

# Nigerian al-Qaedaism

*By Jacob Zenn*

**A** BUBAKAR SHEKAU DECLARED THAT THE “JIHAD HAS BEGUN” IN JULY, 2010. His Nigeria-based movement, known to outsiders as “Boko Haram” but among its members as “*Jama’atu Ahlisunnah Lida’awati Wal-Jihad*,” subsequently emerged as Africa’s most violent insurgent group. Since Boko Haram’s first attack in September 2010, the group has murdered more than 4,000 Christians, government officials, Muslim leaders, and civilians in Nigeria. In 2013, for the first time, Boko Haram gained control over more than ten municipalities in northeastern Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> Their alarming expansion prompted President Goodluck Jonathan to declare a State of Emergency resulting in military operations against Boko Haram’s safe havens in Nigeria’s borderlands with Niger, Chad and Cameroon. The army’s efforts succeeded only temporarily: Boko Haram reemerged at the end of 2013 and has carried out massacres of civilians on a greater scale than any time since the start of the insurgency.

In 2011, a faction of al-Qaeda-trained Boko Haram members formed *Jama’atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan* (Supporters of the Muslims in the Land of Black Africans), more commonly known as “Ansaru.” Ansaru’s *amir* declared that Shekau was “inhumane” for murdering defectors from Boko Haram to Ansaru and unfit to lead his own organization. On an operational level, the creation of Ansaru was part of former Al Qaeda commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar’s strategy to leave al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s (AQIM) North African zone of operations and “spread throughout the entire Sahara.”<sup>2</sup> Like Belmokhtar, Ansaru has stated that

it would target foreigners and foreign interests and the Nigerian government, but not Nigerian Muslims and Christians save for instances of “self-defense.”

Since 2011, both Boko Haram and Ansaru have risen to prominence among international jihadi groups with alarming speed. Western analysis of the two groups and their ideologies, however, is still lacking. The U.S. State Department and the British Home Office designated both groups terrorist organizations years after Boko Haram’s first attack and Ansaru’s first kidnapping. Few Western journalists and national security professionals are familiar with these two movements’ origins and ideologies. Consequently, the Western media frequently confuses the two groups. Such was evident in March of 2013 when the press misleadingly reported that Boko Haram kidnapped and murdered seven foreign engineers in Bauchi in March 2013, when it was actually Ansaru. Similarly, the Western media reported that Boko Haram was behind the UN Headquarters bombing in August, 2011, but the network of militants who carried out the attack were more closely tied to Ansaru and AQIM. Such misrepresentations cause confusion as to the identity of different Islamist players, what their ideological objectives are, and what to expect from them in the future.

Three questions concerning the groups’ rise remain unanswered: why did Muhammad Yusuf’s brand of Salafism gain such wide traction in northeastern Nigeria from 2002 to 2009? How was Abubakar Shekau able to transform Yusuf’s ideology into the basis for a jihadist insurgency in northern Nigeria after Yusuf’s death in 2009? Under what circumstances did Ansaru develop its pan-West African ideology and opposition to Shekau when it formed in 2011? This article finds answers to these questions in the ideologies of Yusuf, Shekau and Mamman Nur. The article emphasizes the influence of Saudi Arabia’s brand of Salafism, known as *wahabbism*, on Boko Haram’s ideology and the role Algerian jihadists played in influencing Boko Haram’s understanding of jihad itself.

## Who Was Yusuf?

BOKO HARAM FOUNDER MUHAMMAD YUSUF WAS BORN IN NORTHEASTERN Nigeria’s Yobe State in 1970. As a youth, he experimented with the leading Islamist currents of the day. Among them was Ibrahim al-Zakzaky’s Iranian-funded Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN).<sup>3</sup> The IMN drew ideological inspiration from the thought of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, particularly Hassan al-Banna and Said Qutb, who revived the concept of an Islamic State governed by Sharia

Law in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Al-Zakzaky, however, incorporated Khomeinist doctrine into the IMN's ideology. His organization imitated Iran's anti-American rhetoric and trained a paramilitary wing for "providing security to members of the movement" modeled after Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah.<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Yusuf, however, broke away from al-Zakzaky in the 1980s after he and other Nigerian Sunni Muslims began to believe the IMN had a "Shi'a agenda" that included the veneration of Iranian leaders and the observance of Shi'a religious rights.

Yusuf and other Nigerian Sunnis began to oppose the IMN in part because Saudi Arabia began funding Salafist groups in Africa in the 1980s to counter Iran's growing influence on the continent.<sup>6</sup> Years after Yusuf's departure from the IMN, he stated that Nigeria had "Sunni groups that started as Muslim Brothers, but ended up turning into a Shi'a sect."<sup>7</sup> He added that one of the causes for division among Muslims in Nigeria was that "some fight as Shi'a, others as Sufi and others as a mixture of everything."<sup>8</sup> Yusuf would later come to believe that only Muslims should follow "true Salafists" and all others were infidels.<sup>9</sup>

Two of the Salafist groups that emerged in northern Nigeria in the 1980s that Yusuf joined included *Jama'atul Tajdid Islam* (Movement for the Revival of Islam), or "JTI," and *Jama'atu Izalatul Bid'a wa Ikamatu Sunna* (Movement for the Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of Sunni Islam), or "Izala." In 1994, Yusuf became the Borno State *amir* of JTI, which had been formed in Kano.<sup>10</sup> That same year, JTI activists reportedly beheaded a Christian trader who allegedly used a page of the Koran as tissue paper. JTI partisans responded to the offense by parading the impaled head on the streets of Kano, resulting in a wave of animosity between Muslims and Christians that has persisted until the present day.<sup>11</sup> JTI was comprised of radicalized IMN members and, like al-Zakzaky's movement, rejected the secular Nigerian government as well as the northern Nigerian Hausa Muslim leaders who worked with the government. Unlike the IMN, however, the JTI followed Saudi-Arabian Salafist doctrine, not Shiism or the pan-Islamic ideology of the Iranian Revolution.

Later, in the 1990s and 2000s, Yusuf became affiliated with the Izala movement, which subsumed JTI in 1999. He also studied under the prominent Saudi-trained imam Sheikh Jafa'ar Adam.<sup>12</sup> By 2002, however, Yusuf himself had grown in prominence and openly challenged Jafa'ar Adam in sermons about Salafist doctrine. In 2002 Yusuf also became the Borno representative on Sheikh Ibrahim Datti Ahmed's Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria that supported Yusuf and his expanding followership. Datti Ahmed's organization sought to Islamize Northern Nigeria. In 2000, Ahmed stated that Muslims were "ready to go to war" if his

version of Sharia Law was not followed.<sup>13</sup> In time, however Yusuf and others in the Supreme Council became dissatisfied with the implementation of Sharia law in Nigeria. Consequently, Yusuf and other members formed a new movement called *Ahl-Sunna wal Jamma* (Companions of the Prophet). Locally, the new group took on the title of the “Nigerian Taliban” or “Yusufiya” (Followers of Yusuf).<sup>14</sup>

In 2004, Yusuf’s disagreements with Jafa’ar Adam over Salafist doctrine also began to surface. In a series of sermons delivered in Mosques in northern Nigeria, both men debated Salafi doctrine.<sup>15</sup> The most contentious issues were Yusuf’s bans on Western education and employment in Nigeria’s secular government. Yusuf argued that *boko*, or the Western education that British colonial administrators brought to northern Nigeria, including agriculture, biology, chemistry, engineering, geography, medicine, physics, and English language, were *haram*, or prohibited for Muslims. Yusuf also contended that the Nigerian educational system was itself *haram* because it mixed men and women in the same classrooms.<sup>16</sup>

Jafa’ar Adam argued that if Nigerian Muslims followed Yusuf’s bans and rejected Western education and refused to serve in the government, then “Pagan [Christian] policemen would kill and injure Muslims, and when taken to hospitals pagan doctors and nurses would attend to them.”<sup>17</sup> The disagreement became personal, as Adam disparagingly labeled Yusuf a “so-called Islamic scholar.” In Yusuf’s sermons, however, he argued that Western institutions were corrupting unto themselves stating:

Anyone who reads history, except a fool, knows that the Europeans handed over secular education to the missionaries. The missionaries incorporated into the curriculum of Western education the belief systems and values of Christianity. But we have said again and again that every Christian teaching regarding God and the universe is completely and fundamentally different from Islamic revelation. In fact it is not Islam and has nothing to do with Islam.<sup>18</sup>

In his arguments against Western education, Yusuf cited the work of a prominent Saudi Wahabbist scholar: *Global, Foreign and Colonialist Schools: Their History and Dangers* by Bakr bin Abdullah Abu Zayd.<sup>19</sup> According to Abu Zayd, European colonialists introduced secular education into Islamic societies as a “camouflaged conspiracy” in order to maintain hegemony over Muslim societies. The aim of such hegemony was to corrupt Islamic morals with Western liberal norms, replace gender roles with permissive sexual mores, and undermine communal identities

built on Salafist notions of piety and righteousness. Abu Zayd's influence on Yusuf's thinking is undeniable. Yusuf stated in his sermons:

European Scholars came and completely changed the history of Islam, claiming that even the Prophet of God came not to establish Islam or a political State, but to fight a tribal war. As such, they abolished the Caliphate and confused the unintelligent and unfaithful....When Europeans were withdrawing from most Muslim countries and handing over power to the citizens, they separated religion from politics, arguing that religion has no role in the administration of political power. This became the faith of those who took power from the colonialists. They insisted on the secular nature of the contemporary state and established democracy and human rights of all sorts in different places. Islamic flags and symbols were replaced with national flags and symbols. The Shari'a, Qur'an and Sunna were replaced with secular law.<sup>20</sup>

Yusuf believed that as a result of "the Europeans destroying Islam and its values ... the Europeans created the situation in which we [Nigerian Muslims] find ourselves in today." Yusuf described that situation as one where a formerly prosperous northern Nigeria that "betrayed God" was "visited upon by poverty, jealousy, fear, and Muslim chiefs who are also wicked politicians."<sup>21</sup>

Borno State, the home of Boko Haram's "Ibn Tamiyya Headquarters" and Yobe State, Yusuf's birthplace, formed part of what was once an ethnic Kanuri-led Islamic Caliphate that existed from around 1,000 A.D. until the end of the 19th century. The Caliphate, known as the Kanem Empire and, its successor, the Borno Empire, spanned from present-day Nigeria to Libya and had diplomatic and trade relations with other states as distant as Ottoman Turkey.<sup>22</sup> The social, political and economic fabric of the former Caliphate in Borno, however, was fundamentally transformed following the French colonization of present-day northern Cameroon, southern Niger, western Chad, and the British colonization of Nigeria. Modern changes in the society became cemented with the amalgamation of southern and northern Nigeria at the beginning of the 21st Century.

Boko Haram has maintained that all of these developments were for the worse. Among their grievances against the legacies of Western imperialism are the economic rise of southern Nigeria through its trade relations with the United Kingdom and the West; the economic decline of northern Nigeria that resulted from the obsolescence of overland Saharan trade and pilgrimage routes due to maritime

and air travel; the arrival of Christianity in northern Nigeria in the 20th century that “diluted” the Muslim identity of Borno and northern Nigeria; the growing prominence of the English language that superseded Arabic language learning and marginalized the traditional Arabic-speaking Muslim religious intellectuals of northern Nigeria; and the emergence of a Nigerian government that has “embezzled money” and had security forces who “brought to [Borno] not just HIV and AIDs, but corruption, extortion and torture.”<sup>23</sup>

The appeal of Yusuf’s message has an ethnic dimension as well. His followers in the Borno and Yobe States and his fellow ethnic Kanuris are particularly receptive to his grievances against the West’s legacy in Nigeria. Kanuris not only believe that they were the inheritors of the Caliphate in Borno, but also that they were the first ethnic group in the country to fully embrace Islam. As a result, they regard themselves as the standard bearers of the Muslim faith in Nigeria. According to Yusuf, Shekau and Nur, the ethnic Fulani and Hausa Muslim leadership of northern Nigeria, who were closely tied the Nigerian government, sold out Nigeria’s Muslims for secularism and democracy. Yusuf argued that the traditional leader of the Hausa-Fulani Muslim religious establishment in Nigeria, the sultan of Sokoto, should be called only the “sarkin” of Sokoto, meaning “chief” in Hausa, and not the “sarkin” of Muslims, since the sultan accepted the legitimacy of Nigeria’s non-Islamic form of government.<sup>24</sup> Yusuf believed that the Nigerian government and the Muslim ruling class needed to be replaced with a new government of Salafists:

We follow the ideology of the Salafists and any *fatwa* issued by a Salafist scholar. No matter how important an Islamic scholar is, we need to know if he is guided by Salafist principles before we accept such a scholar. As a group, we will not accept personal interpretations, opinions and judgments. Every teaching of a scholar must be supported by the writings and teachings of Salafist scholars.<sup>25</sup>

Yusuf’s teachings captivated a wide audience in northern Nigeria most of all because he reinforced the perception that Western education corrupted Islamic morals, secularized Muslim leaders and perpetuated Western hegemony over Muslims. He furthermore spoke to simmering resentments towards the Nigerian government in claiming that it was a present-day embodiment of the old colonial order. Yusuf was therefore able to pin all of the economic, social and political troubles that people in northeastern Nigeria faced on the Nigerian government. Yusuf also took this ideology a step further by sending dozens of his followers to

Algeria and Mauritania in the early 2000s to “gain the strength to succeed” in jihad in Nigeria through training with AQIM.<sup>26</sup>

## From Yusuf to Shekau: The Transition to Jihad

IN 2007, YUSUF’S IDEOLOGICAL RIVAL, JAJA’AR ADAM, WAS ASSASSINATED OUTSIDE of his mosque in Kano. Though the perpetrators were never caught, some journalists suspected that Yusuf or his followers were behind the murder.<sup>27</sup> Yusuf’s accountability for the crime notwithstanding, he consequently became even more prominent among young Islamic clerics in northern Nigeria.

Toward the end of the 2000s, Yusuf supplemented his two main prohibitions with others modeled after the Taliban in Afghanistan. He forbade participation in sports because it violated the Salafist principle that Muslims should not develop affection for non-Muslims, such as exceptional athletes. Yusuf also banned watching movies, which he claimed cast Muslims in the role of hateful villains and non-Muslims in the role of the lovable hero.<sup>28</sup> Yusuf also began to identify with the leading jihadists of the post-2001 era—making him one of the first Salafist-Jihadist ideologues in northern Nigeria. Whereas previous generations of Islamist leaders in northern Nigeria, like al-Zakzaky, looked to Muslim Brotherhood leaders or the Iranian Islamic Revolution’s leaders as models to emulate, Yusuf looked towards al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Yusuf stated in 2009 that, “All Islamic scholars who undermine Ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna and Osama Bin Laden are not authentic Islamic scholars.” Yusuf had a particularly potent admiration for Algerian Islamists. In the same speech he stated that:

We are yet to establish a pure Sunni Islamic sect that will be ready to take on ignorance and secularism. The few we have that are functioning are al-Qaeda and the Taliban, whose ideology and theological foundations are purely Sunni in nature. Finally, we have other groups emerging in Algeria, all of them have missions committed to the spread of Islam and I hope you understand all these.<sup>29</sup>

The influence of Algerian Islamism on Yusuf’s thinking cannot be understated. According to the prominent imam, Muhammad Auwal al-Bani of Zaria, Kaduna:



Yusuf had listened to some leaders of the Algerian Islamist insurgency pronounce a *fatwa* that prohibited the militants from attending schools and working for the government. Besides having been rejected by the vast majority of Algerian scholars, the *fatwa* was rooted in the specific experience of the Algerian civil war of the 1990s between the military government and armed Islamist cells operating from the mountains. Yusuf blindly absorbed it and applied it to Nigeria.<sup>30</sup>

Despite ongoing insurgencies in Somalia with al-Shabaab and Iraq with al-Qaeda, Yusuf primarily discussed the Algerian experience in his sermons. Yusuf would refer, for example, to the Algerian military's cancellation of democratic elections that the Islamists won in 1991 and to the amnesty that members of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), accepted in the mid-2000s. Both developments divided the country's main Islamist group and effectively ended the insurgency in Algeria.<sup>31</sup> As a result, Yusuf, and later Shekau, have stated that no reconciliation could be reached with the Nigerian government unless the country is ruled by a Salafist and Sharia is the law of the land. Citing the Algerian example, Yusuf said in 2009 that:

In Algeria, they tried to introduce democracy. But when they realized democracy was anti-Islam and anti-God, they came back to the way of Shari'a. They formed an Islamic Jihadist group that was initially made up of more than 50,000 people. But when the group refused to follow the way of Shari'a, the way of Allah, their numbers declined drastically.<sup>32</sup>

His admiration for the Algerian Islamist model notwithstanding, Yusuf did not instruct his followers to engage in a "jihad" against the Nigerian government or security forces. While Yusuf and his followers held extreme views, their attacks on the Nigerian security forces were sporadic and were never part of a broader insurgency. Yusuf went so far as to claim that "an Islamic system of government should be established in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world, but through preaching the faith (*dawa'a*)."<sup>33</sup> In preparation for an inevitable conflict with the government, Yusuf told his followers: "If there is not enough strength to ensure that a Muslim becomes the leader, then two things must be done: Muslims should proceed on a *hijra* or search for the strength to succeed."<sup>34</sup>

The former is precisely what several hundred of his followers did in 2003, when



they left mainstream society and established a community called “Afghanistan” in Kanamma, Yobe State. The community refused to follow local ordinances and frequently clashed with the local police. In the final clash in late 2003, Yusuf’s followers raided several police stations, but the police responded with sufficient force to put down the rebellion, destroy the encampment and prevent the community from forming again. The incident compelled Sheikh Datti Ahmed to praise Yusuf’s followers: the “Nigerian Taliban” moniker was born.<sup>35</sup>

Yusuf nonetheless believed violent jihad—as opposed the concept of jihad as a form of self-discipline—was ultimately the solution for Nigeria’s Muslims. He told his followers:

The only thing that can stop the killing of Muslims and the insults against their Prophet is Jihad. However, the group must exercise patience until there is the strength to carry out the jihad. We are for jihad, and our jihad is to put an end to democracy, to western education and western civilization. The Jihad is intended to make Muslims return to our basics and the original state of Islam.

Yusuf urged followers not to fall in the “trap” that “the Europeans conspired to hide from Muslims about the true meaning of Jihad.” He said the Europeans had

separated religion from politics, limited religion to the private sphere and argued that religion should be excluded from the public domain because religion is about a private affair between the adherent and his God. European-educated Muslims returned home only to confuse other Muslims, claiming that democracy is compatible with Islam and Jihad should only be for self-control.<sup>36</sup>

Yusuf’s death at the hands of the security forces in an extrajudicial killing during clashes between the government and Yusuf’s followers in Borno State in July 2009 led to a transition in which Yusuf’s notoriously more militant—and feared—deputy, Abubakar Shekau, assumed leadership of the movement. Moreover, dozens of Yusuf’s followers fled Nigeria to train with AQIM in the Sahel to avenge Yusuf’s death. Some of Yusuf’s followers believed that Shekau, against Yusuf’s better instincts, ordered the very attack that resulted in Yusuf’s death. The violence backfired and led to scores of Boko Haram deaths, and hundreds of arrests.<sup>37</sup> These AQIM-trained followers, who questioned Shekau’s judgment, would later be inclined to join Ansaru as an alternative to following Shekau.

Shekau nonetheless played on the anger of Yusuf's followers who remained in Borno State and their desire for revenge against the government for killing Yusuf.<sup>38</sup> Shekau sought to ignite the Jihad that Yusuf only spoke of in ideological terms. Whereas Yusuf praised Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda and followed the history of Algerian jihadists, Shekau overtly reached out to al-Qaeda and implemented its model of Jihad for Yusuf's former followers.<sup>39</sup> In his first video statement released in July 2010, Shekau said that as Yusuf's deputy he would now become a leader in Yusuf's place and addressed his message to "leaders of al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups in Algeria, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen." He offered his

condolences on behalf of the mujahideen in Nigeria to the mujahideen in general, in particular to those in the Islamic State of Iraq, Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya Al-Libi, Abu Abdullah Al-Muhajir, the Emir of the Islamic State in Somalia, the Emir of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Emir of the Mujahideen in Pakistan, in Chechnya, Kashmir, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, and our religious clerics whom I did not mention.

Shekau also extended Yusuf's previous anti-Western position to a particular hatred of the United States stating: "Do not think jihad is over. Rather jihad has just begun. Oh America, die with your fury."<sup>40</sup>

Shekau also diverged from Yusuf's teachings in his belief that Christians are an enemy in Boko Haram's Jihad and should be eliminated from Nigeria. Shekau's sermons with Yusuf before July 2009 equated Western civilization with atheism and identified the three fundamental pillars of Western civilization: education, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and democracy. The collaboration of these three pillars led to what Shekau calls "globalization and the modern world order." Shekau, like Yusuf and the Saudi cleric Abu Zayd, argued that the West used education to "infiltrate Muslim minds and destroy Islam." Western education, according to Shekau, is the foundation of evil in the world and must not only be rejected but also replaced by religious education.

Shekau claimed that the Judeo-Christian tradition encouraged the more liberal textual interpretations that have become predominant in the practice of most modern religions, and has therefore had a corrupting influence on Islam. Thus, in Shekau's thinking, secular systems attribute to God what God has not instructed. As a result, Shekau completely rejected the use of the Judeo-Christian calendar and holidays that were recognized in Nigeria and adopted by secular governments all over the world. He has called Christians "polytheists" and

“infidels” and said that “true Muslims” should have no personal associations with them.

Finally, Shekau described democracy as the rejection of God’s supreme leadership over his creations. Such is evident in Shekau’s claims that Nigeria’s return to multiparty democracy and the Constitutional affirmation of its secular identity affirmed this rejection of God’s supreme leadership. He argued that the rejection of God’s law in Nigeria was evident in the use of national symbols like the national anthem, national pledge and the national flag. Shekau believed the concepts of honor, unity and glory that accompany these symbols should only be ascribed to God and no other entity; to Shekau, the nation-state is a human construct that denigrates God. Moreover, Western education, the Judeo-Christian tradition and democracy are the elements of a conspiracy meant to destroy Islam. Thus Muslims must fight them everywhere, at all times and by all means.<sup>41</sup>

Shekau, like Yusuf, was a charismatic and persuasive speaker in classical Arabic, Hausa, Kanuri and even in heavily accented English. He is also like Yusuf in that he distinguished himself from all other Islamist schools of thought in Nigeria, including the Salafists in Izala, the Maitatsine, and the Shi’a. Furthermore, Shekau, like Yusuf, has had success in manipulating the memory and political history of the Borno State in order to rally his followers to embrace jihad.

The first Boko Haram attack under Shekau took place on September 7, 2010. Fighters attacked the Bauchi prison and freed over 100 members who had been detained in the July 2009 clashes in which Yusuf was killed. Soon after, Boko Haram carried out a string of assassinations against religious and political leaders who opposed their agenda or who were participating in the 2011 presidential elections. Over the course of 2012 and 2013, Boko Haram burned down dozens of schools and churches, especially in Borno State, thereby indicating that Boko Haram was carrying out Shekau’s call to Jihad.

Even after Shekau was forced into hiding from 2010 onwards, he continued to advocate the same ideology he preached prior to July 2009. However, after July 2009, his sermons were only released through videos on YouTube, sent to international media outlets or posted on online jihadi forums. Shekau’s messages to civilians, which often warned them that anyone who cooperated with the security forces would be killed, have been distributed through leaflet drops in communities.

In a January 10, 2012 video, Shekau stated that the “concept of democracy and constitution are pagan.” Two weeks later, on January 26, 2012, Shekau said that “democracy is neither God’s ideology nor the Prophet’s” and that “Muslims know well that democracy is incompatible with Islam.” Shekau called on Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan and Christians to “embrace Islam and be saved”

and reminded them that secular education, sports, and music are part of a Jewish conspiracy to distract Muslims from studying the Quran. In an August 4, 2012 video, Shekau similarly said that “democracy and constitution” are forbidden themes under Islam and that Boko Haram wants to “change the system by introducing God’s law, the Sharia.” In 2013, Shekau also consistently threatened U.S. President Obama, French President Hollande, Queen Elizabeth, and former U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, mocked the U.S. designation of Shekau as a terrorist, and promised that Boko Haram would attack the U.S. “tomorrow.”

The candid sermons of Shekau prior to 2009 and after becoming the leader of Boko Haram in 2010 demonstrate that his ideology has largely remained intact; since 2010, however, he has made his ideology operational. The ideology he preached before 2010 is now manifesting itself in Boko Haram’s attacks against Christians, Nigerian government officials, and English language schools. Moreover, he has appealed directly to al-Qaeda.

## Mamman Nur and the Rise of Ansaru

SHEKAU’S RHETORIC AGAINST THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT, CHRISTIANS AND religious and political opponents since the start of Boko Haram’s violent insurgency in 2010 has accompanied his tolerance for civilian deaths. Shekau proclaimed a “war on Christians” and, according to his spokesman, Shekau sought to extend Boko Haram operations to Sokoto in order to “reduce the powers of the sultan to traditional rulership functions, while all religious authority would be vested in a Boko Haram leader [Shekau] to be based in Yobe.” The spokesman warned that “any ruler who would obstruct Boko Haram’s plans would regret his action.”<sup>42</sup> Boko Haram was able to strike a Sokoto police station with a suicide attack in July 2012 and assassinate more than 30 religious leaders who were close to the sultan that year, but Boko Haram ultimately failed to extend its influence outside of the ethnic Kanuri areas of northeast Nigeria.

One of the main reasons for Boko Haram’s failure to expand its influence into majority Hausa states in Nigeria was that its large-scale attacks alienated the population. In one particular instance, the group staged an attack on government buildings and churches in Kano, on January 20, 2012 that resulted in the death of nearly 200 people, most of whom were civilians.<sup>43</sup> Ansaru’s announcement of

its “public formation” in flyers distributed in Kano, which stated that Boko Haram was “inhumane” for killing innocent Muslims as well as for targeting defectors, followed a week after the attacks.<sup>44</sup> Shekau was evidently compelled to comment on the Kano attack and justify them in his January 26 video, in which he said that Boko Haram undertook the attack in Kano “in retaliation for the arrest and detention of several group members, including women and children, and that Boko Haram is responding to injustices.”<sup>45</sup>

Despite Shekau’s efforts to reach out to al-Qaeda with the praise for “soldiers of God in the Islamic State of Mali” when AQIM controlled territory in northern Mali in 2012, no other al-Qaeda affiliate has recognized Shekau or Boko Haram as one of their own. Boko Haram’s unapologetic murder of civilians proved burdensome for al-Qaeda’s public image. One of AQIM’s spiritual leaders, Abu Mundhir al-Shniqiti, even issued a *fatwa* in 2013, which appeared to be in reference to Boko Haram’s murder of students in a dormitory:

Targeting schools to kill young students is impermissible, since they have not joined the ranks of the apostate military yet... This will give the enemies of the religion and Western media the opportunity to exploit these scenes to prove to Muslims that the mujahideen are far from Islam... These schools can be combated by warning people against enrolling in them, punishing the families who send their sons to them, and by destroying them when they are empty of the students.<sup>46</sup>

AQIM was much closer ideologically and operationally with Ansaru in Nigeria. Ansaru’s first operation in Nigeria was in May 2011, when a cell kidnapped a British and Italian hostage in Kebbi State and killed them during a rescue operation in Sokoto in March 2012.<sup>47</sup> Unlike Boko Haram, Ansaru almost exclusively targets foreigners for kidnapping.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Ansaru is suspected of playing a role in kidnapping a French priest who had been assisting refugees fleeing from Boko Haram’s violence, and a French family in February and December of 2013 in northern Cameroon.<sup>49</sup>

Ansaru has also obtained notoriety for its members’ participation with Mokhtar Belmokhtar in his attacks against an energy plant in the town of In Amenas in Algeria in January 2013 and French mining facilities in Niger in June 2013.<sup>50</sup> While devoting most of its efforts to targeting foreigners and foreign owned targets, Ansaru has also attacked Nigerians as well. In January 2013, Ansaru militants ambushed a convoy of three buses carrying 180 Nigerian soldiers through

Okene, Kogi State, en route to Mali, killing two soldiers. Ansaru claimed the troops “were aiming to demolish the Islamic Empire of Mali” and warned African countries to “stop helping Western countries fight Muslims.”<sup>51</sup>

Ansaru’s operations are distinguished from Boko Haram’s in that they kill few local civilians, and principally target foreigners and foreign interests. Furthermore, most of Ansaru’s operations took place in northwestern Nigeria, where Boko Haram under Shekau had minimal influence. One explanation for Ansaru’s departure from Shekau’s focus on targets in northeastern Nigeria, such as churches, government offices and schools, is that former Yusuf deputy, Mamman Nur, inspired Ansaru’s internationalist agenda. Nur, like Shekau, was a deputy of Yusuf’s before July 2009. However, Nur, a native Cameroonian, may have had a personal interest in detaching Boko Haram’s aims from Nigeria alone by regionalizing the group such that he could solidify his legitimacy as a leader. When Yusuf was killed in July 2009, for example, Shekau won a power struggle over Nur and took over the leadership of Yusuf’s followers in part because Shekau was seen as the “local” while Nur was considered an “outsider.”<sup>52</sup>

Nur also was known as an “internationalist” because he connected with al-Shabaab in East Africa and AQIM between 2009 and his return to Nigeria in 2011.<sup>53</sup> Upon his return, AQIM coordinated attacks with Nur, including a suicide bombing on the UN Headquarters in Abuja that killed 22 people in August 2011. Nur’s international experience and more extensive theological background compared to Shekau is one reason why Nur was well-prepared to lead the followers of Yusuf who rejected Shekau’s methods and wanted to launch attacks on foreign targets. Before July 2009, Nur’s sermons focused on the history of Jihad in West Africa and northern Nigeria and on the legacy of Usman dan Fodio: the founder of the northwestern Nigeria-based Sokoto Caliphate.

Nur, like Yusuf, blamed “poverty” in northern Nigeria on the Muslim leaders who rejected Dan Fodio’s Jihad and accepted instead the secular constitution from the Europeans. Nur stated that:

It was Shari’a law that was practiced in this country. Dan Fodio and other Islamic scholars carried out the jihad and ensured that Quranic law was implemented. God did not interfere with this situation until our Muslim leaders accepted from the Europeans the secular constitution. Since that time, Allah took away the comfort and peace Muslims used to enjoy, and replaced it with suffering and poverty.<sup>54</sup>

He also argued that:

Our ancestors fought against western education and yet, some of you take your children to western schools. You think by doing this you are civilized, full of wisdom and smart? Our ancestors were killed because they opposed democracy, they opposed western education and they fought the jihad.<sup>55</sup>

It is not likely that Nur leads Ansaru's kidnappings operations;<sup>56</sup> however, Nur's ideology is prevalent in the group and will remain an alternative to Shekau's preoccupation with Nigeria and willingness to murder civilians.

Since February of 2013, Ansaru has become operationally silent in Nigeria, attacking only French mining facilities in Niger with Belmokhtar in June 2013 and kidnapping a French priest in Northern Cameroon in December 2013. Indeed, several of Ansaru's commanders have reverted back to Shekau, likely including al-Barnawi, who Nigeria listed in November 2012 as the top-ranking member on Shekau's Shura. Ansaru is therefore left with its "propaganda" wing that issues statements in line with AQIM that include criticisms of Boko Haram for killing Muslim civilians and of the Egyptian military for removing Mohammed Morsi from power.<sup>57</sup> It furthermore sustains AQIM's hostility towards Nigerian Christians, with threats against Christian militias in the Middle Belt and MEND in the Niger Delta.<sup>58</sup> Granted that Nur is the only known former Boko Haram member connected to AQIM Ansaru's first operations, it is likely that he remains part of Ansaru's ideological core.

## Conclusion

BOKO HARAM IS AN OUTGROWTH OF THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL troubles in northern Nigeria. The group gained a following under Muhammed Yusuf because he provided a satisfactory explanation for the failures in their society: the cultural corruption that European colonialism brought to undermine their faith in Islam. Yusuf absorbed al-Qaeda's ideology as well as Saudi Arabia's brand of Salafism. In turn, Shekau operationalized Yusuf's thinking into a jihadist insurgency that continues to the present day.

Yusuf's death was the trigger that enabled Shekau to mobilize his mentor's followers to wage an insurgency. While Nur and Ansaru's ideology is an outgrowth



of Yusuf's preaching, it is more reflective of the influence of other actors such as AQIM. Consequently, Shekau and Nur have sought to expand the reach of Yusuf's ideological influence and focus on those whom Boko Haram believed were directly responsible for northern Nigeria's "poverty and suffering" i.e. the Nigerian government, Westerners and Christians in the Middle Belt.

Moreover, Nur, like many of Yusuf's followers, came to see that Shekau's brutality may be effective on the battlefield, but that it has been politically counter-productive. Indeed, most northern Nigerians now reject Boko Haram's ideology, whereas Yusuf's ideology was widely popular in northeast Nigeria.

Nigeria has yet to effectively counter the ideology that underscored the growth of the Boko Haram movement before 2009. Even if the Nigerian government succeeds in defeating the group on the battlefield, another incarnation of Yusuf's ideology will likely challenge the existence of the Nigerian State once again. Nigeria would be wise to address the frustrations of Nigerians throughout the country, especially in Borno State, in order to prevent the manifestation of such an ideology in the future. The country and its Muslim religious leaders would be all the wiser if they promoted other more traditionally accepted brands of Islamism to challenge the influence of Saudi *wahabbism*, and AQIM's interpretation of jihad. The political defeat of the Islamist ideas of Boko Haram would contribute to curbing the influence of Islamism in Africa, and indeed the entire world.

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