintering of the group as purely ideological or operational, a closer look reveals that the division was exacerbated by Boko Haram's military losses at the hands of state forces between 2015 and 2016. This led to a battle for power and the control of looted money that had been amassed from bank robberies and ransom payments.

Simmering internal disagreements in Boko Haram came to a head in 2016 when senior commanders and leaders, opposed to Shekau's megalomaniac leadership style and his policy of targeting non-members and Muslims civilians, began to speak up. Several council members including Mamman Nur, Abu Musab al-Barnawi (Yusuf's oldest son) and Abu Maryam (a senior commander) reported Shekau to ISIS for tyranny, corruption, arbitrary killing of dissenting members, misinterpretation of Islamic texts as a consequence of his poor Arabic language skills and theological knowledge, and finally indiscriminate attacks on Muslim civilians.⁵⁰ After an ongoing exchange of correspondence, ISIS ultimately decided against Shekau, announced his removal and replaced him with Abu Musab al-Barnawi. Shekau refused to step down to allow al-Barnawi, who had fled to the northern part of Borno State along with other members, to step up to his position as the new governor or *wali* of ISWAP. Instead, Shekau broke away and reverted to calling his group JAS, cementing the factional splintering. From mid-2016 onwards, inter-factional warfare between ISWAP and JAS ensued, killing hundreds of members including senior commanders from both sides.

This fragmentation is a result of ideological and operational differences as well as the power tussle among senior leaders, especially Shekau and Nur. The duo had been locked in a rivalry since the early days of Boko Haram. After Yusuf's death in 2009, Nur vied to be his successor and opposed Shekau's appointment. When the majority of the council selected Shekau, the new leader vowed never to allow Nur to hold any position or exert any influence. This explains why Nur temporarily left Boko Haram for his mother's village in Cameroon. When he returned in 2014, Shekau feared that Nur would lead a revolt against him and demanded an oath of loyalty. In the end, Shekau's fears came to fruition two years later when Nur led the rebellion against him, bolstered by the grievances of ISWAP leaders who disputed Shekau's showmanship and his exclusive control of Boko Haram's plunder.

ISWAP, which initially consisted of scores of commanders that had defected secretly from Shekau, quickly grew in strength to surpass JAS. This is down to two primary factors: first, mass defections from JAS occurred just as ISIS recognition of the ISWAP leadership boosted the faction's credentials and legitimacy among Boko Haram members; second, ISWAP received technical and possible logistical support from ISIS. While JAS has between 1,500 and 3,000 fighters around the southern part of Borno State and the banks of Lake Chad, ISWAP is thought to number between 3,500 and 5,000 active combatants in its stronghold also on the banks of Lake Chad, as well as its areas of influence into northern Borno and the southern part of Niger's Diffa region where the faction has patrols, emissaries and sympathisers.⁵¹ ISWAP has been able to establish a better network than JAS because it has not only spared neighbouring Muslim communities from attacks but actively protected them from Shekau's criminal-like operations.

ISWAP's decision to not target Muslim civilians has been strategic as well as ideological. As the main faction today, it has invested significant time and effort into protecting residents against raids by JAS militants while providing services such as health care, adjudication of disputes and infrastructure improvements to territories under its de facto control. In exchange, communities are made to pay taxes for the safe grazing of their animals and for farming and fishing. ISWAP promotes its proto-state as a model of the entity it would build if it succeeded in defeating regional security forces. All the while recruiting fighters, sympathisers, informants and financiers to its cause, ISWAP demonstrates a clear pragmatic advantage over JAS.

BOKO HARAM (TODAY)

While Boko Haram effectively operates as the three distinct factions of ISWAP, JAS and Ansaru, they are still inherently the same. The goal of establishing an Islamic State in Nigeria, and across the Lake Chad Basin, is ideologically ingrained in each faction with the same fervour that drove Yusuf, Ali, Nur and Shekau as they first set foot in Maiduguri years ago. Despite differences that have since led to infighting and splintering, the factions remain united by the core, foundational message of their founders.

ISWAP's operational growth during the past four years has seen it expand its footprint beyond Nigeria into the Lake Chad Basin, with offensives prioritising security personnel and hard targets. Its violence in the region is complicating efforts to alleviate conflict in the Sahel and bring peace and security to West Africa.

Conversely, JAS has reverted to a criminal-like operation mainly targeting civilians, with its leaders continuing to cite Islamic scripture to justify their violent acts and frame their group as a jihadist one. And just when JAS was able to boast of establishing a territorial presence complete with hundreds of members in northwestern Nigeria, it suffered its biggest setback yet with the recent death of Shekau, which occurred during a renewed factional struggle with ISWAP. Having received direct orders from ISIS to take out Shekau and consolidate the Lake Chad region, ISWAP commanders invaded Shekau's stronghold in the Sambisa Forest. They cornered Shekau after killing many senior JAS members and demanded that he announce his loyalty to ISWAP, instructing all his followers to do the same. Shekau refused and blew himself up instead, throwing his faction's future not only in Lake Chad, but across the North West, into uncertainty. Shekau's death has since taken the ISWAP–JAS battle into uncharted territory with Shekau's lieutenants launching revenge attacks and ISWAP vowing to eliminate them all.

Finally, the more recent re-emergence of Ansaru highlights the proliferating jihadist threat in and around Nigeria, where groups born out of operational and ideological differences remain true to the same unified cause and violent ambitions set out by their founding members.

Their homegrown qualities have translated into protection and strength in the face of military efforts that have failed to acknowledge the contextual realities of the group's standing.

Four ordinary Nigerians created Boko Haram in response to their growing hostility towards so-called sin including secularism, modernity and the influence of the West. By establishing themselves as community leaders in Maiduguri, these individuals set the flame alight for one of the deadliest terrorist groups in history. Their homegrown characteristics and qualities have translated into protection and strength in the face of international military efforts that have failed to acknowledge the contextual realities of the group's social, religious and political standing.

Over the past decade, the world has witnessed conflict and Islamist terrorism accelerate across the Middle East, Africa and Asia. From Syria's HTS to al-Qaeda, the Taliban to the Philippines' Abu Sayyaf, the roots of the most destabilising Islamist insurgencies can all be traced back to a few individuals whose life experiences inform a warped perception of society – and which have led to hundreds of thousands of lives being lost. A dozen years on from Boko Haram's first attacks, the roots of its insurgency are what sustain it today and will continue to do so – as long as those seeking to defeat the group fail to comprehend and confront the factors that gave rise to its militancy in the first place.

Endnotes

1 The author interviewed Dr Bukar Balarabe, Muhammad Gana, Muhammad Kabir and Mallam Usman via telephone between January and February 2021. Dr Balarabe studied with Ali, served as sectional treasurer of a group called Shabab when Yusuf was the leader, and travelled and shared a room with Yusuf on pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia in 2001. Gana and Kabir were both Ali's high classmates at Federal Government College Maiduguri until their graduation in 1998. Usman, a Salafi cleric, was a close associate of Nur and served as secretary of Nur's Islamic school and preached weekly in Nur's mosque alongside Yusuf. Names of respondents have been slightly altered for security reasons.

2 Author's interview with Dr Balarabe.

3 Mashood A. Baderin, "Review of Sharia Implementation in Northern Nigeria 1999-2006: A Sourcebook", *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 1 July 2009, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/2789786.pdf>.

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5 James Astill and Owen Bowcott, "Fatwa is issued on Nigerian journalist", *The Guardian*, 27 November 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/27/jamesastill.owenbowcott>.

6 Author's interview with Usman (see note 1 above).

7 Author's interview with Gana and Kabir (see note 1 above).

8 Author's interview with Gana, Kabir and Dr Balarabe (see note 1 above).

9 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State West Africa Province vs. Abu Bakr Shek-au: Full Text, Translation and Analysis", Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, 5 August 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21467/the-islamic-state-west-africa-province-vs-abu>.

10 Author's interview with Dr Balarabe and Usman, both of whom said they had personal knowledge of where Nur first hid in Maiduguri before fleeing to Cameroon.

11 Saibou Issa, Professor of History and Security Studies at the University of Maroua (Cameroon) and coordinator of Cameroon's rehabilitation programme for former Boko Haram members, was in discussion with the author in N'Djamena, Chad, in September 2019.

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17 This caliphate stretched from today’s Burkina Faso in the west to Cameroon in the east
and from the edge of the Sahel in the north to the start of the forest six hundred kilo-
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not be confused with the Tarmuwa Local Government in the same state.

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ed in Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian
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