
How much Takfir is too much Takfir? The Evolution of Boko Haram's Factionalization.

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Abstract

This article explores the ways in which the doctrine of *takfir* has been a central component in causing the Boko Haram movement to factionalize. The paper considers the historical origins of the concept of *takfir* and then turns to looking at how this concept has been (re)interpreted in the contemporary period among jihadist groups such as Boko Haram. Contemporary usage of *takfirism* as an ideology has often led to lethal consequences for civilians on the ground who are labeled “Kafir”, and devastating consequences for the internal cohesion of groups who use *takfir* as disagreements arise over who is or is not “Kafir”. The concept is highly controversial, and has torn jihadist movements apart. The priority given to this concept in Boko Haram factions provides an illustrative case study of *takfirism* in contemporary jihadist movements. In the conclusion, the article provides recommendations on how this concept can be incorporated into CVE programs and especially de-radicalization of both leaders and foot soldiers of Boko Haram.

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Introduction

Boko Haram is a violent *takfiri* jihadist movement operating mostly in northeastern Nigeria but whose operational reach extends into the neighboring countries of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. *Takfir*, which will be discussed in more detail below, is an Islamic concept translating as excommunication, or the declaring of a nominal Muslim as an apostate (Akhlaq 2015: 1). The interpretation and implementation of this concept in practice has been a constant dividing line between the various factions that are known as “Boko Haram”.

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The name “Boko Haram” itself is often translated as “Western education is blasphemous”. While this encapsulates one element of the group’s ideology (its stance against Western education and any teachings that are not strictly based on the Qur’an), it is a name that the movement has consistently rejected but that the media and politicians have embraced as what is, in essence, a slur against the movement.

The name constricts our understanding of what Boko Haram is by endorsing a monolithic view of Boko Haram as anti-education when, in fact, the movement has and continues to be divided into factions that represent doctrines beyond education. As early as Boko Haram’s formation in August 2009 as a self-avowed jihadist group, Abubakar Shekau (2009), the then new leader, said “Western education is part of a broader civilizational project to detach Muslims from Islam and its Arabic language traditions, and instead immerse Muslims in Christianity and English-language”. Thus, opposition to Western education is but one ingredient in a much broader construction of Boko Haram ideology.

Since 2009, Boko Haram leaders officially called the movement *Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah Lid dawa wa al-Jihad* (Sunni Group for Proselytization and Jihad), or JAS, and published statements to reaffirm that they are – at least in their mindset – *the “pure” Ahl al-Sunna*.² Those who did not join JAS, including “mainstream” Muslims, and Salafists who “sold out” to the Nigerian state, are not part of *Ahl al-Sunna*, instead classified as *kafir* or infidels. Not all factions of Boko Haram, however, follow this line of thinking which is key to Shekau’s JAS faction. The faction in alliance with Islamic State and called Islamic State’s West Africa Province (*Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya*), has a narrower view of *takfir* by not applying it to all “mainstream” Muslims.

The group known as JAS today was once a part of West Africa Province after Shekau pledged allegiance to Islamic State Caliph Abubakr Al-Baghdadi in March 2015. But in August 2016 Islamic State replaced Shekau with Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son on the late Mohammad Yusuf, and who has a more restricted view of *takfir*. Once deposed, Shekau revived JAS, which from the time of his pledge in March 2015 to August 2016 had been

² Community of Muslims who follow the sayings and permissions, or disapprovals, of prophet Muhammad, as well as reports about Muhammad and his companions and community.

extinct. West Africa Province accused Shekau of “too much *takfir*”, which is also the same criticism that al-Qaeda levies against Islamic State—a seeming paradox.³

This paradox can be best reconciled as follows: The leaders of West Africa Province who deposed Shekau, including Abu Musab al-Barnawi, Mamman Nur and Abu Fatima, were previously part of Ansaru, a group affiliated with al-Qaeda, and which itself broke away from JAS in 2012 because of Shekau’s excessive *takfirism*. Some of these leaders who broke away from JAS in 2012 only rejoined Shekau in March 2015 because they believed that uniting with Shekau to pledge allegiance to Abubakr al-Baghdadi was a priority even despite their reservations over Shekau’s excessive *takfirism*.⁴ This shows that the issue of *takfir* was not the only factor in determining Boko Haram factional relations as far as the leaders of the current West Africa Province were concerned: the issue of *caliphacy*, at least in 2015, stood supreme for them.

Thus, there are currently three factions commonly referred to as “Boko Haram”: West Africa Province, which is part of Islamic State and prioritizes loyalty to al-Baghdadi and is more discriminating in its use of *takfir*; JAS, which is neither affiliated with Islamic State nor al-Qaeda, despite still accepting al-Baghdadi as caliph, and holds the most wide-reaching interpretation of *takfir*; and Ansaru, which, like West Africa Province, believes ordinary Muslims should not be subject to accusations of *takfir* so long as they do not actively oppose jihad, such as fighting in the Nigerian military. Ansaru is loyal to al-Qaeda and rejects the caliphacy of al-Baghdadi.

Despite their key doctrinal differences, all Boko Haram factions—West Africa Province, JAS and Ansaru—are irredentist movements that do not recognize the sovereignty of the Nigerian state. Their stated goal is to establish an Islamic state in northeastern Nigeria and parts of neighboring West Africa where Shari’a law will be implemented in its totality,

³ For more information on this, see Shekau’s audio message to Abubakr al-Baghdadi <http://jihadology.net/2015/03/07/al-urwah-al-wuthqa-foundation-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-jamaat-ahl-al-sunnah-li-l-dawah-wa-l-jihads-boko-%E1%B8%A5aram-abu-bakr-shekau-bayah-jama/>

⁴ Not all members of Ansaru chose to unite with Shekau. Some stayed in Ansaru and continued to condemn Shekau for declaring *takfir* on those who fall outside of JAS. For these Ansaru members, Shekau’s excessive *takfirism* is a dispositive factor preventing them from uniting with him, although they, in addition to that, do not accept al-Baghdadi as a legitimate caliph

and in which all aspects of secularism, democracy and Western influence would be rejected (Pieri and Zenn 2016). Even though Boko Haram is now factionalized, there is no indication that the stated goal for any of the factions has shifted from carving out space for Islamist governance in a region broader than Nigeria: their differences are primarily doctrinal over the issue of *takfir*, as will be discussed in this article.

The paper first outlines the concept of *takfir*, tracing it to its origins with the Kharijites, and explaining how the concept has reemerged among contemporary jihadist movements such as Boko Haram, with lethal effects. The paper then provides a background on the origins and evolution of Boko Haram through five phases of its factionalization over the issue of *takfir*. Through focusing on its key leaders and ideologies we are able to map the way in which Boko Haram evolved as an organization with regards to its stance on *takfirism*. Moreover, we explain the paradox that currently exists in West Africa Province, which is still loyal to Islamic State despite its stance on *takfirism* being consistent with al-Qaeda. Finally, we provide recommendations for implementers of CVE and de-radicalization programs connected to the Boko Haram insurgency. There are also broader lessons for other theaters where the issue of *takfir* is highly prominent among militant groups.

Methodology

The data used for this study is based on a discourse analysis of primary source material emanating from the three Boko Haram factions, Islamic State, and al-Qaeda. In total we examined seventy items of discourse covering a ten-year period from January 2007 to February 2017, and the items of discourse include speeches, sermons, writings, and statements from the above groups. These were gathered through online open sourcing including reputable media outlets, and YouTube. In almost all cases, the materials were in a mixture of languages including Hausa, Arabic, and Kanuri, and in these instances, the transcripts were translated by a professional. In one instance, our data came from *Agence France-Presse* (AFP) in the form of an internal audio by Shekau for his commanders from

December 18, 2016. The audio file was not made public, but the authors were given permission to use it as part of the discourse analysis. Some data also came from semi-structured interviews conducted in Nigeria by the authors. In total, 20 interviews were conducted in Abuja with people who have had direct experience with Boko Haram, either as victims, or residents in Boko Haram dominated areas. Our interviewees were divided accordingly: 15 Male and 5 female; 14 were from a Muslim background and 6 were of a Christian background; all participants were from the North of Nigeria, and have been displaced from their homes.⁵ Interviews were carried out in accordance to IRB ethical guidelines in which participants were briefed on the nature of the interviews, were given a period of time to consider participation in the study, and were allowed to withdraw from the research at any point of their choosing. All interviewees gave informed verbal consent, and permission for data to be used in academic research on condition of anonymity. The condition of anonymity is particularly important given the possibility of Boko Haram attacking those who take part in “Western education” and knowledge construction. As such there has been an additional ethical imperative to protect participants from harm.

It is through discourse analysis that we witness the realization of the macro-sociological patterns that characterize groups, movements and societies. This approach was taken as language can not be viewed as a mere channel through which information about behaviour or facts about the world are communicated, but rather as a vehicle that generates, and as a result constitutes, the social world (Phillips and Jorgensen 2002). Most important to our understanding of the way in which the different factions of Boko Haram view themselves has been their ideologies, alliances, and strategies as explained through their he, as well as from discussions taking place within the wider jihadist movements of al-Qaeda and Islamic State. These forms of discourse were translated, catalogued, and coded. Before cataloguing and coding our data we read through each transcript at least three times, with the purpose of familiarizing ourselves with the data, and to pay close attention to the language used and as to how that language may promote support for terrorism. As Braddock and Horgan (2016: 387)

⁵ These interviews were conducted as part of our wider research project on Boko Haram in West Africa, although not all have been directly used in this paper.

suggest, ‘carefully reading the terrorist narratives before engaging in coding procedures should provide the analyst with an impression of the narratives and what the terrorists hope to accomplish with them.’ After careful reading we created a discourse database in which data was codified in terms of how it related to Boko Haram’s ideology, and divided this into master frames and sub-frames. In doing so we were able to produce a list of frames, as well as the degree to which each frame is represented within the data. These frames or themes, as Braddock and Horgan (2016: 388) argue, ‘represent the central tenets of the ideas being espoused in the narratives, and therefore serve as the thematic targets at which counternarratives should be aimed.’

Several master-frames emerged from these transcripts and statements, which show how the different Boko Haram factions prioritize and organize the directions of the movement. What stood out most, especially in the documents pertaining to the period between late 2015 and early 2017, was the increase in conflicting accounts between the Boko Haram factions over the doctrine and practice of *takfir*, and what role, if any, it should play within the jihadist movement. As well as the issue of *takfir*, other resonant master-frames include those of “salafism”, “salvation”, “governance issues”, “anti-Constitution”, and “anti-West”.

Given the tense security situation, the State of Emergency enforced in northeastern Nigeria since 2013 and renewed in 2015, and restrictions on travel to the region, we have not been able to conduct primary field research in Borno, Yobe or Adamawa states since 2012. However, both authors, as recently as 2016, have spent a considerable amount of time in Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad region, and have a deep familiarity with the issues surrounding the region.

Takfirism

The concept of *takfir*, though controversial in Islam, has become a powerful weapon in the theological arsenal of contemporary jihadist movements, though there is debate even among jihadists as to how *takfir* should be used. *Takfir* is a religious concept, which signifies the act of excommunication – declaring a nominal Muslim an infidel (Akhlaq 2015: 1). The importance of this lies in the proscribed punishment for those classified as apostates, namely death. The pronouncement of *takfir* has become a convenient way for some jihadists to discredit and dispose of their “enemies”. Boko Haram is one such group. Historically however, declaring *takfir* was no easy task treated with severity and could ‘only be pronounced by qualified religious authorities under very specific circumstances’ (Hegghammer 2009: 247).

The Qur’an stipulates that Muslims should not excommunicate other Muslims who consider themselves Muslim, even if some of their practices do not always conform to Islam (Qur’an 4:94). This is even clearer in the Hadith, for example, Ibn Umar reported the Prophet Muhammad as saying, ‘When a man calls his brother an unbeliever, it returns at least to one of them.’ In another narration, the Prophet said, ‘Either the accused is as claimed, or the charge will return against the accuser.’⁶ Yet, shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the issue of *takfir* rose to prominence, threatening to rip the Muslim community apart. The debate climaxed after the assassination of Islam’s third Caliph, Uthman, in 656. Ali ibn Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad who became the fourth Caliph, faced strong opposition from Mu’awiya ibn Abu Sufyan, one of Uthman’s close relatives and the governor of Damascus. In a summation of the events, Quintan Wiktorowicz notes that Mu’awiya accused Ali of ‘harboring Uthman’s assassins and demanded extradition so that he could fulfil his vendetta, according to tribal customs’ (Wiktorowicz 2006: 228). The two armies engaged in battle at Siffin in 657, and later agreed to submit to arbitration by two referees who would settle the dispute according to the Qur’an. A number of fighters from Ali’s side felt ‘betrayed by his decision to submit to human arbitration and turned against him. The Khawarij, as they became known, argued that, “God alone has the right to judge” and

⁶ Sahih Bukhari 5753, Sahih Muslim 60

declared Ali an apostate' (Wiktorowicz 2006: 228).

The Kharijites were the first identifiable group in Islamic history to be concerned with the issue of excommunication, and with determining the extent one could deviate from Islamic norms and still be considered Muslim. The Kharijite position was that, 'Muslims who commit grave sins effectively reject their religion, entering the ranks of apostates, and therefore deserve capital punishment' (Sonn and Farrar 2009). The majority of Muslims at the time rejected this position as too extreme, threatening the cohesiveness of the community. The Kharijites illustrated the most radical and literal reading of Islam, and for most Muslims the term is pejorative.

In more recent times, Sayyid Qutb was influential in reigniting the concept of *takfir* as a legitimate weapon within the arsenal of jihadist movements when he argued that the entire world was in a state of *jahiliyah*, or ignorance (akin to the period in Arabia prior to the revelation of Islam) and where man's way had replaced God's way. Dale Eikmeier (2007) argues that for Qutb, since *jahiliyah* and Islam cannot coexist, 'an offensive jihad was necessary to destroy *jahiliyah* society and bring the entire world to Islam. Until *jahiliyah* is defeated, all true Muslims have a personal obligation to wage offensive jihad.

In addition to offensive jihad, Qutb used the concept of *takfir* to provide a legal loophole around the prohibition of killing other Muslims, and made it a religious obligation to execute the apostate. The obvious use of this concept was to declare secular rulers, officials or organizations, or any Muslims that opposed the Islamist agenda a *kafir* thereby justifying assassinations against them (Eikmeier 2007: 89). Such thinking is demonstrated by Shekau, where he said 'even if a woman is praying and fasting, once she engages in democracy I can capture her in a battle'.⁷ This shows that for Shekau, even if a woman outwardly expresses the practices of Islam such as prayer, and fasting, she is relegated to the domain of unbelief if she engages in democracy.

⁷ The speech is an internal audio by Shekau for his commanders from December 18, 2016. Among other themes, in the audio Shekau explained that he killed commanders because they undermined his authority by carrying out operations without his explicit approval. The audio appeared to show that Shekau as facing a crisis of legitimacy with commanders in the group and there was competition between commanders in his faction. The audio is not publicly available but has been reported on and obtained by AFP, and the authors also have an audio file of it.

Hegghammer (2009: 247) stipulates that the concept of *takfir* is now evoked in three main types of situations.

The first is when an opposition group seeks to topple what they view as a politically illegitimate Muslim regime. By declaring the ruler infidel, they justify the use of violence against him. The second is when official or self-appointed representatives of a conservative majority seek to intimidate holders of minority views on religion, usually individual progressive intellectuals. The third main type of situation is when a small sect views Muslims around them as so morally corrupt that it considers them infidels and seeks to isolate itself from the rest of society. This is a rare and inward-looking use of *takfir*, which most often produces withdrawal, not violence.

The various factions of Boko Haram do not neatly fall into the above categorizations, but what is clear is that the ideology of *takfir* can have clear and direct paths to brutal violence directed against Muslims who refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the movement. During its early stages under the leadership of Mohammad Yusuf, Boko Haram repudiated the legitimacy of the Nigerian state, and chose to withdraw from what they regarded as a morally corrupt society around them (Serrano and Pieri 2014: 199). Boko Haram turned towards a clearer *takfiri* path with the leadership ascent of Abubakar Shekau, but intensified after its alliance with Islamic State. Yet Shekau's liberal use of *takfir* marked a fissure between Boko Haram and Islamic State. It is this point of contention around the use of *takfir* as an ideological tool that this paper will examine in the sections that follow.

Origins and Shisms in “Boko Haram“

There are different variations of how Boko Haram started, and these are summarized by Comolli (2015). One factor that needs further discussion though, is the early association

between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda. This initial relationship to al-Qaeda is important when considering the ideological underpinnings of Boko Haram, and the way the interpretation of *takfir* has conformed with and deviated from al-Qaeda's interpretation among different factions.

The Nigerian Taliban was a precursor to Boko Haram, and was founded in the late-1990s by Muhammed Ali, a Nigerian graduate of the Islamic University in Khartoum, Sudan, who met with Osama bin Laden at a time when Bin Laden was leader of the proto-al-Qaeda organization based in Khartoum (International Crisis Group 2014: 23; Ofongo 2016: 146). Muhammed Ali and another Nigerian who was in Sudan at the time, Khalid al-Barnawi, became followers of bin Laden, and together they pledged their allegiance to him. Bin Laden gave seed funding (approximately \$3 million) to Muhammed Ali to establish a jihadist movement in Nigeria (International Crisis Group 2014: 23; Al-Risalah 2017: 19).

After returning to Nigeria after the 9/11 attacks, Ali recruited Muslim preachers in Nigeria to become his deputies, including the then young Mohammed Yusuf (b. 1970), who by this time had been in and out of various Salafi movements, but found mentorship under Sheikh Jafaar Adam Mahmoud, one of Nigeria's most influential Salafist preachers and leader of *Jama'at Izalat al Bid'a Wa Iqamat as Sunna*, better known by the name "Izala" (Society of Removal of Innovation and Re-establishment of the Sunna) (International Crisis Group 2014: 23). Under Ali's leadership the Nigerian Taliban recruited and expanded their network across the northeastern Nigerian states. Indeed, the "Nigerian Taliban" was an above-ground movement and part of the "mainstream" Salafist/Wahabbist currents (Brigaglia 2015: 182).

Over the next decade various schisms would occur within Boko Haram, however, with *takfirism* proving to be the most decisive issue among them, and relegating Boko Haram discourse to the extreme margins of debate in Nigerian Salafi communities.

First Schism: 2004 Conflict

In 2003, a faction—then still under the leadership of Muhammed Ali and known as the Nigerian Taliban—strove for self-exclusion of its members from the mainstream "corrupt" society by living in areas far from society in order to intellectualize and radicalize the

revolutionary process that would ultimately lead to the violent takeover of the [Nigerian] state' (Isa 2010: 333). According to one source at the time, they regarded western education as apostasy, and were 'just individuals having similar ideology fashioned after the sacked Taliban regime in Afghanistan' (Murray 2009; Oropo 2004). Brigaglia's review of the Nigerian Salafi/Wahabbi leadership's relationship with the Nigerian Taliban and the court transcripts of an al-Qaeda external operations unit member, Ibrahim Harun, who travelled from Pakistan to Nigeria in 2003, suggest some members of this early reclusive community, called "Afghanistan", were infiltrated by or had some collaboration with al-Qaeda for training to attack Western targets in Nigeria (Brigaglia 2012; United States District Court 2016: 3). As well as Muhammed Ali having met Bin Laden in Sudan, two Nigerian Taliban delegates, including Ali's top deputy, were arrested in Pakistan in 2003 after relaying Ibrahim Harun's attack plans on U.S. targets in Nigeria to al-Qaeda leadership.

This instance appears to have represented the first fault line in the movement between those, like Ali, Ibrahim Harun and Ali's two delegates who travelled to Pakistan, and others, such as Nigeria's Salafi leadership, and likely Mohammed Yusuf himself. The former believed that jihad is legitimate against American targets in Iraq and Afghanistan and also in Nigeria itself, and plotted against U.S interests in the country. Discussions about *takfir* against Nigerian society more broadly were also taking place, though not yet acted upon. The latter believed that targeting American interests in Iraq and Afghanistan was legitimate, but that Nigeria was not a 'land of jihad' and any domestic insurrection in Nigeria could lead to *fitna* among Muslims or that, in the case of Yusuf, jihad in Nigeria was necessary but should be delayed until the believing Muslims were strong enough to win a battle against the state. As such the latter did not support attacks in Nigeria, nor believed it necessary to engage in *takfir* against society at large, at least not a time when Muslims were too weak to achieve victory (Brigaglia 2015: 180). Yusuf would later recall in a recorded lecture in Kano in 2006 that Ali had even called *takfir* on him over this agreement⁸.

Upon learning of the intentions of the "Afghanistan" camp in late 2003, the Nigerian

⁸ Mohammad Yusuf. 2006. "Clearing the Doubts of the Scholars", available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWfv28iSEZQ>

government cracked down on the reclusive community and killed Muhammed Ali and several dozen followers. The Nigerian Taliban dissolved for some time, with some members fleeing Nigeria, while others become immersed in the growing AQIM networks in the Sahel, and others fleeing Nigeria to return after mediation between the Nigerian Salafi leadership and the government. Once such person was Mohammad Yusuf, who took control of the remnants of the group.

Second Schism: 2004-2009

Learning lessons from the destruction of the “Afghanistan” camp, Yusuf focused on “group-building”, seeking to build up the Nigerian Taliban’s support within Nigeria while avoiding any overt associations with al-Qaeda, or violence against Western or Nigerian interests in Nigeria. Thus, after 2004 Yusuf, who received funding from Saudi sponsors he met during his year in exile (Author Interview, 2017)⁹, established micro-financing programs and would loan small amounts of money to individuals, which attracted a large following of youths who were loyal to him (Pieri and Zenn 2016: 72). This tactic allowed Yusuf to divorce his followers from the state, and create an atmosphere in which he was seen as not only a preacher but a provider. Yusuf created a parallel social order in which he operated his own schools, hospital and newspaper. Women were also instrumental in the early workings of the movement benefitting from Yusuf’s largess, while he called for all women to be educated in a basic Islamic education.

Doctrinally, Yusuf differed from the formerly more militant-oriented members of his movement in that he believed it necessary to engage in *Iqamat al-hujja*—or “establishing evidence”—before declaring jihad (Yusuf 2007). His preaching was thus oriented towards convincing followers that the Nigerian government was oppressive. While Yusuf knew he had supporters training in the Sahel with AQIM to prepare for militancy in Nigeria, he thought the

⁹ The source has requested anonymity. The author knows the source from the source’s work as a liaison to and expert on JAS in the negotiations for the detained Chibok schoolgirls, which led to the release of 21 and 83 girls in October 2016 and May 2017, respectively, thus verifying the source’s credibility.

time was not ripe for jihad (Al-Hamid 2009). This differed from Izala, and especially its leader Shaykh Jafaar Mahmoud Adam, who after originally turning a blind eye to the “Afghanistan” camp’s militant activities had begun to abandon the idea of confronting the Nigerian state and instead to working within state structures to Islamicize its institutions, which Yusuf considered a form of apostasy. Indeed, Yusuf, in contrast, preferred to grow the movement until it was sufficiently strong enough to implement a program of Shari’a by jihad if needed, and thus his opposition to confronting the state was merely temporal.

This second factionalization was therefore mostly between Yusuf and his followers and the Nigerian religious establishment, particularly the Salafis from which Yusuf had originally emerged. This is the period where Yusuf’s anti-State and anti-religious establishment became solidified. Yusuf, however, only engaged in *takfir* against the Nigerian government and those who “collaborated” with it, which gradually came to include Muslims such as Shaykh Jafaar, but Yusuf still left the issue aside about whether ordinary Muslims who benefitted from government services were *kafir* or not, and instead tried to convince them to join his movement. Yusuf also praised Bin Laden, cited Saudi Wahhabi theologians in his sermons, and predicted that Nigeria would become a ‘land of jihad’, but did not make known to those beyond his immediate followers that he planned a jihad or espoused violence.

Third Schism: 2010-2012

Yusuf's call for *Iqamat al-hujja* and declaration of the Nigerian government as "taghut"¹⁰ became a self-fulfilling prophecy when in July 2009 the Nigerian government killed Yusuf and 1,000 followers in a clash sparked by Yusuf's followers refusal to wear motorcycle helmets but which was also prompted by underlying tensions between the government and Yusuf's movement's growing calls for jihad that existed for at least a year before the clash. The mantle of leadership after a one-year interregnum fell to Yusuf's deputy, Abubakar Shekau. Shekau won over Yusuf's other deputy, Mamman Nur, who after Yusuf's death moved abroad and trained with AQIM and al-Shabab (Zenn 2014: 24). Nur believed the appropriate response after Yusuf's death was to target foreigners, international institutions, Nigerian government, Muslims who opposed "Boko Haram" (through serving in the government or army), or Christian churches and institutions in Nigeria, which he viewed as concomitant with the West. In this respect, Nur blended much of the original program of Muhammed Ali and the Nigerian Taliban, while also seeking to operationalize through militancy much of Yusuf's program.

Shekau, in contrast to Nur, believed that jihad after 2010 was obligatory, and that not actively joining his jihad was tantamount to apostasy. This did not mean Shekau actively killed anyone after he announced jihad and renamed the group "JAS" in 2010. Rather, there was a "priority scale" with Christians, the government, and publicly anti-JAS Muslim preachers targeted first. This also meant any Muslims killed collaterally were not a concern since they were "guilty" for not having joined his jihad.

Shekau's acceptance of Muslim casualties—and practice of *takfir* against anyone who was not in his group—was thus a cause of the third schism. This schism appeared in October 2010, when assassinations targeting Muslim religious leaders, especially Salafists who opposed JAS's religious interpretation, as well as civil servants, became an almost weekly

¹⁰ Arabic term often translated as "tyrant" or "oppressor." The Quran lists vividly the misdeeds and excesses of taghut political leaders and societies, including the pharaoh of Egypt.

occurrence in northeastern Nigeria. In addition to this, prisons, banks, churches and beer halls also were common targets of attack (Watts 2015: 196).

Opposition emerged to JAS as resentment grew among some followers of the late Yusuf, who called themselves the Yusufiya Islamic Movement (YIM). They rejected JAS's killing of Muslim scholars and Muslims civilians in collateral damage (Comolli 2015: 68). The YIM however was never able to establish itself as an alternate to Shekau's JAS. One reason for this is that it is likely Shekau killed its members for defecting, or because they had too few members. The importance of the emergence of the YIM, however, is that it captures a certain level of dissatisfaction and debate within the ranks of the late Yusuf's followership as to the appropriateness of violent tactics, including that of *takfir*.

Fourth Schism: Ansaru

A similar set of issues that led to YIM's dissent from Shekau also led to the formation of Ansaru, which represented the most public schism in the group's history. *Ansarul al-Muslimin fi Biladis Sudan* (Vanguard of the Muslims in Black Africa) announced its formation on January 26, 2012 in fliers dropped in Kano. This occurred in direct aftermath of an "urban invasion" attack that JAS launched in Kano on Shekau's orders one week earlier with up to 200 people killed (Abubakar 2012: 97). Shekau, who was hiding in Kano at the time, claimed that it was a response to the arrests of JAS members, wives and children, and the killing of Mohammed Yusuf. The attacks, however, reflect Shekau's approach to *takfir*: government offices may have been targeted but even those who were caught in the crossfire were seen as *kafir* for not being part of JAS.

To explain its ideology, in June 2012, Ansaru, released high quality video statements on Youtube affirming (in Hausa and English) that Ansaru disapproved of Shekau's killing of Muslims, including Ansaru defectors from JAS and Ansaru's spiritual leader from Gombe State.¹¹ Ansaru explained five years later in an al-Qaeda publication in January 2017 that prior

¹¹ Ansaru pseudonymous leader/spokesman (along with Khalid al-Barnawi, who was more operational), Abu Usamatul al-Ansari, decried the killing of Ansaru members by Shekau in the video debut of the group that appeared in June 2, 2012 in Hausa and English language, available at:

to forming Ansaru they had elected Shekau as “amir” of their “jamaah”, or group, after Yusuf’s death, but they saw how Shekau declared anyone who was not part of their “jamaah” as apostates (Al-Risalah 2017). This led to Shekau considering too broad a population of Muslims as worthy of death. As a result, Ansaru, whose core leaders were former Nigerian AQIM members or those, like Nur, who were trained by AQIM, consulted their “Algerian brothers” and chose the new name Ansaru. Similarly, a series of letters that AQIM released in April 2017 showing discussions between JAS and AQIM from before 2011 includes complaints by future Ansaru mastermind Khalid al-Barnawi and his shura members to AQIM about Shekau. The letter signed by Khalid al-Barnawi and his shura says “Shekau spends his time proclaiming *takfir*” and “all of this has led the Nigerian people to criticize the religion and jihad, causing general chaos”, and that Shekau uses “*takfir* for all who participate in elections disregarding the principles and rules of *takfir*” (Rashid 2017). In addition, the letters list Shekau’s theological reference points for understanding *takfir*, which al-Barnawi and his shura consider to be “deviant”. Ultimately, they compare Shekau to the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), from which AQIM’s predecessor, the GSPC, split during the Algerian civil war in the 1990s because of the GIA’s excessive *takfir*.¹²

Ansaru, however, met a demise, at least operationally, by mid-2013. While Shekau killed a number of its members, the Nigerian security forces raided Ansaru’s main base in Kaduna and broke up its kidnapping cells in Sokoto and Kano and elsewhere in northern Nigeria, thus reducing its capacity. The French-led intervention in Mali at the time also meant that Ansaru’s networks to AQIM were severed. Some former Ansaru members would later join JAS, such as Mamman Nur and its commander of suicide bombings, Abu Fatima.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6Atd6blaBI> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZ-6Strj2tI>. “New statement from Jamā’at Ansār al-muslimīn Fi Bilād al- Sūdān: “Innocence of the mujāhidīn From the Blood of the Innocent Muslims,” May 14, 2013, available at: <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/14/new-statement-from-jamaat-an%E1%B9%A3ar-al-muslimin-fi-bilad-al-sudan-innocence-of-the-mujahidin-from-the-blood-of-the-innocent-muslims/>.

¹² It appears AQIM released these documents publicly to its followers for two reasons: first, one of the documents is the original version of one released by the US Directorate of National Intelligence in January 2017, so AQIM may be seeking to contextualize that now public document; and, second, AQIM may be seeking to explain to its followership that it is not responsible for—and even advised against—Shekau’s *takfirism* and the misguided paths that Shekau and his commanders have taken.

Ansaru's kidnapping commander, Khalid al-Barnawi, also reconciled with Shekau in 2012, perhaps due to his faltering network in Nigeria. Other JAS tactical and narrative changes between 2013 and 2014 showed signs of Ansaru influence on JAS.¹³ This showed that as important as *takfir* was to Ansaru's ideology, survival became paramount to ideology when the group's existence was at stake. But what followed after this "merger" with JAS showed the ideological differences over *takfir* ultimately could not be overcome.

Fifth Schism: West Africa Province

The "merger" of Ansaru elements into JAS coincided with JAS's occupation of territory for the first time in the history of the insurgency in 2014. This was perhaps not coincidental, however, as former Ansaru members' skill-sets in suicide bombings, kidnappings-for-ransom (of foreigners and local Nigerians), and ambushes supported JAS to raise funds and attack the security forces. This caused the military to essentially withdraw from large tracts of countryside in northeastern Nigeria. From October 2014 until February 2015, when the Nigerian government launched a massive military offensive against Shekau's declared "Islamic State"¹⁴ nearly 30 towns fell under JAS's control, including ones populated by more than tens of thousands of people such as Monguno, Bama, Baga, and Mubi, where JAS implemented strict *hudud shari'a* punishments and appointed its own *amirs* (Pieri 2014).

¹³ Among the signs that former Ansaru members joined Boko Haram beyond the Abu Fatima and Nur audios and that these former Ansaru were leading Boko Haram's pledge to Islamic State was that videos began employing Islamic State and Ansaru rhetoric, including stating in October 2014 that the borders of Nigeria and Cameroon were "broken (*kasara* in Arabic)", which was modelled on an Islamic State video also showing its militants "breaking" the border posts between Iraq and Syria, and saying that Boko Haram had an "established an Islamic State in biladis Sudan (Black Africa)". This is distinctly Ansaru phraseology and given the experience of Ansaru militants in AQIM and the higher quality of their videos and statements at their founding in 2011-2012, they were well-placed to play a key role in amplifying Boko Haram's capabilities. This was exemplified in the kidnappings of 22 foreigners in Cameroon in 2013-2014 and numerous others in Borno, the first two of which were carried out jointly by Boko Haram Ansaru in February 2013 and November 2013 and the latter three only by the same network, but only explicitly claimed by Boko Haram (the former Ansaru members were integrated by then). In addition, Boko Haram's raids on several key military barracks during Boko Haram's occupation of territory in its "Islamic State" in 2014-2015 and the introduction of widespread suicide bombings can be attributed to the expertise of former Ansaru members to Boko Haram, including Abu Fatima.

¹⁴ Shekau referred to it as both *dawlat al-Islam* in Arabic and *daular Musulunci* in Hausa

Altogether, JAS's de-facto control spanned an area almost as large as Belgium in three Nigerian states: Borno, Yobe and Adamawa.

Although the creation of an "Islamic State" has been a long term goal of JAS, this strategic shift should also be viewed through the lens of JAS wanting to impress the Islamic State, or that it came from the urging of the Islamic State. The holding of territory for the Islamic State is one of three essential components of its maintaining legitimacy of the Caliphate; the other two are al-Baghdadi's decendency from the Qurayshi tribe and, at least according to its view, it having received support from the *ulema* for the declaration of the Caliphate (Wood 2015). In the absence of evident operational links between Islamic State and JAS, the most concrete relationship was their social media coordination, including Islamic State's setting up for JAS a social media platform showing videos, tweets and statements in January 2015.¹⁵

In March 2015, Shekau pledged allegiance to Islamic State, which was recognized by Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammed al-Adnani and in various Islamic State publications. The internal dynamics of the pledge from JAS show that, in fact, in a meeting Mamman Nur and Abu Fatima "compelled" Shekau to pledge allegiance to Islamic State because, according to Nur (2016), "it is obligatory to pledge allegiance to the Caliph once he appears in the world."¹⁶ Moreover, according to Nur, Shekau feared his not pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi would lead Abu Musab al-Barnawi, Mamman Nur, and Abu Fatima to break away just like they had as part of Ansaru. Shekau, who had never formally joined al-Qaeda, may have not wanted to formally join Islamic State, but rather to have mutual recognition as opposed to a formal relationship so as to not have to sacrifice his authority to another leader.

Indeed, Shekau's disinterest in listening to authorities and his continued excessive *takfirism* is what caused the group to ultimately factionalize in August 2016, with Islamic

¹⁵ The authors retain a hard copy PDF file of this document, although it is otherwise not available online.

¹⁶ The publicly available recording of Nur's discussion of this meeting between Nur and Shekau on the Sahara Reporters website says that the voice in Abu Musab al-Barnawi's but, in fact, the voice is Nur's. In one instance, Nur even referencing a conversation he had with "Habib," referring to Abu Musab al-Barnawi's actual given name.

State recognizing Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the West Africa Province leader and Shekau reverting to lead JAS. According to an audio by Nur that was leaked on August 2, 2016, Shekau ignored al-Baghdadi's advice on distinguishing female "apostates" who should be killed and not enslaved, and *Kafir Asli*, or "those who are born unbelievers", such as Christian girls, who can be kept as slaves.¹⁷ Moreover, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who controlled West Africa Province's communications, cut off Shekau from communicating with Islamic State. As Nur (2016) described, the reasons included killing militants who disagreed with Shekau without explanation or fighters and reason why Abu Musab al-Barnawi and Nur turned against Shekau again is that he killed civilians whose only crime was holding a government ID card and killed militants who defected to Abu Musab al-Barnawi's faction, just as Shekau had done to Ansaru members. Nur (2016) states,

In one of our Shura meetings, someone asked Shekau how he felt about Muslims running away from their own land to the land of the infidels [i.e., internally displaced persons camps run by the Nigerian government or international organizations] for their own safety. Shekau said [such Muslims] are also infidels and should be killed like the infidels. These people are not infidels, they are Muslims running for their lives, and he insisted that they are infidels and should be killed. Shekau is ignorant of the fact that it is forbidden for a Muslim to be killed after being chased out of Islamic State to a strange land and [when the Muslim] has not taken part in any conspiracy against Muslims. [Shekau] is ignorant and needs to be taught the rudiments of Islam.

Al-Barnawi believed these actions attacks would cause West Africa Province to lose the support of the population.

Nur (2016) also cited instances where Shekau ordered the amputation of the hand of someone who sold a sheep that he was supposed to keep, and the stoning to death of a fighter

¹⁷ The audio was later made public on the website Sahara Reporters. Such "Boko Haram insiders" included Ahmed Salkida, a Nigerian journalist who knew Mohammed Yusuf. <http://saharareporters.com/2016/08/05/new-boko-haram-leader-al-barnawi-accuses-abubakar-shekau-killing-fellow-muslims-living>

who “married” female captives of other fighters. Shekau considered this to be adultery, but Nur said the case was ambiguous in terms of Islamic law and thus did not require capital punishment.¹⁸ Shekau considers such people to not be Muslim because they are guilty of collaborating with an un-Islamic government.¹⁹ The distinction is that Nur uses the “theological tool” of *irja’* to defer judgment about who is or is not a Muslim and argues that the Qur’an prohibits declaring *kafir* and saying to “whoever says he is a Muslim, you are not a Muslim.” (Lahoud 2010: 214)

One day after Nur’s audio was leaked, on August 2, 2016, Islamic State released the 41st edition of its Arabic-language newsletter, *al-Naba*, which featured an interview with Abu Musab al-Barnawi.²⁰ In al-Barnawi’s interview on August 3, he explained that West Africa Province “prohibited targeting ordinary people who adhere to Islam and disavowed these acts [of Shekau]... He who does not show any of Islam’s *nawaaqid* (*nullifications*), we will not call *takfir* and brand him or shed his blood” (Wiktorowicz 2005: 81). Al-Barnawi added, “we have fought [Shekau’s] chauvinism (*al-ghalaw*).... We do not target mosques of ordinary people who adhere to Islam.”

Al-Barnawi (2016) was, however, also clear about who West Africa Province would target. He said his fighters would “booby-trap and blow up every church that we are able to

¹⁸ In August 2015, an attack on an IDP camp in Borno State led several members of West Africa Province under the command of Mahamat Daud to protest Shekau’s targeting of civilians. Daud, who was previously responsible for facilitating the training of JAS fighters in Mali with AQIM and Movement for Unity and Jihad West Africa (MUJWA). Images of the burned out village can be seen at: <http://en.alalam.ir/news/1785020>

¹⁹ Al-Qaeda ideologue Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi argues that whoever obeys Muslim rulers who rule with secular laws worships them as “lords (*arbaban*)” apart from Allah, which he equates with polytheism and unbelief. He justifies this assertion by citing Quran 9:31, which states that Jews and Christians “have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God [...]”. Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has concluded that whoever follows such a ruler has taken such rulers as lords besides Allah. In this context, Muslims who choose to participate in political institutions with secular laws are accused of not disbelieving in *taghut* and therefore are lacking in *tawhid*. In order to counter the argument that these al-Qaeda ideologues *ghulat al-mukaffira* [extremists who rush to declare fellow Muslims to be infidels], al-Maqdisi has said that *takfir* should only be called Muslims working in government, such as policemen, soldiers, judges and ambassadors, because they protect the regimes ruling with secular laws but necessarily “ordinary” Muslims who participate in such institutions. Al-Barnawi would seem to fall in line with al-Qaeda on this point, while Shekau would call *takfir* on such “ordinary” Muslims and take a view similar to Islamic State. Abdulbasit Kassim, “Defining and Understanding the Religious Philosophy of jihādī- Salafism and the Ideology of Boko Haram,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, September 2015.

²⁰ <http://jihadology.net/2016/08/02/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-41/>

reach, and kill all of those who we find from the citizens of the cross,” including “Crusader relief organizations” that exploit the “displaced in the raging war, and provide them with food and shelter and then Christianize them.

Less than 24 hours after Islamic State released the interview with al-Barnawi on August 3, Shekau released his own audio on Youtube (Shekau 2016). Shekau declared himself to be “imam”, or leader, of JAS, which was his precise position and group affiliation before he was designated *wali* of West Africa Province in March 2015. Shekau, however, still referred to al-Baghdadi as the “caliph of Muslims”, and therefore did not renounce his *baya* to al-Baghdadi.

The purpose of Shekau’s audio was likely two-fold. First, the Youtube platform allowed him to circumvent al-Barnawi’s blocking his behind-the-scenes lines of communication to al-Baghdadi. Second, it allowed Shekau to respond publicly about Islamic State’s appointment of al-Barnawi as *wali* and explain that based upon the principle of *al-Wala wal-Bara* al-Barnawi is wrong to believe that Muslims who live in “lands of disbelief” and “do not show animosity to the infidels” are not *kafir* themselves. Shekau, in contrast to al-Barnawi, believes such Muslims may be killed directly or as collateral damage and that al-Barnawi’s ignorance of the Quran and Sunnah on this principle means that al-Barnawi is using only his or personal opinion.

The fifth schism showed that despite an effort of the factions to unite over their mutual recognition of Abubakr al-Baghdadi as a legitimate caliph, the issue of *takfirism* once again became paramount. For Abu Musab al-Barnawi and Mamman Nur, Shekau’s excessive *takfir* was untenable from a theological, operational and alliance perspective. Theologically, Shekau considered too wide a group of Muslims to be *kafir*; operationally, Shekau killed ordinary Muslims and ignored their needs which meant those were supposed to live in the West Africa Province “Islamic State” were alienated; and he caused internal *fitna* by killing off commanders and disregarding al-Baghdadi’s orders, especially on the issue of slavery.

Conclusion

The discussion of factional splits within the Boko Haram movement over the issue of *takfir* has important implications for ongoing prison-based de-radicalization programs in Nigeria (Barkindo and Bryans 2016) and neighboring countries and for the planned Operation Safe Corridor program (Africa News 2016), which is intended to be based in a non-prison facility in northeastern Nigeria's Gombe State for "repentant" militants. First, it will be important to understand to which faction militants in de-radicalization programs belong, since this will likely affect the approach of the theological/ideological aspects of de-radicalization, especially for leaders who were privy to the arguments of Khalid al-Barnawi and his shura and later Abu Musab al-Barnawi and Mamman Nur against Shekau. Second, it will be important not to consider the West Africa Province "more moderate" simply because it has a narrower view of *takfir* relative to the JAS faction of Shekau. West Africa Province still has highly problematic understandings of *takfir* as well as *caliphacy* that need to be address in a de-radicalization program. And, third, it is important to review not only the origins and factors which gave rise to contemporary *takfirism* in the first place in Nigeria using the early views of Muhammed Ali and Mohammed Yusuf as starting points and subsequent views of Shekau and his reference points but also going back further in Nigerian history to see how these views entered Nigeria, gained acceptance, and then launched under the various factions of "Boko Haram". In this regard, it would be important for Nigerian Islamic scholars who were in the same religious milieu as Ali, Yusuf and Shekau in the early- and mid-2000s to objectively reflect on what additional measures could have been taken to stem the tide of growing *takfirism* and what mistakes were made at that time.

On the operational side, the issue of factionalization presents a conundrum for counter-terrorism forces in Nigeria. While Shekau's actions make him a target for killing, the fact that his excessive violence and *takfirism* alienates the populations where he operates (even if allowing him to "control" through fear) reduces support for the insurgents. Meanwhile Abu Musab al-Barnawi's more restrained approach to dealing with the populations allows his

fighters to co-exist with the population. This means that if Shekau were killed it could lead some supporters of Shekau to defect to al-Barnawi's faction, thus strengthening the latter. According to the literature, the lack of a "clear succession process" in an organization like Shekau's where his underlings are routinely purged and are not allowed to show their faces publicly as well as a lack of "communal support" in his faction means that Shekau's faction may lack the resources to "function and survive" should Shekau be killed (Jordan 2014). In this respect, the Nigerian military (or its international partners) may be advised to eschew any targeted assassination of Shekau while even devoting greater resources to countering al-Barnawi's faction, which in the long-run may be the greater threat to state sovereignty to expanding the insurgency.

On the counter-radicalization side, public expressions against *takfirism* are already commonplace among northern Nigeria's Islamic leadership as well as in other African countries (Harnischfeger 2014). Yet, what could additionally be constructive in condemning *takfirism* is both greater public intra-faith demonstrations of acceptance of other Muslim sects, particularly between Salafis, Sufis and Shias. Such would be especially important from a Salafi perspective because a strong argument can be made that the modern iterations of *takfir* emerged along with the rise of Salafism in the country after nearly two centuries of dormancy. In the early 1800s, the doctrine of *takfir* had, in contrast, been espoused by the Sufi orders, including Usman dan Fodio himself, but was "appropriated" by the Salafi-Jihadis (Kassim and Zenn 2017). Developing strong counter-narratives to the ones put forward by groups such as Boko Haram, and which are appropriately contextualized, is needed. The importance of constructing effective counter-narratives is discussed by Bradock and Horgan (2015:386), who argue that it is important to deliver a counter-narrative in such a way that audience members believe it to be constructed by a credible entity. A counter-narrative's 'effectiveness is determined not only by the content that comprises it, but also by how (and by whom) it is disseminated'. As such any counter-radicalization efforts will also demand credible partners from the Islamic milieu in Nigeria who are prepared to refute violent concepts from a theological standpoint.

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