Degree Project

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Historical Research on Boko Haram: a Debate.

The Cases of Ansaru and the Chibok Kidnapping.

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Abstract:

The thesis focuses on the phenomenon of Boko Haram in Nigeria, attempting to give an understanding of the group based on the academical analysis that has been elaborated through time. A contextualisation of the movement’s evolution introduces two cases of study, currently under scholars’ scrutiny: the birth of the splinter-cell Ansaru and the Chibok kidnapping.

The work is integrated by on-going debates among scholars and the most recently published contributions to the research.

Keywords:

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1. Introduction

Nigeria is both Africa’s most populated country and one of the most heterogeneous from the ethничal point of view. The main groups of the Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are not the only realities, since several other languages, communities and traditions can be found. In this constellation of particularisms, Islam and Christianity represented an important factor of unification, but ended up causing increasing inter-religious clashes in the last decades of the 20th century. From 1966, a few years after independence in 1960, the federal state was implemented, bringing to a gradual dissolution of the Muslims’ political unity in the North and fostering the development of a more religiously neutral state. This steadily brought to a development of the Southern areas of the country, thanks to the revenues coming from natural resources exports, with a gradual abandonment of the Islam-majority Northern regions. Consequently, a variety of religious movements enriched the area, trying to answer the needs of the growingly discontented population. Many started to consider this contingency a surrender to Westernisation, calling for the need of a new tajdid (renewal) of Islam in the country.\footnote{R. Loimeier, 
Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria, Northwestern University press, 1997. Pp. 6-9.} Eventually, the movement of Boko Haram have emerged, getting inspiration from previous movements’ experiences, in an ultimate attempt to reform the country.

The group has experienced fluctuating luck through time, both with its followers and the government, mutating its ideology and aims in an increasing extremist fashion. Under the guide of its leaders, the organisation has matured a Jihadist consciousness, aiming at overthrowing the government and establishing an Islamic State. This has been achieved through international ties with other Jihadist organisations and with peculiar terrorist tactics, with escalations of violence that went from targeting Western and Christian interests, to more generalised attacks, often also directed to innocent Muslim commoners. The present research will introduce the history of Boko Haram and proceed on considering two cases of study of extreme interest: the birth of the splinter-cell Ansaru and the Chibok Kidnapping.

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The research delineated the existence of a double layer of understanding of the events concerning Boko Haram. The movement, while having received an intense coverage and interest on both the national and international levels, is still surrounded by a shroud of mystery. In this context, the academical debate has proven fundamental in shaping our knowledge about the group. The aim of this thesis is to use two cases of study to get two glances on how the research about Boko Haram has been developing, presenting how the most recent academical contributions have improved the pre-
existing understanding. While the analysis of the sources reveals a growing interest for the issues related to the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, on the Chibok Kidnapping, the debate has seemingly crystallized. The two events have surely represented unique moments for both the group and the Nigerian government, in their confrontation, but we should focus more on using them to elaborate a comprehensive analysis of Boko Haram’s strategy. Some consider the group on its descending curve of power and strength, which might be true, but this has in some cases brought to consider the terrorists as without alternatives or even as acting in a confused way. What emerges from the present study is instead that many ties are present between the group and other internationally active Jihadist actors, thus raising the need for deeper and careful considerations. One purpose is to demonstrate that the analysis of such connections brings new insights to the research, giving the chance to formulate hypotheses about other moments or events of the history of Boko Haram, that were apparently inexplicable. Thus, the research questions that have guided the work are the following:

- What is the scholarly opinion on the birth of Ansaru and the ties that the Nigerian Jihadists possess with other international Jihadist organisations?
- To what extent is possible to reconstruct the Chibok kidnapping? Do scholars perceive a connection between this major event and the split up of the leadership of Boko Haram?

It is desirable to inscribe the formation of Ansaru, as well as the Chibok kidnapping, into the broader picture of the agency and tactics of the movement, freeing them from a localised and limited analysis of the events. The result can give further information on the internal dynamics and display unexpected operational insights. Such aim will be followed by investigating and presenting the findings that have by far been made on the movement by scholars researching the Boko Haram phenomenon. The upcoming paragraph displays how, also giving an overview of the state of the existing research.

1.2 Methodology

The thesis has been structured in three main chapters, following the present introduction. One has the aim of presenting an historical overview of the movement, opening the space for the analysis of the cases of study. The reality of Muslim movements of northern Nigeria is given to contextualise the early years of the movement, which have been followed by growing radicalisation. A deductive path is developed from its birth, going towards the radicalisation of the movement and ending up with the birth of Ansaru and the Chibok kidnapping, two in-depth investigations presented respectively in the second and third chapters. Concluding remarks will summarise the findings of each chapter, while a Conclusion will consider the overall outcomes of the thesis. The methodology used to carry on the research, consists of content analysis of the sources employed in the present work. These have been selected using a qualitative method, choosing authors on the
basis of the consistency of their research on the phenomenon of Boko Haram and the reliability of the data they have utilised themselves to elaborate their work.

A few words should also be spent describing the choice to utilise case studies. To employ cases of study should be considered another example of qualitative research, a comprehensive description of an individual case and its analysis. It should be noted though, that case studies are here utilised considering them more than just a methodological choice, but rather a kind of qualitative research type, as presented by Starman. They examine the operation of causal mechanisms in individual cases in detail, looking at a large number of intervening variables within a single phenomenon.\textsuperscript{2} The preference for this kind of research lays in the fact that whereas quantitative research runs the risk of throwing together dissimilar cases to get a larger sample, case studies allow for conceptual refinements, with a higher validity level.\textsuperscript{3}

For what concerns the sources utilised in the work, instead of basing it on a quantitative analysis of a very specific kind of sources, data of various kinds has been utilised. The reason for this choice is that in recent years the research on Boko Haram has been improved critically, thanks to diverse contributions. Thus, early sources have been utilised considering their partiality, while others have been excluded from the research, having their contribution become negligible if not obsolete during time.

As previously noted, the on-going debate on Boko Haram has been displayed throughout the research, presenting now and then opposite accounts, as the Source of Materials paragraph will explain. This has been done with a comparative effort, with no presumption to expose fallacious accounts, but rather to present the reader with a comprehensive overview. Moreover, the upcoming paragraph, about the State of research, will briefly present what has defined the research on this topic and some of the works that have been published through time.

1.3 State of Research

Books, articles, newspaper articles and translations from videos and audiotapes constitute the basis for the present thesis. The academical production on the phenomenon of Boko Haram has been extremely wide and diverse, from many different fields of study. For my research I have then considered works of various kinds, as described in the previous paragraph, which get their basis from early publications on the matter, that should be briefly presented here.


Among them, should be reminded the article *The Popular Discourses of Salafi Radicalism and Salafi Counter-radicalism in Nigeria: A Case Study of Boko Haram*, by an anonymous writer, edited in 2012. This piece of work particularly has represented a great contribution to many later publications, given its early focus on religious discourse analysis of Boko Haram, through the study of sermons and debates from cassettes, CDs and DVDs. Another extremely important research has been elaborated by Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos. His book, *Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria*, 2015 is one of the first attempt to understand Boko Haram in a comprehensive and consistent way. He examined the early history of the sect and its transformation into a radical armed group. Not only that, he analyses the causes of the uprising against the Nigerian state and evaluates the consequences of the on-going conflict from a religious, social and political point of view, giving priority to authors conducting fieldwork in Nigeria. Some other books from my list. This approach has surely given a strong impulse to the studies on Boko Haram, and a great overall contribution to our understanding of its dynamics. *Boko Haram: Nigeria’s Islamist Insurgency* by Virginia Comolli, 2015, has also had a great impact on the research on Boko Haram. Based on a three-year-long field work and access to the opinions of major stakeholders, has given a critical and comprehensive view over the phenomenon. While I could not obtain access to such book, I have considered authors that have made use of it in their publications. It surely must be recognised that a complex analysis as the one given by Comolli, based on tracing the evolution of the phenomenon on the local, regional and international levels, is of great importance.

Lastly, it is important to say that, on the side of religious analysis, the work by Roman Loimeier, *Islamic reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria*, 1997, has described a framework on which most of the later publications on the matter have based themselves.

### 1.4 Sources and Materials

Every chapter has been based on certain fundamental sources, which have been implemented by other material. Some of them deserve to be pointed out, to express their role and stress their contribution to the present work.

The second chapter has been elaborated in two main sections, a first one aimed at contextualising the phenomenon of Boko Haram, a second one presenting a peculiar debate over the nature of the group. The first one has its basis in the comprehensive work by R. Loimeier, *Islamic reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria*, 1997, completed by his more recent *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-century Africa*, 2016, to define a glance on religious Nigerian history, in which Boko Haram must be inscribed. Another important analytical contribution on the side of religious analysis, is represented
by the article of J. O. Voll, “Boko Haram: Religion and Violence in the 21st century”, 2015. This specifically helps us in focusing the ideological interpretation that Boko Haram made of specific doctrinal aspects of Islam.

The second section of the chapter revolves instead around three very recent and interesting academical articles. First of all, M. Ibrahim with his “In Search of a Plausible Theory to Explain the Boko Haram Phenomenon: Analysis of Intellectual Discourses on Insurgency and Violent Extremism in Nigeria”, 2019, has been fundamental in shaping the various currents of thought now present in the dispute about the origins of the organisation. Two currents have been mainly described, because of the dire confrontation between the scholars respectively supporting them. One side is represented by J. Zenn in his “Demystifying al-Qaida’s Impact in Nigeria Cases from Boko Haram’s Founding”, 2017, the other, in complete opposition, is the presented by A. Higazi, B. Kendhammer, K. Mohammed, M. A. Pérouse de Montclos and A. Thurston: “A Response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa’ida”, 2018, exposing what they consider to be Zenn’s inaccuracies.

The contribution of A. Brigaglia to this debate has also been considered, siding him more to the side of Zenn. His works, “Some Advice and Guidelines’: The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as Narrated by AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb)”, 2017, with A. Iocchi and “Slicing off the Tumour: The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as narrated by the Islamic State”, 2018, present his opinion, while also contributing much to the understanding of the Boko Haram reality.

Moreover, such work from Brigaglia have also contributed to the third chapter, giving insights on internal sources of the Jihadist movements, completing research done by Zenn, who has been one of the first to elaborate on the matter of the formation of Ansaru. His articles “Cooperation or Competition: Boko Haram and Ansaru After the Mali Intervention”, 2013 and “Leadership Analysis of Boko haram and Ansaru in Nigeria”, 2014, identify key actors of both groups and base the research on the agency of the militants. Such contributions are corroborated by the work of P. Raffaello and S. Jesperson, “From Boko Haram to Ansaru. The Evolution of Nigerian Jihad”, 2015. This have proven especially useful for the analysis of the ideological interpretation of the newly formed cell, giving sense to its discontinuities with Boko Haram’s actions and thought.

As a fundamental foundation of both the second and third chapters, the book by A. Thurston, Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement, 2018, must as well be listed. Probably the most comprehensive overall analysis of the phenomenon of Boko Haram that we possess, such work considers an astounding amount of data, giving numerous insights on the history of the group.

For what concerns the fourth chapter, events have been reconstructed with many diverse contributions. The topic of kidnapping as a tactic of terror has been described thanks to J. J. F. Forest, “Global Trends in kidnapping by Terrorist Groups”, 2012 and B. F. Obamamoye, “Navigating the
Enigma of Negotiating with a Jihadist Terrorist Group”, 2018. The most noteworthy article on the event of Chibok is likely the one by B. Maiangwa and O. B. Amao, “Daughters, Brides, and Supporters of the Jihad: Revisiting the Gender-Based Atrocities of Boko Haram in Nigeria”, 2015, connecting gender studies theory, human rights and security studies and religious studies in a comprehensive elaboration. Other well-elaborated and complete accounts have been produced instead by UNICEF: “‘Bad Blood’, perception of children of conflict-related sexual violence and women and girls associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria” and “Beyond Chibok”, both dated 2016. An Overall Contribution to the thesis should be finally identified in the work by A. Kassim and M. Nwankpa, The Boko Haram Reader. From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State, 2018. This is a collection of dozens of translations from video and audio tapes, which has contributed and still has much to give to this research on many fields. Many sources have been utilised from this collection to enrich the understanding of Boko Haram, through the words of its members and affiliates.

1.4 Theoretical framework

It is now useful to the research to specify certain characters of the object of the present work: the Salafi Jihadist movement of Boko Haram, which approximately translates to “Western Education is Forbidden”. Is fundamental to note that Islam has always met many different currents of interpretation throughout history, based on the creation of religious concepts of symbols, in order to control the institutions and the public order of the state. This constructive tradition, have stimulated the religion and the communities of believers, though bringing forth, in some cases, extremization. The basic theological understanding of Islam has been and is contained in the Quran and the Sharia, the latter elaborated by law scholars, during the first centuries of the diffusion of Islam. From such origins, the religion has been subjected to elaborations of the cult, fostered by scholars, politicians and movements of belief. This is based on the concept of Tajdid: reform, or renewal. The meaning conveyed is the one of modification of existing Muslim societies, with respect to un-Islamic ways of life or government, in an effort of adaptation and coexistence. In the last century though, a new concept emerged from several Muslim groups, switching the focus to a need for purification rather than renewal.\textsuperscript{4} Islah (purification), was then adopted by groups that were aiming at the elimination of societal elements that had corrupted Islam. This shift represented the claim to go back to the traditional and pure ways of the Prophet, eventually withdrawing from society or changing the existing system altogether, rather than reforming it. Salafism, as such ideology is called, has then a relatively recent history and Boko Haram appeared to be perfectly in line with it. The group has though gone further than simply refusing heretical innovation, taking steps that would have alienated

it from the mainstream Nigerian Salafi arena. Its members started to denounce the *shirk*\(^5\) of democracy and of the foreign colonial school system and its heritage, as well as working within the *kufr* (un-Islamic) system, refusing to cooperate with state institutions and declaring *Jihad* against them.

While engaging the debate over Boko Haram, a few words should be devoted to its genesis. First, it must be noted that the name “Boko Haram” is not a product of the founders of the group. It was the *Yan’Izala* Salafi movement, because of a rivalry, to nickname the group in this way, trying to minimise their ideology.\(^6\) This has been adopted widely by both the media and the scholarly arena, as an easy way to identify the subject in articles and publications. The same will be done in the present thesis, but the reader should consider the complexity of the movement’s evolution, to not mistakenly consider “Boko Haram” a monolithic entity. As a group of militant believers, its composition has changed through time, together with its ideology, as the upcoming chapters will display. Furthermore, internal issues had brought at some point to the formation of a divided front, with diverse groups operating separately, being this the main reason for Brigaglia to argue that such a naming, Boko Haram, should be used wisely and consciously.\(^7\)

A theory presented by Voll on the development of Islamic militant groups deserves also to be presented, to give a clearer idea of Boko Haram’s evolution. The life of these groups is considered to be organised in four stages. The first consists in the gathering of a group of followers around a teacher, while the second is characterised by the organisation of the group, continuing to develop the teacher’s message. In this phase, if resistance from the local rulers or population is experienced, the group tends to withdraw from society. The third stage is then characterised by open conflict, with the potential declaration of jihad and legitimisation of religious violence, aimed at reforming and purifying the constitutive order. Finally, the fourth, varies between the formation of a new state (in case of military success) or the disappearance of the movement (in case of failure).\(^8\) Boko Haram has followed exactly these stages, while gaining inspiration from previous movements, whose experience and teaching has survived in the local memory.\(^9\)

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\(^5\) Meaning to practice idolatry or polytheism, by worshipping persons or entities besides Allah. In this case, Boko Haram started to identify in democracy a new “religion”, mistakenly worshipped by Muslims by living in the Nigerian state, thus falling into idolatry.


\(^7\) *Ivi*, pag. 216.


2. Boko Haram: History of the Movement

The present chapter aims at tackling the basic timeline of Boko Haram formation, from the framework of previous Salafi-oriented movements in Nigeria. The figure of Muhammad Yusuf will be analysed and inscribed in the panorama of Borno and Yobe state, with his connections with the so-called Kanamma commune. Lastly, the chapter will display an on-going debate on the origins of the movement, in which scholars are presently confronting each other.

2.1 Historical Contextualisation

Boko Haram has been identified as “an Islamic Revolution”, by Mallam Sanni Umaru, acting leader of the group in 2009, after the killing of Muhammad Yusuf, former founder of the movement.\(^\text{10}\) Such point though, has been reached only after several years of evolution. The group arose from roots that lie in the Islamic history of Northern Nigeria,\(^\text{11}\) reaching visibility by 2001. It must be recognised that religious violence in the form of militant Muslim movements of reform, had represented an important part of West African history,\(^\text{12}\) giving the founder, Muhammad Yusuf, an ideological basis for his thought. A fundamental element was his acknowledgement of the incapability of the Nigerian government of doing justice, during the 80s and 90s, when the state adopted a pattern of avoiding accountability applied to Muslim-Christian reciprocal conflicts.\(^\text{13}\) The lack of government’s reliability on security issues was though worsened by strong issues on education. Boko Haram emerged in an area of Nigeria, in fact, were mass government education registered one of its biggest failures. Yobe’s literacy was the lowest in the country and 70% of the population had never attended school, while the situation in Borno was not better by any means. Private schools were out of the reach of families because of fees, and Muslim families were in general very suspicious of Western-style schools and education.\(^\text{14}\)

The inability to face the consequent youths’ unemployment and religious and ethnical conflicts between different social groups, could not be resolved after Nigeria’s return to democratic government in 1999. The Fourth Republic was signed by heightened cases of growing insecurity, criminality and disorder. This is the frame from which Boko haram emerged, a somehow chaotic background, with a new government that failed at meeting the expectations of the people. A first


\(^{14}\) Ivi, pp. 74-75.
reaction was showed in the Northern states, where the situation brought many countries to the adoption of Shari’a, to prepare the road towards religious purification.\textsuperscript{15}

The trigger that then led to an increasing radicalisation of the youth was the frustration with inequality, brought by globalisation and democratisation, which were perceived as being legacies of Western colonial influences. In this scenario Shari’a proposed an alternative way to prosperity, trying to discard corruption and poverty.\textsuperscript{16}

We must also identify in the years from independence to 1999, a period in which Islam was shaken, other than by the growth of Christianity, also by doctrinal debates between Sufis and Salafists. The implementation of Shari’a law in 12 Northern states was also aimed at countering such internal contrasts, but while satisfying the mainstream Muslims, discontented the most extremists, like Yusuf’s followers. They ultimately chose to withdraw from society, establishing first their own mosque, then giving birth to a camp, close to Kanamma.\textsuperscript{17} The year 1999 might then be taken as a turning point, since the return to a civilian multi-party system granted louder expression to Yusuf’s message.\textsuperscript{18}

The next paragraph will tackle issues of earlier experiences of Islamic activism, to understand what influences brought to the Boko Haram phenomenon.

2.1.1 Salafi Experience: Inspiration and “Teaching”

We must inscribe Boko Haram into a wider frame of ideology, born in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and known as \textit{Salafism}. As we have introduced in our introduction, Muslim reformers in recent times have levelled critiques at Sufis affiliation\textsuperscript{19}, on an anti-esoteric level. Some of these Salafi movements usually share a hatred for saint veneration, superstition and un-Islamic innovations. Even more, by them is criticised the Sufi claim to \textit{Irshad} (guidance) by a teacher, regarding his hegemony on the interpretation of texts. Because of this, a distinctive trait of Salafi movements must be found in the literalist approach to the Quran. The Salafi reform aims at restoring a pure approach to religion and must then be regarded as aiming at \textit{islah}, or purification.\textsuperscript{20} What follows is the presentation of two examples of Nigerian Salafi movement, from which Yusuf has likely been influenced.


\textsuperscript{16} Ivi, pag. 10.


2.1.2 ‘Yan Izala
This movement started in the 70s with the acclamation of Abubakar Gumi as the mujaddid of the present era, being also the former Grand Kadi of Nigeria Northern region. He started to preach the need for a reformation of the Muslim educational system, to re-politicise Islam in the country, founding the ‘Yan Izala’ organization in 1978. Aiming at the purification of the religion, a fundamental step to be taken for its members was the eradication of all the bid’ a (heresy), caused by the westernization of society. As an eminent scholar, he opposed Sufism by stating publicly that ‘the individual Muslim never stands in need of anyone else’s intercession between him and God’. He started to collect approval among many Muslims and to trigger debate on deviation of Sufi orders. He not only created a Salafi-oriented reform that fought against every un-Islamic innovation, but also advocated for reforms. The growing corruption along with the miserable conditions of the population and the incapacity of the other contemporary Muslim movements to be decisive, inspired a few believers on the need of a new Jihad of the sword. Some suggest that Yusuf could have become a part of this movement, to exploit the Izala infrastructure and pre-existing pool of followers, to enrich his group via recruitment. However, the topic is debated and there is no real agreement on this. For sure the Yan’Izala have represented a source of inspiration for him and his followers.

2.1.3 Maitatsine
The everlasting contrasts between Christianity and Islam in Nigeria brought tensions to a different level after the Islamic Revolution in Iran from 1979. Fearing a similar outcome in Northern Nigeria, the Christian communities started turmoils against the possibility of the introduction of Sharia laws in the country. The harsh situation created the requirements for the outburst of the fundamentalist group of the Maitatsine: guided by Muhammadu Marwa, moving a harsh critique towards the Nigerian state.

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21 Great magistrate of a Shari’a court. The term has been used from the Muhammad period, meaning to “judge”, “decide”.
22 Jama’at Izalat al-Bid’a wa-Iqamat as-Sunna: The Association for the Eradication of the Innovation and the Establishment of the Sunna.
24 Ivi, pag. 154.
The founder mobilised young poor and rebelled against state representatives in the north, willing to purify Nigerian Islam from western influences through armed violence, leading to clashes that caused over 4000 casualties. As a fundamentalist movement it expressed opposition to religious and cultural liberalism, in defence of orthodoxy and religious traditions. As Adesoji suggests, this was the first event that exemplified the possible ferocious conflicts induced by religion and influenced by extraneous elements, like economy and its shortcomings. Such religiously justified violence created an environment for the emergence of Boko Haram, as an incubation cell of further extremist and terrorist action.

2.2 The Ultimate Reform: Boko Haram

From these experiences, in the mid-90s in Borno, a group of young Muslim activists started to gather, concerned about the political situation and the need for change. This must be recognised as a radical Salafist and Jihadist entity, but to solely focus on the terrorist nature of their actions could be misleading. Their ideology is thick and firmly defined by the need for a change in the Muslim educational system, expressed in the same name Boko Haram, “Western education is forbidden”. Such aim can only be obtained by reaching three interconnected objectives, according to the group’s ideology.

First of all, every trace of un-Islamic elements in the society must be cancelled, so western innovations and education figure as two of the main targets of the movement. To establish the Sharia law in the entire country is then the second objective and to this is connected the third one: the overthrowing of the Nigerian government, un-Islamic, corrupted, arbitrary and influenced by western elements.

From the Salafi understanding that a genuine commitment to Islam was missing, in order to change to country, Yusuf moved forward arguing that the same founders of Borno’s ruling dynasty had to be blamed for this contingency. He went on through time extremising his thought, eventually starting in 2003 to preach “for monotheism and jihad, and for a complete disavowal of the followers of democracy”, inducing the core Salafi leadership of Nigeria to take a distance from him. This would

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be a first example of schism internal to the community of believers, in which different interpretations of religion created separate layers of activism.

The actions taken by the group are the perfect exemplification of this categorisation, depicting though an approach that changed through time. The first clashes of open conflict happened between 2003 and 2004 in Borno, against police stations. Five years were then taken as a period of preparation before a major riot in June 2009, when Boko Haram attacked the Nigerian security forces, resulting in more than 1000 casualties. Muhammad Yusuf himself was killed after being abducted by the police. The conflict from 2011 acquired a wider dimension with the change in leadership and the advent of Abubakar Shekau, aiming at churches, abductions of people and assassinations of politicians and Muslims that dared to criticise the movement in public. Considering such development in the group’s approach to ideology, the research will now briefly present the origins of the founder of the movement, to give an idea of Boko Haram’s roots.

2.2.1 Where does Muhammad Yusuf Come From?

Yusuf was born on January 29th, 1970 in Yobe State and the group he founded is believed to have arisen as far back as 1995, appearing under different names and groupings. He spent his childhood in one of the most rural and isolated states in the north and as a young man he came to Maiduguri, the biggest city of North-eastern Nigeria, arriving probably at the latest around mid-1990s, since by 2001 he had managed to rise to public prominence. An early influence on him should be found in the teachings of Salafi scholars, expressing in their anti-Sufi polemic that the aim of the enemies of Islam was to turn the children of Muslims away from learning their religion. This was quoted more than 30 years later by Yusuf, in his manifesto, showing adherence to such thought. Still a difference between the mainstream Nigerian Salafis and Yusuf would have emerged, becoming him way more extreme on this topic, turning the critique of Western-style education into a broader attack to Nigeria’s entire political system.

Probably because of the complicated reality represented by the Islamic arena in Northern Nigeria, it is unclear what trajectory Yusuf experienced exactly. It is recorded that he managed at some point to

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34 *Ivi*, pp. 196-197.
build his own preaching centre, a mosque complex, in which he started with his followers to build an imaginary “State within a State”, administering private justice and delivering social services, as Sani reports. This gave him the chance to gather an increasing number of followers around him, growing to prominence in the Northeast of Nigeria. Thurston asserts that among these members several hardliners were also present, bringing forth internal frictions in the early years of the movement. They were in fact willing to direct the movement straight into Jihad, but Yusuf at that time, was not convinced yet of such an evolution. Such aforesaid contrast likely led to a rift in the group, when these members planned to leave Maiduguri, in 2003. They ended up establishing a commune close to the city of Kanamma, in rural Yobe, soon coming to clashes with the locals that brought to the intervention of security forces, that removed the camp between 2003 and 2004.

Research suggests that individuals in Kanamma were a heterogenous group, engaging in diverse activities, being it hence simplistic to depict it as a one-dimensional jihadist camp. They were known for touring villages and preaching Islam, before starting to attack police posts. On new-year’s eve 2003 they attacked the city, destroying government buildings and killing a police officer, being this the main reason, together with early-2004 clashes, that led to their elimination by the police. Former leader of the commune, Muhammad Ali, is today considered as the one who acted as a liaison between Bin Laden and Nigeria in late 90s and early 2000s, creating the chance for later connections between Boko Haram and other international Jihadist organisations. From another source, is explained how this “is a link whose threads were woven starting from the year 1994 onwards”, giving a proof that the group was already starting to move its first steps into managing its international Jihadi connections early on. For this reason, Brigaglia suggests that regarding the Kanamma camp as a mainly pacific commune, as some have done, should be strongly reconsidered.

At the end of this experience, it was Yusuf’s initiative to reintegrate in his group those who defected and survived the clashes.

2.2.2 Radicalisation: Towards the 2009 Military Uprising

Our understanding of the years between 2005 and 2009 is still surrounded by mystery. It is confirmed though that by the end of 2008 the consciousness of Boko Haram on Nigeria had reached his peak, demonstrating how the ideology of the movement had switched towards a Jihadist approach.

Violence was not alien to the group before this time, considering the 2004 Kanamma clashes. A switch in Yusuf’s preaching is easily recognisable, probably coming from the need to reintegrate into the group those hardliners that had previously followed Ali. From 2006-2008 and 2008-2009, the focus of his preaching started to strongly point towards a deep change. He in this phase tried to demonstrate how Nigerian history is closely associated with Jihad, stressing the fact that the only reason for the government to be able to dominate the Muslims, is the fact that they had abandoned Jihad altogether.47 Because of this, we should avoid considering the 2009 uprising as a product of contingency and chance: Boko Haram’s thought had developed in this time-span and two sources close to the event help us to understand what point had been reached after several years of evolution.

Spring 2009 was already characterised by dire declarations from the movement, probably rising worrying considerations among Nigerian government operatives. Abubakar Shekau, long time member of the organisation and second in command, was using by that time extreme words, before taking the lead of the organisation after the death of former leader Muhammad Yusuf.

Today the only disease known worldwide is democracy and the constitution. The only known contemporary medicine for this disease, now and forever, is Islam. (...) If we as Muslims possess tawhid48 in our hearts, we have the obligation to guard it, protect it and revolt against those who want to insult, abuse, destroy or misuse the tawhid of Allah. (...) consequently, mushrikin49 are subject to bombs. Munafikun50 are subject to bomb blasts and must be eliminated. Unbelievers must be bombed, as they have no option but to accept Islam and follow the principles of Tawhid.51

This was giving a clear statement of what the considerations of the group have become, regarding unbelievers, with a sincere display of opposition and violence at any cost.

For what concerns the reasons for the precipitation of violence of July 2009 instead, an event is identified as a trigger, as explained by Muhammad Yusuf in his June 12th Open Letter to the Nigerian Government. He explains how members of the group have been attacked by police forces with no

48 Believing in Monotheism, “Unification or Oneness of God”.
49 A person that practices Shirk, an idolater. It also refers to those believing in polytheism, hence opposed to those who possess Tawhid.
50 A group of outward Muslims concealing their disbelief in order to harm the community of believers.
clear reason, on their way to perform burial rites. He declared how “such injustice was meant to suppress our brothers and our preaching and to humiliate the people of this town”, proceeding then to inflame the hearts of his followers with zealous words, threatening the government and clearly referring to the possibility of Jihad: “even if you (military forces) attack us with all your military strength and planes, those who will survive will continue, and not hesitate to wage jihad”.

Moreover, in the same speech, he stresses the need for obedience from his followers, stating that

> whatever you are instructed to do, even if you will die, go ahead and do it. (…) Don’t you see how they put bombs on people, instructing them to leave, so they will go and explode (in suicide attacks)? and yet they are happy. You should be like that”.

By describing the necessary obedience of the believer, Yusuf prepares them for military confrontation, and quite possibly, self-sacrifice for the cause. It was one month later that such confrontation happened, and during the period 26th-29th July 2009 approximately 1000 Nigerians, mostly members of Boko Haram, were killed in Maiduguri, as well as other cities, and their building complex at the Ibn Taymiyya Center was destroyed. Muhammad Yusuf himself was taken captive, and later killed in police custody after interrogation.

While such events have been reconstructed and confirmed by research through time, scholars are still confronting on some key issues of the history of Boko Haram. Below is presented a recent debate that has emerged from 2017 afterwards, which will give us an idea of the complexity of historiographical analysis of Boko Haram, together with some of the most recent insights and contributions to the research. Furthermore, for what concerns the history of the movement following 2009, the reader should look forward for the upcoming chapter.

### 2.3 Origins of the Movement: A Debate

Historical research on the group has been able to delineate many interpretative keys to understand its dynamics and connections with local and international actors through time. However, debate is still ongoing for what concerns the interpretation of the origins of the organisation, with many recent contributions. In particular, the disputed matter is whether structural and local factors or external influences and individual agency best explain the movement and its history. With the help of Ibrahim

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53 Ivi, pag. 195.
54 Ivi, pp. 196-197.
is possible to identify four groupings of thought among scholars, as emerged clearly during the “Insurgency and Boko Haram Phenomenon in Nigeria” Kano conference, on November 13th-15th 2018. The scholars are divided as follows:

1 – Brigaglia, Loimeier and Kassim: considering Boko Haram as a by-product of both global and localised Salafism. For Brigaglia, the war on terror particularly had a huge impact on the Nigerian Salafi arena, bringing to a black and white situation in which no alternative was given to Salafis other than siding or not with Al-Qaida after 9/11.56

2 - Thurston: attempting to alienate Boko Haram from the global jihadi movement, treating it as a local entity informed by local intrigues. He states that none of the sources link Yusuf to international organisations undisputedly, since some of the arguments in favour of a connection with Al-Qaeda concern mainly the figure of Muhammad Ali al-Barnawi, about whom not much is known. For him there are many conflicting accounts about the Yusuf-Ali relationship.57

3 – Salisu Shehu: tries to deconstruct the theories linking Boko haram to the Salafi movement in Nigeria. Some contemporary narratives do not capture some crucial segments in the history of extremism and radicalism in Nigeria. Citing the work of Loimeier, Brigaglia, Kyari and Kassim, he found that they do not consider the role of Iran after 1979 Islamic revolution. It is fundamental to understand radicalisation in this frame in Nigeria.58 This is an extremely interesting account that could be interesting for future research.

4 – Muhammad Kyari: looking at the history of Boko Haram as the product of an ideology started in early Islamic history, but still ongoing and transforming. It looks to the jihad of Usman dan Fodio but also other attempts earlier or later than that.59

Ibrahim also suggests that all the players in spreading violent extremism in Nigeria are the product of the same religious system that has been existing in Nigeria for centuries. Every sect, or movement, individuals or groups, have appropriated the jihad of dan Fodio in a way that benefits their agenda. This long process has gradually transformed the idea of religious insurgency against the state gradually.60

It should also be noted how another authoritative voice in the confrontation for the definition of the original nature of the movement of Boko Haram should be identified in Jacob Zenn. His effort to the research has been present through the years, even though some scholars have questioned his

57 Ivi, pag. 26.
58 Ivi, pp. 28-29.
59 Ivi, pag. 31.
60 Ivi, pag. 33.
contributions. The debate has reached a heated confrontation between him and other scholars who tend to see only a marginal role of Al-Qaeda and other actors in the origins of Boko Haram and see it as a product of multi-dimensional factors such as religious doctrines, poverty, inequality, geography, post-1999 politics and so on. Zenn’s view, partially supported by Brigaglia, finds Boko Haram to be the product of individuals that wanted to engage in Jihad in Nigeria and were supported in this by Al-Qaeda, AQIM and Al-Shabab for funding, training and advice. The main accusation that is moved to the supporters of this view, is of being instrumental to the harsher forms of American anti-terror engagement in Muslim majority countries.

Brigaglia has responded to such accusations explaining how they do not position themselves as privileged interlocutors of the American government, neither they aim at influencing its foreign policy. Conversely, they are convinced that the minimising attitude of those scholars doesn’t serve the interest of an oppressed community but exonerates them from their responsibilities. This in regard to address the jihadist tumour that their elites have contributed to create, without properly opposing it. As sources have proved, it seems fair to state that an embryonic base of the global Jihadi movement existed in Nigeria well before the 2009 crackdown on Boko Haram, and this should be taken seriously, to understand the successive history of global and local manifestations of Jihadism in Nigeria.

This does not mean, however, that the Boko Haram phenomenon should be the linear outcome of the penetration of al-Qaeda’s experience in the Nigerian landscape. In fact, Brigaglia points out, Al-Qaeda in Nigeria met a multiplicity of local forces that collectively shaped the development of the phenomenon that has become known in the world as “Boko Haram”. Some of these “forces” are expressed by Zenn, focusing on three key stages for the understanding of the international ties of Boko Haram: the birth of the movement, the death of Yusuf in 2009 and the start of suicide bombings around 2011-2012. As he explained, some assert that to adopt an Al-Qaida style of operation was a move intended to act as propaganda, but no real ties between the two organisations were present. What Zenn declares though, is that only after the declaration of jihad by Shekau in 2010 the scholarly audience started to portray the earlier nature of the movement as inherently peaceful, by comparison, thus falling into a misinterpretation.

Early cases of connection between Boko Haram and AQIM are shown by him, tracing as back as early 2003, also displaying many connections between Boko Haram affiliates and other groups through time. Furthermore, he suggests that being these key events sudden in their development, an explanation for their verification might exactly lay in the influence exercised by external factors. To stress the role of structural elements would, for Zenn, inhibit a clear understanding of these peculiar phases of the movement, in which individual decisions and connections with other groups can explain drastic change.

The article published by Zenn, was followed by a reply from several other scholars, criticising his approach and sources, also containing personal allegations to his credibility as a researcher. What is particularly denounced by them, is Zenn’s denial of Boko Haram as the product of multi-dimensional factors, implying that only militants have real agency. Furthermore, he is accused of unreliability and it is said by his detractors that he does not cite or use articles that argue against his view. Especially for what concerns the 2009 uprisings, they stress that it was a series of incidents to bring to the inflammation of the confrontation between Boko Haram and the government, denying that it happened suddenly and because of individual decisions. This was again followed by an article by Zenn, on the same journal, giving explanation for his view and clarifying the sources he has utilised to reach his conclusion.

Presenting this debate has given an idea of how the topic is still on-going in his interpretation and how complex the analysis of key events of the history of the movement is, being it still extremely actual. No agreement has yet been reached on such issues and future months and years are likely to show a development on such topics.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

The analysis has presented the earlier history of the Boko Haram phenomenon, giving hints on his evolution from previous experiences of movements of Islamic reform in Nigerian history. While a common understanding has been reached on a basic timeline and ideological framework, academical debate is still present on some key phases of the movement and their same nature. The upcoming

66 Ivi, pag. 184.
68 Ivi, pag. 206.
chapters will present case-studies of research, approaching further moments in the group’s evolution, particularly following the year 2009.

3. A Change in Leadership: The Birth of a Splinter-Cell

This chapter will proceed to tackle two major events in Boko Haram’s history, concerning internal leadership issues of the organisation. What is necessary to specify is that the group does not emerge as a united entity from this study, but rather a fluid reality articulated in various cells and sub-groups, with not one only clear leader. Two phenomena are then fundamental in understanding the structure of the organisation, while also presenting peculiar cases of study of the Boko haram history, revolving around the leadership theme: the emergence of Abubakar Shekau as a leader of Boko Haram after the death of Muhammad Yusuf in 2009; the detachment of an independent organization from Boko Haram: Ansar al-Mulsimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (The Vanguards of the Muslims in the Lands of the Blacks), also known as Ansaru, after 2011.

The chapter will be developed in order to present such instances and to give knowledge of the complex debate surrounding the discourse of leadership built around the figure of Shekau. An overview will be given to explain how these two phases are connected and what the consequences have been, especially bringing to matters of co-operational articulations among members of Boko Haram. The research presents several suggestions for speculation, while also giving new insights from the recent academical research, useful to further develop our understanding of the movement. A first glance over the organisation will present the advent to leadership of Abubakar Shekau and his decision-making as the new leader of the group. New sources help us to precisely define his operational scope and better trace the line of events that characterised the years following 2009. Progressing with the analysis, it will be elaborated how Shekau could go from reuniting the organisation to alienate part of its members. Some of the first hypotheses on the leadership issues will be presented, then proceeding to implement them with more recent sources and material.

3.1 The New Guide: Abubakar Shekau

It is fundamental to state how the change in leadership represents a serious discontinuity in the history of the movement. After the poorly organised uprising of July 2009 and the extrajudicial killing of Muhammad Yusuf and hundreds of his followers, the group resurged afterwards with mutated ideology. As Thurston states, the doctrine was changed into a “wartime ideology”, with deep continuity with Yusuf’s thought, but also with abandonment of public politics, substituted by his
successor Abubakar Shekau with exclusivism and propaganda.\textsuperscript{70} The leadership structure, after the re-emergence in 2010, after many months of reorganisation, presents Abubakar Shekau as taking on the guise of the group, appearing in various videos as the spokesman of Boko Haram.\textsuperscript{71} The new leader had previously followed Yusuf in his preaching, being able himself to elaborate a simple, passionate and motivating preaching style, being also known for his virtues of piety and asceticism. It was him to give the organization its first name: Jama’at Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da’wa wa-l-Jihad,\textsuperscript{72} reorganising the group and recovering Yusuf’s followers after the clashes with the Nigerian government.\textsuperscript{73}

A significant change with Shekau was to reach an uncompromising stance when coming to interpret the Qur’an and the Hadith, revealing him to be more extreme compared to Yusuf. The sect started to direct attacks to enemies and sites of immorality, going from assassinations to large-scale attacks, towards, but not only, Christians and politicians.\textsuperscript{74} With such actions they started to strike those who had either opposed or criticised their group, showing terrorist attitudes to enflame Muslim-Christian tensions. This came to a peak of widened violence against civilians, especially closer to 2012, since from the spring of 2011 attacks had started to be more and more indiscriminate.\textsuperscript{75} Such actions are probably to be blamed as the reason that started to create interior dissent within Shekau’s leadership, eventually bringing to the birth of a splinter cell.\textsuperscript{76}

Symptoms of growing extremism can be later found in other declarations given by the leader, as in 2013. It was asserted after an attack, that they would have eaten their enemies if they could, but they would have instead continued with mutilation and decapitation, since “Allah forbids cannibalism”.\textsuperscript{77} This shows how, as we will see, even after a growth of dissent around 2011-2012, Shekau’s modus operandi didn’t show signs of change.

Boko Haram’s leadership seems to have become at some point less cohesive and more complex. Divisions and disagreements have hindered unity through time, and it seems that increased influence could be held on the group by members trained or connected with other organisations. There are hints

\textsuperscript{72} Community of the people of the Sunna for Preaching and Jihad.
about competition for power and internal struggles that demonstrate a complex scenario to consider, as we will present in the upcoming paragraph.78

3.2 Establishment of Connections with AQIM

One explanation of how Boko Haram could resurge with such an explosive military power, lays in its connection with the Mali-based Al’Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Sources show how less than a month after the succession of Shekau, it was possible for him to send a delegation of three representatives of the Nigerian Jihadi community, to meet AQIM members. They discussed with Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd, commander of AQIM in the Sahara, asking for the establishment of an organic link and military and economic assistance. The pace that it took them to establish such a connection brought Brigaglia to hypothesize that a link between the two groups was already present before the clashes.79 It is interesting to note, in fact, that it was the commander of AQIM to specify in a letter to his superiors that those men were well known to him. AQIM agreed in training the Nigerians in their ranks and supporting them financially, while discouraging them from prematurely declaring Jihad against the Nigerian state. They considered a previous consultation with the global leadership of the Jihadi community fundamental in taking such a decision. At the same time though, AQIM leader stated that if the Nigerians

want to start their Jihad, we cannot but bless their decision, while at the same time advising them to concentrate on specific operations in major urban centres, targeted at the leaders of crime, at western expatriates and at the organizations devoted to spreading Christianity amongst the Muslims; all of this while carefully avoiding to expose the Muslims and the weaker members of society to any risk.80

Here we have a prior example of how the major interest of the leaders of AQIM might have been to safeguard the community of believers. Maybe they were already suspicious of the potential toxic and unstable behaviour of Shekau. The hypothesis comes from the fact that they were the ones choosing the terms of the agreement, as a potential way to gain leverage back on Boko Haram in case it was needed.81

Many Boko Haram members then reached the ranks of AQIM for training and cooperated to orchestrate attacks. Two of them, in particular, appear to have been part of such links: Abu Mohammed and Khalid al-Barnawi. Both mysterious figures, they are considered to have created an

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80 Ivi, pp. 30-31.
81 Ibid.
alliance aimed at adopting kidnappings as a tactic of terror, with the cover of Boko Haram and its leader for such operations. Especially Al-Barnawi seems to have been a trainer for AQIM (and involved in the later creation of the Ansaru group).  

### 3.3 Formation of Ansaru, Interpretative Issues

The academical research has showed how in 2012 a group of Boko Haram militants stepped out of the path of the organisation, for a variety of reasons. Our intent is here to describe how such separation happened, to then introduce how newly researched sources implement our understanding of the internal dynamics of the sect.

The first unofficial recorded appearance of the splinter cell to the public, belongs to the month of January, 2012, with the distribution of flyers in the city of Kano. This happened around a week after an attack that Boko Haram held in the same city, to strike police facilities and government offices. The explosive attacks left more than 180 people dead, many of which were innocent civilians.  

This has surely been one of the reasons for the internal split, with a group of militants dissociating from the dire attack.

A more official proclamation of the birth of Ansaru has instead to be traced to the 9th of July 2012, when a video by the self-proclaimed leader presented the “Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan”.  

The proclaimed aims of the group are to preach the straight path to raise the consciousness of people while protecting the lives and properties of Muslims, and to give response to any unjust or terroristic action against them. The final aim being to bring back Islam to the glory and nobility that once was during the Caliphate (of Sokoto).  

Moreover, it is specified that:

> the formation of our organisation is due to the uncountable acts of violence done towards the Muslims of Nigeria by the Christians, since neither the government nor any other body did anything. When the government is not ready to protect us, because it is not an Islamic government, it is incumbent on us to find our own organisations to contrast terror.

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84 Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa.


While showing strong discontent towards the ruling institutions and the Christian community, as in line with the thought of Boko Haram, it doesn’t seem to appear a clear stance against the operations of the group guided by Shekau, within this video.

Nonetheless, the relation between Ansaru and Boko Haram have appeared more complex through time. We will now consider how Ansaru have been determining itself and how this has translated in its relationship with the core of the terroristic group.

The organisation has become, as we will see, the pre- eminent threat to foreign interests in Northern Nigeria after announcing its formation. The bulk of the difference lays on the fact that, if Boko Haram maintained its focus on toppling the Nigerian government, Ansaru instead developed a more regional interest. While showing elements of discontinuity in their operations though, they have also publicly supported each other, as explained by one of Ansaru leading members, Abu Ja’afar. He noted how Ansaru complemented Boko Haram in the ultimate aim to create an Islamic state and eliminate all enemies of Islam. This is found in a video released on 26th November 2012 by Ansaru, to declare their intent to form a Caliphate over Niger and Northern Nigeria and Cameroon, but as we will see this information should be taken cautiously. Considering such aim, it would be useful to not exclude the possibility of a later cooperation between the two groups, to reach similar and common interests. We will now proceed to shrink down the activity of Ansaru and analyse on the base of their attacks what are the key differences in ideology with Boko Haram, as understood in the early years of their formation, to clarify if a direct cooperation has been reached between the two.

3.4 Ansaru: Activity and Role

Ansaru appears to prefer the adoption of kidnappings as an operational tactic. Their attacks are usually surgical and display an overt emphasis on limiting casualties: the efficacy and sophistication of the group’s operations are similar to the one adopted by AQIM. This demonstrates how its constituents are well-trained, highly organised and possibly receiving patronage from regional movements.

Between November 26th, 2012 and February 17th, 2013, Ansaru claimed responsibility for four attacks, but there are hypotheses that they might have orchestrated more and cooperated with Boko Haram again for other attacks and ultimately for the Chibok Abduction on April 2014. Despite the

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90 Ibid.
separation of the groups, their actions could be complementary, as some early declarations specified.
The claimed attacks are as follows:

4. February 17th, 2013: Kidnapping of seven expatriate workers from a construction site.

3.4.1 Insights on Ansaru Attacks and Further Connections
First of all, it might be controversial to note that, after November 25th, Abubakar Shekau praised Ansaru’s attack in Abuja with a video, possibly showing how the intent of the groups was still to be considered importantly linked.

Furthermore, some of these attacks must be strictly linked with the nature of the formation of Ansaru, and their intent to act against Western interests to defend Islam. The attack carried out in February 2013 capturing 7 foreign expatriate workers, was meant to avenge the transgressions done by European nations in Mali and Afghanistan. The previous month instead, the killing of two Nigerian soldiers ready to be deployed in Mali had a similar aim. They would have joined the French-led military campaign against Islam that was carried out there, and this was the reason given by the group to justify the killing. One reason for their involvement was also said to be the apparent inability of the Nigerian government to defend Muslims in inter-religious violence with Christians. This was the reason why they were also fighting to recover the lost dignity of Muslims of black Africa.

While the group has claimed only a handful of attacks though, researchers have traced lines that could show the involvement of Ansaru in organising other terrorist activities.

A link has been found with a previous case of kidnapping, concerning the abduction of a Briton and an Italian engineers on May 12th, 2011 in Birnin Kebbi. Moreover, while distributing flyers in January 2012, also a kidnapping of a German engineer happened in Kano, the exact same city and

day. Both the attacks have been connected with AQIM, thus we understand from these events that important links could have been established between them and Ansaru.\textsuperscript{94} This is a first step taken in tracing down the relations between such groups, in an attempt to understand internal dynamics. Here the elements that suggest connection between the two groups, for the McManus and Lamolinara case, are well presented by Zenn. Apparently:

on March 7\textsuperscript{th}, 2012, Nigerian security forces broke into a Shura council meeting, led by Abu Muhammad, a man who defected from Boko Haram because of disagreements with Shekau and discovered that he was responsible for the kidnapping. This was then an operation led by a Boko Haram agent that had distanced himself from the group. In June 2012 instead a Boko Haram informant alleged that such a kidnapping was also coordinated with the help of Khalid al-Barnawi, the long-time member of AQIM.\textsuperscript{95}

For what concerns the case of the German engineer, it was AQIM to take credit for the kidnapping, but the group was not known to be active in Nigeria and for this reason Zenn suggests that this happened thanks to its connections consisting in the presence of Khalid al-Barnawi, and the group that was in that period detaching itself from Boko Haram, Ansaru.\textsuperscript{96} This potential connection is also corroborated by the use of tactics by Ansaru that have been previously unknown in Nigeria, especially the one of kidnapping.

Apart from the connection between Ansaru and AQIM, some have found evidence of tactical cooperation between Ansaru and Boko Haram and have hypothesized that these two have been reunited. A clear cooperation is traced back to November 2013, when the kidnapping of the priest Georges Vandenbeush was carried out by a joint Boko-Haram-Ansaru cell. Raffaello and Sasha suggest that such cooperation might have been supported despite their differences by Boko Haram’s desire to seek kidnappings for ransom, as a way to gather resources and given Ansaru’s silence after the previously listed attacks, but it is hard to say if they have been re-merging in a single operational group.\textsuperscript{97} It is in this context that the Chibok kidnapping might be interesting, because it had the operational flavour of Ansaru, while also being claimed by Abubakar Shekau. Here the reason for Campbell to suggest that since the splinter group had been inactive for a long time, it might be possible that it has been reuniting together with Boko Haram to organise such an attack.\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Ivi.} pag. 3.
complexity and the vastity of the Chibok operation have been so intriguing that we are still left with the doubt of how it could have been carried out by Boko Haram forces only.

Lastly, Zenn hypothesized that it could be likely for them to go back to direct cooperation looking past their differences, if they happened to be low on resources after the retreat of AQIM from northern Mali.  

### 3.4.2 Key Differences in Ideology

It is then time to understand what the core differences among the ideology of Ansaru and Boko Haram have been, to proceed on clarifying how their relation has developed and then better comprehend how more recent research contributes to elaborate the topic.

We have understood that Ansaru’s goal can be summarised in founding a transnational Islamic Emirate, strongly disapproving acts of violence of any kind towards Muslims. Conversely, Boko Haram is instead seeking to establish a Nigerian entity and has been less discriminated in its slaughter. Ideologically speaking, a video recorded in Arabic and translated into Hausa and English explained that Ansaru considers anybody that accepted the *khalimatush shahada* as a Muslim, who must not be killed except he/she has committed an act that is punishable by death, as stated by the holy Qur’ran. This must be considered mandatory, since Islam forbids the killing of innocent people, including non-Muslims.

Boko Haram on the other side has focused its fundamentals on the concept of *takfir* and Salafi Jihadism: they consider Western influence on Islamic society and faith in the governmental order to be punished, being a weakness to the true belief in religion and God. They also suggest other Muslims to run from the morally ruined and corrupted society and establish a new one. This is what justifies them to attack the state and its workers and representatives.

Clear signs of Ansaru’s stance emerged with a video in May 14th, 2013. This followed tragic events on March 18th in the city of Kano, where Boko Haram’s bombings left killed approximately 65 people. Afterwards, on April 13th the so-called first Baga massacre was recorded, with at least 187

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100 Believing in one God and Prophet Muhammad as the messenger of Allah.


102 Denoting excommunication and non-belief.

casualties. While it is unclear if this second attack was perpetrated by Shekau’s group, Ansaru felt the need to clarify their stance.¹⁰⁴

We in the JAMBS (abbreviation of Ansaru) proclaim our dissociation from targeting the masses of Muslims who have spoken the two declarations of faith, manifesting outwardly the signs of Islam. So as long as they (the Muslims) entered Islam in complete certainty, we will not expel them without complete certainty.

We do not intend to attack Muslims, and those actions that bring to the killing of Muslims and the destruction of their properties are perpetrated by Satan’s armies. (…) as it is written: “Destruction of the world is less in the eyes of Allah than the unjustified killing of a believer”.¹⁰⁵

To Ansaru, those who consider themselves Muslims with certainty,¹⁰⁶ must be respected and to Allah their unjustified killing is unacceptable. Boko Haram’s victims started to often include Muslim innocents, killed in higher numbers than Christians or government employees. Shekau’s choice to consider non-believers all the Muslims living by the laws of the state, thus being able to punish them by means of killing, was the reason that alienated not only Ansaru, but also AQIM leadership from him.¹⁰⁷

We are left with the aim to further clarify how deep this cut between Ansaru and Boko Haram was and how likely it was for them to merge together in a coordinated group. Newer sources and research will help us in this task, understanding how articulated the separation has been.

### 3.5 Demystifying Internal Relations: Authority and Oppression

Here we must bring up a last fundamental element to understand our framework. We have gone through ideological reasons for the two entities to split up, but what have probably had the major impact is the authoritative and toxic behaviour of Abubakar Shekau. It was Zenn amongst the firsts to bring up such a deep issue back in 2014, when hypothesising that at the split between him and Ansaru, might be the so-called death penalty imposed by Shekau on every defector of the group.¹⁰⁸ The issue was not further analysed by him, also because such a task was not in the scope of his article. Thanks to new sources though, it is useful to shrink down the topic to ease our understanding.

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¹⁰⁶ i.e.: living rightfully or not being aware of having committed acts of disbelief.


Brigaglia has lately been working on internal sources of the organisation and international Islamic Jihadi hubs, being two of them particularly interesting to our aim.

- “‘Some Advice and Guidelines:’ The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as Narrated by AQIM. Analysis of the content of the treatise: ‘Nasai’ih wa-tawjihat shar’iyya li-mujahidi Nijiriya’” (Some Advice and Guidelines to the Jihadists of Nigeria), written in late 2011 by one of AQIM’s leading officials, Abu al-Hasan Rashid al-Bulaydi and published in April 2017 by the platform Mu’Assasat al-Andalus, enriched by an introduction.

- “‘Slicing off the Tumour’: The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as narrated by the Islamic State”. Analysis of the publication by the Islamic State: “Khadh’ al-waram min al-khawārij al-Shīkawiyya bi-bay‘at ahl al-karam” (Slicing off the Tumour of Shekau’s karijites, in Pledging Allegiance to the Honourable Ones). This is credited to the two sons of Muhammad Yusuf.

These are internal documents produced respectively by AQIM and the Islamic State (IS), representing how these two actors have interacted through time with the figure of Shekau, giving important insights on his leadership.

As the second source explains, excessive extremism of Shekau was soon noticed along with his “autocratic and selfish” leadership style, both at the national and at the international level, bringing AQIM to the publication of one letter that caused the separation of the Nigerian Jihadi community in three groups: one in defence of Shekau, one committed to Jihad but opposed to him, one renouncing jihad and joining the Murijites.109 This is not necessarily referring to the exact formation of Ansaru, but more in general to a gradual disaffection caused by Shekau’s attitude among all levels of his followers. Concerning the specific case of Ansaru instead, and the exit of many long-time members of the group, Shekau’s reaction happened to be brutal, killing also many that remained neutral about such issue. The source explains that it was with the blessing of AQIM, that his opponents broke off and established the independent organization of Ansar al-Mulsimin fi Bilad al-Sudan.110

But what was this letter the author is talking about in the source? We have identified in AQIM the actor, or at least one of the actors that contributed to such a separation, thus clarifying what its stance has been in relation with Shekau. A key in this confrontation has been held by those Nigerian Jihadists loyal to AQIM, who started to raise their unhappiness towards Shekau’s behaviour rather early. Here we experience the density of an ideological exchange, through the lens of some letters and

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109 Those who practice ‘irja: postponement of judgement on other believers. This group believes that God alone might judge a Muslim, so men should not make declarations of takfir (disbelief), as Shekau was doing.
publications, analysed by Brigaglia and Iocchi in “Some Advice and Guidelines”. The source explains how:

- First, we have the experience of an early critique to Shekau’s leadership by Abu Muslim al-Ibrahimi, a Nigerian scholar, “one of the exemplary seekers of knowledge in the Jihadi trend”. This represents a public open letter, with which he lamented the extremism of Shekau and claimed his adherence to the moderates of AQIM. We are not sure about the time in which his treaty was emanated, but it was prior to a letter sent to Shekau by an exponent of AQIM. What the source tells us, is that the author is believed to have been killed by Shekau in 2012, confirming his brutality towards his opponents.

- Such letter sent to Shekau is a second element in the dispute, written by Shaykh Abdallah Abu al-Hasan al-Shinqiti. This Mauritanian scholar of AQIM, stated his view in 2010 over the controversial interpretation made by Shekau about the Salafi canon of takfir. We see how already in the early stages of Shekau’s leadership issues were starting to seriously emerge.

- The polemical exchange then reached a point in which also the supreme Qadi111 of AQIM, Shaykh Abd al-Rahman Ishaq, wrote an epistle in November 18th 2011, supporting the position of al-Ibrahimi and the group of Nigerians that had started to feel detached from the project followed by Shekau.112

It is after these explicit declarations that “the matter culminated in the decision of those who rejected Shekau’s extremism to separate from him and to withdraw from his group, so that some of them could form a new group”113 but many of these would be eventually killed by Shekau, as further evidence will explain.

The text of the introduction to “Some Advice and Guidelines” is then concluded with one last letter, written by a delegation of Nigerian Jihadists. This letter is basically the one that started the entire epistolary exchange, and to which “Some Advice and Guidelines to the Jihadists of Nigeria” is the reply. It is signed by 11 men with different roles and organisational positions in Boko Haram, it is not dated but according to the author of the introduction was written at the end of 2011. The authors claim to represent a point of a moderate path in Salafi-jihadi thought, in alternative to the one held by Shekau.114

111 Legal Authority.
They add in fact that he kills all the jihadists who disagree with his decisions and blame him for bad leadership, since he systematically alienated the scholarly elite and founding fathers of the group with his attitude. To the point that they “are not aware of the existence, amongst those who are close to him, of any of those who used to be renowned for their teaching or their zeal in search for knowledge”. At the same time, the Muslim masses were starting to incline towards the Murji’ites, for they had lost their confidence in the religious legitimacy of the Jihadi organisation.

This was then caused mainly, but not only, by violence. It is recorded in fact that Shekau ruled that in Islam there is no consultation. But as some of his opponents lamented, “this is un-Islamic since Allah says: ‘And consult them in the conduct of affairs’”. But “in your case (Shekau’s case) each time we attempt to speak to you about consultation you say: ‘Mallam, remember I only need advice, not consultation’”.

For killings and avoiding confrontation and debate, as “Slicing off the tumour” explains, at this point Shekau’s camp was deserted from scholars and he could make space for further extremism. This manifested in robberies and raids also directed at the Muslim commoners, based on their excommunication by the leader and bringing to further alienation of the Muslims from the Jihadi organisation. Here is an explanation for the growing escalation of Boko Haram’s violence previously noted through time.

Shekau went to the point of thinking of himself as a scholar that could inspire the Islamic State to the revival of slavery, with the famous mass kidnapping in Chibok. Interestingly enough, in March 27th, 2015, Abu Malik Shayba al-Hamad, who claims to have facilitated the union between Boko Haram and ISIS in 2015, declared that it was actually the Chibok kidnapping to make him realise that the group was truly a Jihadi one. So apparently, while certain actions have alienated one audience, they also probably served Shekau’s plans in a way.

Further proof about his use of violence is found in an open letter written by Mamman Nur to Shekau in August 4th, 2016. He denounces him for having chosen a wrong path for Boko Haram, bringing up many issues with his ruling behaviour, like the execution of punishment without proof.

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120 Long-time Boko Haram member, close to Muhammad Yusuf.
“You are killing the leaders of war, but also killing religious scholars. You should bring your evidence. Bring forth your proof if you are truthful”\textsuperscript{121}, since “you are always saying you have evidence for killing people, yet you only kill them in secret”.\textsuperscript{122} This not only emerges from the words of Mamman Nur, but also from the pen of Yusuf’s sons in “Slicing off the Tumour”. Even while pledging allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015, Shekau did not stop his violence. Being him reluctant of joining the Islamic State for a long time, he killed those Boko Haram members who were pressuring him to take this step.\textsuperscript{123} This is then a definitive proof that gives direct explanation for the separation between Ansaru and Boko Haram. Looking at other primary sources their disconnection with Shekau had been repeatedly publicly confirmed through time, as showed in the sermon of November 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2013, reporting: “We have announced our dissociation from the operations that target Muslims in their markets, their fields and even in their Mosques”,\textsuperscript{124} and “We do not agree with them and we disassociate ourselves before Allah from them”.\textsuperscript{125} Blaming how suddenly the Muslims have been pressured and attacked by their same people. Closing the sermon, Al-Ansari then greets a list of mujahidin chiefs, but the name of Shekau is not present. Furthermore, Ansaru kept on publicly denying its participation to Boko Haram’s attacks in 2015:

Our aim is different from that of JASDJ (Boko Haram) that attacks on Mosques, markets, motor parks and other public places. We do not kill any Muslim, nor do we attack in the places of their day-to-day affairs. (…) We only wage Jihad to help weak Muslims who are being oppressed. We are not killing innocent civilians, we also make it clear that we do not kill any soul with a right. We do not oppress anyone.\textsuperscript{126}

\section*{3.6 Concluding Remarks}

We have considered what the origins for the separation between Ansaru and Boko Haram have been, presenting how the research have been developed around such an event. Many hypotheses and speculations were formulated on the basis of Ansaru’s actions and the relations of the two groups with other international Jihadi actors, specifically AQIM. It was then through the analysis of more

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{122} Ivi, pag. 452.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Ivi, pag. 282.
\end{itemize}
recent research that it has been possible to put down at once our understanding of the phenomena and complete it with further contribution.

Under the light of the latest sources it seems very unlikely for the two entities to have been merging once again together, and improbable for some members of Ansaru to have re-joined Shekau afterwards, contributing to the organisation of other attacks like the Chibok Kidnapping. Obviously, our knowledge is far from complete certainty, but the newer proof about his attitude makes us more certain of his brutality, even towards his closest associates. A peculiar case to be further analysed is the kidnapping of the German priest Georges Vandenbeush, dated November 2013, since it is unclear how the supposed cooperation between Ansaru and Boko Haram has been developed.

The case of study has represented to this point an exercise of completive effort, centred on recollecting what the understanding of the events has been and improving it with data collection: concerning Shekau’s leadership and his ideology, the historiographical knowledge is still to a point in which primary sources are fundamental and progressively been collected.

The issue of leadership has showed how a topic subject to academical disputation is developed; the next chapter will instead present an alternative case of study. The Chibok Kidnapping has been nominated a few times, the aim is now to present it in its complexity, showing how the conjectures presented above contribute to improve the state of research. Furthermore, it will be displayed how the scholarly analysis has been crystallising during time, for a variety of reasons. Given the absence of primary sources on the kidnapping and its consequent implications in the following months and years, the research will proceed focusing on what is known about the event and how this knowledge has been utilised by scholars.
4. The Chibok Kidnapping

The present chapter will tackle the so-called Chibok Kidnapping. The case is of extreme interest to an analysis of the Boko Haram movement, representing how the tactics of the group have changed and radicalised under Shekau’s leadership. The case is extraneous to the usual tactics employed by the terrorists and its entity makes it a unique exploit of means and resources. While the research has managed to improve our understanding of its dynamics, by excluding the possibility of a cooperation between Boko Haram and Ansaru in orchestrating this attack, the academical debate on this will emerge as frozen, since little to no primary source has been lately collected. An overview of the event and kidnapping as a tactic will be followed by the administrative response to it. A few primary video sources will be integrated to grasp the ideology that moved Shekau’s action, then followed by an analysis of the implications of the kidnapping, as formulated by the scholars. The description will aim at considering what could have represented a further impulse to academical research on the topic, in an attempt to understand why such a major event is apparently still surrounded by mystery.

4.1 Radicalisation of Terror: A Major Attack

On April 14th, 2014 in the city of Chibok, Borno, Boko Haram sent a strong message to a wide array of actors. The local community, the federate government as well as the international audience had to acknowledge a dramatic event, that would have induced a widespread response in the public opinion, together with political, social and military consequences. The movement had started to apply changes in its tactics starting from 2012, in order to gain increasing leverage over the Nigerian government. Suicide bombings and kidnappings-for-ransom started to be employed: this was meant to guarantee a more effective hold on the geographical areas in which the group was established and to deal with the national army from a position of superiority, asking for prisoners releasing. Initial success stimulated the employment of such practices, that brought in the upcoming years to an affirmed presence of Boko Haram with growing concern for the region’s security. Among hundreds of attacks with thousands of casualties, kidnappings became a confirmed strategy. Symbolical event in this confrontation became the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from the city of Chibok, in which they had been brought to give the yearly state exams. This case of study is of extreme interest, for the purpose of understanding the knowledge that we could build around the movement of Boko Haram. In particular, the research reveals an amount of literature over the topic coming from a variety of fields, ranging from international and security affairs, to gender and religious studies, as well as medical research concerning Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Psychological issues. Reports by International Organisations and Newspaper articles complete the array of data. What this amount of sources tells us about the case of study is the existence of a strong
interest for this emblematic event, stimulated probably by international attention and extreme media coverage, as favoured by the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, meant to raise awareness about the issue and put pressure on the Nigerian government for the rescuing process. The data available has been utilized in a variety of ways to shrink down the argument and elaborate a deep understanding of it, but what seems to appear is that most of this academic production has basically relied on the same data, while only a few authors managed to introduce newly discovered information. It is now useful to give a description of the events based on how it has been narrated, firstly considering the kidnapping as a tactic employed by Boko Haram.

4.2 Tactics of Terror: A Focus on Kidnapping

Considerations should be made about the issue of kidnappings as a tactic, a relatively rare practice in terrorist group activities especially in modern times. Reasons for an interest in kidnappings is a reward in publicity, money or obtaining concessions by the governments, but the downsides are apparent, needing many human interactions, often during a long period of time, in order to make it a successful strategy.\textsuperscript{127} This brings terrorist to the adoption of such a practice preferably in countries marked by dysfunctional or corrupted security forces, especially for the chance to discredit the central government and putting it under even more pressure, by the public opinion. This is one reason why many negotiations and payments are usually kept secret: as estimated by the \textit{Castle Rock International, ‘Top10 Kidnap Rated Countries with Ransom Stats’} (April 3, 2008) in fact, 80\% of all kidnappings for ransom apparently go unreported. Adding to this the fact that most of them happen in weak developing countries, the result is that data collection and reporting happens to be generally substandard.\textsuperscript{128} Especially for what concerns the specific situation of Nigeria, the country was ranked at number 37 out of 52 countries in the overall governance scale, being one of the worst governed countries in Africa because of decades of military dictatorship and widespread corruption, backwardness of social and physical infrastructure and deficient electoral and participatory practices.\textsuperscript{129} This should definitely to be taken into account while approaching data released by Nigerian governance. Numbers in data are in fact, neither precise nor always reliable. What we do know though, is that 17000 people have been feared dead because of Boko Haram in seven years since 2010, while more than 2.6 million have been displaced.\textsuperscript{130} For what concerns clarity of analysis, it

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Ibid}.
should be said that the Nigerian government has proved inconsistent in dealing with the issue. The upcoming paragraph will consider the presidential response to the kidnapping and how this has hindered the possibility for a growing academical interest.

4.3 The Chibok Case: Governmental Management and Media Coverage

The kidnapping, on April 14th, 2014, has happened under the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan and has demonstrated his inability to resolve the event. A stronger reaction came from former president Muhammadu Buhari, elected on March 28th, 2015, after promises of a new effort against Boko Haram. Neither of them has though showed an inclination to coherency, as it is going to be showed.

4.3.1 President Jonathan’s Administration

Talking more expressively about the kidnappings perpetrated by the Boko Haram group, the Chibok case has been preceded by logics involving gender violence as a tactic of conflict: in the two previous years in fact, it is estimated that between 500 and 2000 women and girls have been abducted by the group. An array of reasons lays behind these numbers and choices. It should be useful to say that most victims of kidnapping events are locals, indigenous individuals of the area from which they are abducted. This contrasts the coverage given by the media, that usually only concentrates on the kidnappings of foreigners. The reason for the usual preference of natives is the fact that carrying on such kidnappings is less risky: foreigners might grant major ransom payments, but it is more likely that the government decides to intervene in such cases because of the involvement of other countries in the issue. In the case of kidnappings of locals instead, other needs are addressed by the terrorist, preferably asking for policy concessions, creating a coercive pressure against governments. In this case, also the government operates in different directions as compared to cases of abductions of foreigners. Strong criticism has been moved to the federal authorities and their decision-making and reliability in addressing the event, especially regarding withdrawal of the soldiers form the school of Chibok, the reluctant and week-late admission that the kidnap happened, and failure to pursue the rescue: various elements contributing to question the government’s competence in crisis management situations. But other facts consistently contributed to generate growing distrust towards president Goodluck Jonathan’s administration, in charge at the time of the kidnapping, as it is useful to display.

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133 Ivi, pag. 325.

The day after the kidnapping, the government was caught unaware and could neither explain the circumstances nor the veracity of the report, being it a source of huge surprise. A further worrying element is the fact that president Goodluck Jonathan was never categorical about the incident at its outset. Following the president’s confirmation of the event in fact, it was still difficult if not impossible to clearly define the precise number of missing schoolgirls. This was only confirmed in June 2014, almost two months after the kidnapping, and even with major support and cooperation from foreign countries, the majority of the girls still remains in Boko Haram’s custody. The Nigerian government was reported to doubt the fact that the schoolgirls were abducted in Chibok, taking nearly three weeks to issue an official statement regarding the incident. The same wife of former president Goodluck Jonathan declared that the fact was a calculated propaganda to embarrass the presidency, showing complete denial of the events. Another element contributed to distrust the state administration, when a month after the kidnapping, president Jonathan had a scheduled visit to the Chibok parents but preferred cancelling it, declaring that it wouldn’t have helped in saving the girls. This decision came mainly from the doubts the administration had over the veracity of the event but ended up confirming a serious deficiency in the public administration’s reliability.

4.3.2 President Buhari’s Administration

The manifested insensitivity to the issue should not be uniquely addressed to Jonathan’s presidency, since also the Buhari management has been caught guilty of extreme declarations, synonyms of superficial treatment of the matter. Many newspapers have been paying attention to such involvements, especially because of the strict correlation these had with the #BringBackOurGirls (BBOG) campaign. The movement, born to foster interest over the event and to pressure the government into getting involved in an intervention useful to rescue the kidnapped schoolgirls, had succeeded in gathering mass media attention and multiplying reporters’ interest. Here are some articles found covering the issue of the involvement of president Buhari, stating that almost two years since the abduction, no evidence of persuasive, deliberate and result-targeted action had been conveyed by him. In an interview a member of the #BBOG group asserted:

We were promised that the president (Buhari) would visit Sambisa after becoming president. We were also told that within two weeks our girls would be rescued. (...) They told us that our girls seen in the last video was merely an arrangement. No one has spoken to the family of any of the Chibok girls since the last video was released by the terrorists.\textsuperscript{140}

What strikes the audience is the fact that the election of president Buhari was not followed, as expected, by a serious effort in military and tactical action, but more by a series of controversial declarations that had rarely been matched by facts. It should be remembered that during the electoral campaign of 2015, which he ended up winning, a strong impact in the electoral outcome was played exactly by allegations and promises that he made regarding the war on terror, to be held against the terrorist movement of Boko Haram. Muhammadu Buhari has been elected in May, after promising to eradicate the group, and part of his media campaign was later involved in sponsoring the success of his military policy, to the point of declaring the movement as defeated within the Nigerian borders in an interview in London. This declaration has been though criticised and taken by the local and international audience with reserve, since despite recent military success against the group, some months later, in mid-December 2015 a number of deadly attacks left up to 80 people dead in the north-east.\textsuperscript{141} This obviously raised major doubts about his allegations, but the ground was not yet ready for an even more concerning declaration.

After months of silence and absence of information about the proceeding investigations, Buhari showed his openness to negotiate with the group. A major blow stroke the public, as the Nigerian government proved ready to deal with the terrorists, as his president had said at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Nairobi, Kenya 2016:

\textbf{If they (the terrorists) do not want to talk to us directly, let them pick an internationally-recognised non-governmental organisation, convince them that they have the girls and want Nigeria to release a number of Boko Haram leaders in detention, which they are supposed to know.}\textsuperscript{142}

Not only then the presidency was offering unconditional talks but was also considering the chance to release prisoners in exchange for the kidnapped girls. Moreover, as reported by another newspaper,


“if a credible leader of Boko haram can be established and they tell us where those girls are, we are prepared to negotiate with them, without any precondition”, Buhari had said.143

Such declarations obviously brought major distress and stimulated increasing action by the BBOG group, since to this point still no girls had been freed and the inconsistency in Buhari’s speeches was apparent. Obviously, having to recur to negotiation after military intervention had proven non-resolutive, suggests that the movement had not been defeated at all, as avowed by him. Allowing or granting concessions in negotiation implies in fact that both parties are bringing their respective strengths to the confrontation: no monopoly of power is present in such cases. A crushed Boko haram movement couldn’t have been relevant enough to bring demands to a negotiation table, as they instead managed to do.144

It must be said that effort in defeating the group was shown and forces were deployed to this aim, as the earlier months after the elections showed. In order to free the girls in February 2015, a major offensive was launched by the government against Boko Haram, which, by the time, had control over large parts of the North-East. Help came from regional forces and with support from US, France and UK and brought to increasing successes, with the militants losing nearly all their territory and retreating in the deep of the Sambisa forest.145 Nonetheless, the actions turned out to be insufficient to the rescue, a reason why the BBOG movement demanded specifically to set up a “Chibok Rescue Operation Monitoring Team”. This was meant to be composed by representatives of the federal government, parents of the Chibok girls, the Kada community (where the Chibok village is located) and the BBOG group:146 a clear symptom of distrust in the ruling institutions. Another declaration by the BBOG stated in regard to the offer made by Buhari that: “We fail to understand why our Federal Government is giving so much powers to determine process and first-mover actions to the terrorists.”147 Considering the fact that only later achievements were reached towards rescuing some of the girls, attention and care about public declarations have been widely analysed. Two mass releases happened in fact respectively in October 2016 and May 2017, bringing back respectively 21 and 82 of the girls.


Still, the government must be criticised for its silence on the situation, which was kept for more than a year after Buhari’s election. This strategy must surely be blamed as one of the causes for the crystallisation of the academical analysis of the Chibok kidnapping, being scholars unable to analyse the outcomes and dynamics of negotiations. Knowledge about the state of the captives came instead from Boko Haram video releases, that are fundamental to the research and will be presented in the next paragraph.

4.4 Religious Explanations: Video Sources

By now we have proceeded depicting an overlook of the presidential involvement, but we need to take on considering Boko Haram responses and actions. It should be reminded in fact, that other than a discourse about human rights and security, this should be firstly considered a matter of religious confrontation. The voice of scholars and religious leaders has been heard over the dispute around Boko Haram, and the same Abubakar Shekau has more than once brought explanation for his choices as based on interpretation of the Muslim doctrine. The same has happened for the abduction of the Chibok girls, creating a peculiar structure of justification for his actions.

Such video sources are extremely useful for the hints they give on the safety of the girls and the ideological matter of the organisation. One tape released by Boko Haram on August 14th, 2016, showed about 50 of them, while asking for imprisoned militants release and reporting that some of the girls were killed or injured in government air strikes. Earlier, in April 2016, a video showed some of them alive, while already in May 2014 at least 130 of them were shown while reciting the Quran. Abubakar Shekau has there reported that all of them had converted to Islam and been married off to the soldiers.\textsuperscript{148} Especially this last one together with another video source are fundamental to our research, having been recently translated integrally. An amount of information is given regarding the reasons for the kidnapping, the state of the girls and the conditions for a potential release.

In the video dated May 12\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, the leader provided theological justification to refute other Muslim scholars’ condemnation of the kidnapping.\textsuperscript{149} His main critique moved to the opponents, identifying them as hypocrites, that have corrupted Islam and the life of the believers and then proceed to call others, like him, unbelievers. He specifically denounced them as guilty of mixing religion with democracy, which implies a comparison between the rule of God and the rule of men, which is by him considered to be a sin, far from the will of God.\textsuperscript{150} The entire matter is shaped around the


definition of believer and unbeliever, especially for what concerns the right to kill and enslave, as for the case of the Chibok Girls. The importance of such a source is pivotal, being it released less than a month after the abduction. It shows the discourse Shekau is willing to build around the event concerning the lives of non-Muslim girls, showing that “because we caught these girls, the girls who Allah helped to accept the religion, many of them have accepted the religion”.

But what follows raises concerns about their security, since, even if declared to be now Muslims, Shekau asserts that: “only Allah knows the unbelieving women we have captured, the women Allah instructed us to enslave. Yes, Allah said we should enslave them”. He then continues: “I will sell them. Those women, even if they become Muslims, they are still slaves. I am the person who has the right to emancipate them”.

What emerges is primarily a concern over the religious belief of the kidnapped, and the case of the Chibok abduction revealed that targets are either Christians or students attending Western schools. This did not grant any additional safety to Muslim believers as noted by the discourse presented by Shekau: for somebody to consider himself a believer does not imply that he or she is actually a believer. This can legitimately be seen in the framework that Roman Loimeier describes for the religious panorama in Nigeria, demonstrating that “Muslims in Nigeria do not form a homogeneous group and are divided into bitterly disputed splinter factions of which some oppose the Nigerian state and others are deeply involved in governmental dynamics”.

Moreover, a second video dated November 1st, 2014, gives further knowledge on the condition of the kidnapped girls. Shekau here declares that they have become Muslims and have been married off to members of the group, cheering their abandonment of the Westernised customs. “They have realised that Christians have distorted the gospel with lies”. Later in the video Shekau also dismisses the possibility for a cease-fire with the Nigerian government and symbolically breaks the border between Nigeria and Cameroon. This act probably imitating the foundation of the Islamic State, thus showing doctrinal and military strategic contiguity with it.

It is now time to present what has been elaborated by the scholarly arena on the topic, to finally define a round glance on the issue and draw the conclusions.

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151 Ivi, pag. 314.
152 Ibidem.
153 Ivi, pag. 315.
157 Ivi, pag. 340.
4.5 Implications: The Academical Analysis

We should now delve into an understanding of the major instances brought up in the academic research concerning the issues around the Chibok kidnapping. Research has produced an amount of literature over the topic coming from a variety of fields, ranging from international and security affairs, to gender and religious studies, as well as medical research concerning Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Psychological issues. Nonetheless the issue of human rights of women and children has been under the spotlight for obvious reasons. What emerges from an analysis of the literature is a wide interest over the issue of the kidnapped girls, especially when related to cases of mismanagement of the situation by the government, while only a few sources have focused on the side of the kidnappers and their real aims.

We should open our analysis reporting the centrality of the issue of corruption, as endemic in the country and widely involved in inhibiting an efficient answer to the group, because of cases of sabotage and leaks of intelligence among the military. Moreover, there is also evidence of low morale and lack of motivation in the Nigerian army, mostly attributed to their low pay. This, makes it likely for soldiers to be willing to accept bribes, with serious consequences on the efficiency of the response to the Boko Haram issue. As Whitehead has reported, civilians have frequently complained that the military have failed to protect them, despite having prior knowledge that attacks were imminent. Arguably, terrorism has then become a source of livelihood for militaries but also for most civilians, due to the collection of aid from organisations, national and international donors. The turn of resources and richness is not feasible, and it makes many people greedy for collection, generating an informal system of exchange.

Another reason that complicates the response to the Boko Haram group has to be connected with a tactic of decentralisation of terror tactics as employed by the terrorists. The presence of several leaders and cells, with different operational groups, as showed in the previous chapter, makes it harder for the security forces to deal with the insurgents. This has raised the hypothesis for the Chibok kidnapping to be the result of a coordinated action by different cells, organised for such major attack. As a consequence, the girls might be kept separated and the same negotiations might need to be handled separately. To be commanded by different leaders, would also make it harder to understand how the movement and its tactics might evolve through time, as Zenn had argued in the past.


An interesting account on this topic is given also by the same leader of the organisation, Abubakar Shekau, which in a video-message reports: “You must be angry towards me if you said I have violated the norms of international law and disobeyed your laws. I am not following nation-states; rather I am following Allah and His messenger”\.  

This gives us an understanding of how different the perception of politics, diplomacy, boundaries and nations can be, and how this should be accounted for, while analysing the organisation. Together with the difference in perception and tactics, lays an altered understanding of the power dynamics between Boko haram and the security forces of Nigeria, as we have already seen through the declarations of his former president Muhammad Buhari. The Nigerian government claimed to have decimated the terrorist group in their strongholds in the Sambisa forest, but on this basis, bargaining should not have been a prerequisite for releasing the girls. We should focus on thinking that Jihadist terrorists are far from irrational, but tactical and likely to employ any means suitable for the actualization of specific objectives. The group considered negotiation as the right option to re-unite their co-terrorists, under government detention, so it seems pointless to address them as unskilful and hopeless criminals.  

The same choice of the victims for the kidnapping, young women and girls, is far from random but rather belongs to a year-long tactic. Nigeria has in fact witnessed increasing feminisation of terror by Boko Haram, not in one, but in two paradoxical ways: the targets of this intense and perpetrated violence are both victims and vanguards of terror. The leadership of the group, aware of the upcoming challenges caused by the lasting of the conflict, has shifted tactics to innovate ways of sustaining its activities while furthering its strategic goals. Kidnappings may occur for the purpose of revenge, or a form of coercive bargaining, moreover their demands may appeal to popular grievances against the government. For what specifically concerns the employment of women in terrorist attacks though, reasons include their capability to avoid invasive searches by military personnel, for a matter of honour, a search for publicity but also for their capability to draw less suspicion while spying or gathering information in enemy camps. Furthermore, they have likely been employed as undercover informants for Boko Haram, by notifying the group of the whereabouts of potential targets, being also used to lure some men into the terrorists’ camps.

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166 Ivi, pag. 121.

The example of women employment in terrorist tactics is not the only worrying issue that we should be concerned about. Many children have been abducted with the intent to employ them as well in suicide attacks and terror initiatives. The main issues concerning their involvement and the effects of violence and brainwashing procedures are those regarding their health and security. Being freed from captivity after months or years doesn’t mean in fact that their struggle is over, since it is not unlikely for them to experiment mistrust, discrimination and persecution while reintegrating in their community. This exclusion also comes from the hub that should represent the safest haven for their reintegration, their same families. Both women and children are stigmatised by their fellow villagers, which would abuse them in many ways. They are referred to as “Boko Haram wives”, “Sambisa women”, “Boko Haram blood” and “Annoba” (epidemics), evocating the radicalisation that they received while in captivity, an evil seed that they will implant in the communities if accepted and reintegrated. The perpetration of this kind of gender and sexual violence, as operated by the members of Boko Haram, takes the form of forced marriages, with a specific function for the organisation. Furthermore, the experience of children is equally alienating. Those born from Boko Haram fighters are considered “hyenas among dogs” and are assumed to be the next generation of fighters, since “a child of a snake is a snake”.

When reintegrating into society, the reaction of the communities towards them changes completely if those women have joined the group by force or choice. The stigma is posited exactly between the victimhood or free agency of the involved women. Obviously the main problem is that not much is known of the women once they are abducted, and any speculation about their life in captivity would potentially end up building a strong structure of prejudice around them.

4.6 Concluding Remarks
The chapter has displayed how the academic and media coverage has been built around the event of the Chibok abduction. The literature is characterised by a wide analysis of the implications surrounding the kidnapping, representing the wide picture of both national and local implications. What is found is that the history and the understanding of Boko Haram is defined by the comprehension of the events that are part of its narrative. This is shaped by the fact that no certainty about its decision-making process and internal communication is present, thus the scholarly arena simply relies on conjectures. What represents a hook to understand Boko Haram is the analysis of

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attacks, initiatives, tactics, speeches and video releases, as hints to build an effective adaptive system of prevention towards its actions. While considering the process of historicization, the media understanding of the phenomenon and what is its historiographical elaboration should be differentiated.

What emerges in the analysis of the Chibok kidnapping is the fact that this page of Boko Haram history is still far from being written, since the media understanding that is possessed hasn’t been matched by the chance to reconstruct the events through data findings. No trace of internal correspondence or documents about planning of attacks have yet been gathered, nor it has been possible to clarify the involvement of kidnapped people in terrorist activities. Lines can be traced between the case of the group’s leadership and the Chibok kidnapping, since research about the former have contributed to clarify a passage in the developing of the latter. While some researchers have hypothesised, as it has been previously showed, that the kidnapping could have been orchestrated by a Boko Haram – Ansaru joint group, the chapter above has presented otherwise.

What can be deducted is the need for an active academic disputation, on topics far from historical certainty, with on-going historiographical research. This is currently not present on the Chibok kidnapping as emerged after the analysis of the state of the research. One reason for this probably lays, as previously noted, on the absence of direct primary sources on the event. While some video sources have helped us to understand Shekau’s approach to the issue, this is still shrouded in mystery and far from being understood. Scholars have made great use of the knowledge on the matter contributing to shrink down the event and favour its understanding from a variety of points of view, yet work must be done in gathering intelligence on internal Boko Haram’s data to further the research.
5. Conclusion

The research has focused on analysing the academical understanding of the Boko Haram phenomenon, as matured through years of scrutiny. Secondary sources on the movement have represented the fulcrum of the present work, through which the life of the group has been delineated. The thesis has been elaborated on three main chapters, with the aim of using two cases of study to understand the scholarly interpretation of different moments of Boko Haram’s history. An historical contextualisation has been given, to introduce the issue and inscribe the following chapters into a broader picture. Together with a basic framework of the timeline of this Salafist phenomenon, has been presented the opinion of several scholars, identified in four currents of thought over the origins of the movement. Moreover, some representatives of such factions have confronted each other lately, to the point of trying to discredit their opponents. The focus has then been moved to two cases of study: the birth of the Ansaru splinter-cell and the kidnapping of the schoolgirls of Chibok.

For what concerns the former, the chapter has been developed with one main aim, as presented in the research question that follows:

- What is the scholarly opinion on the birth of Ansaru and the ties that the Nigerian Jihadists possess with other international Jihadist organisations?

Three main sections have been used, starting by explaining how the leadership of Abubakar Shekau has represented a pivotal point in Boko Haram’s history. This has been followed by what the common understanding of Ansaru from its formation has been for the scholars, together with opinions about their attacks and operations. Its connections with other international Jihadist actors have completed the picture, opening up for a third last section, aimed at demystifying and clarifying such earlier knowledge about the splinter-cell. Lines have been drawn with other attacks by Boko Haram, considering the possibility for Ansaru’s participation in them, as per the Chibok kidnapping.

The research has then been carried out by presenting the second case study. In this last chapter, the kidnapping of 276 girls from a school in Chibok has been analysed, because of the interest grown around the event. Given the exceptionality of the attack, regarding its entity and the means and resources employed to carry it on, the chapter has been opened spending a few words on the kidnapping, as a tactic of terror. The reason for this has been to open up for a presentation of the issue, to find an answer to the second research question:

- To what extent is possible to reconstruct the Chibok kidnapping? Do scholars perceive a connection between this major event and the split up of the leadership of Boko Haram?
While the second part had been answered in the third chapter of the thesis, the focus switched on modelling the academical analysis of the event. This has included an overview of the presidential management of the issue, the analysis of newspaper articles from the media and a few primary sources, from the leader of Boko Haram. Being this the fundamental basis on which the research by the scholars has been founded, the last part of the chapter has showed what has been produced as a study about the event, comprehensively.

The thesis has managed to gather sources and data and to present them with a completive effort, producing a refined and integrated result. Some considerations can be drawn, on two fundamental lines, among the two cases of study. As an answer to the second research question, the research has highlighted how the connections between the Chibok kidnapping and the formation of Ansaru seem unlikely. Some scholars had formulated conjectures about the possibility, for such a major kidnapping, of a cooperation between Ansaru and Boko Haram, having the former previously matured an interest for the tactic of kidnappings. A potential reunion of the two Jihadist entities had also been considered, as presented in the third chapter, though more recent insights from primary sources have undermined such presumptions. Nonetheless, considerations might be also drawn on a second line of interpretation, that was not considered at the start of this thesis project and should be considered an outcome.

Only after the complete elaboration of the two cases, one main difference has emerged, for what concerns the academical understanding of these key events. The former had the chance to be developed on the basis on new findings, keeping alive an on-going debate and confrontation among scholars. This has also been the case for what concerns the dispute about the origins of the movement, as presented in the second chapter, while the second case study had proven to be almost sterile for the academical research. The academical contribution to the construction of knowledge has seemingly been hampered on the case of the Chibok Kidnapping, with a crystallisation of the debate. This has potentially never really been able to detach itself from the elaboration of mere hypotheses or considerations on a variety of fields of research. One reason for this might be found in a lack of primary sources from the terrorist group or other actors, while the opposite was recorded for the case of the birth of Ansaru. One possibility for the research to gain further impulse is present, and lays in the secret negotiations between the government and Boko Haram and in the accounts of the released girls. These are still inaccessible for security issue, but some details might as well be gathered in the future, opening up options for a wider and more complete understanding of this dire attack.

Under the light of the present scrutiny, it emerges that improvement has come thanks to steps made towards comprehensive recollections of primary sources and their translations. The future should see an increasing interest for the employment of linguistic and speech analysis of aforesaid primary
sources, to trace down transitions in ideology and link them to key moments of Boko Haram’s history. Not only that, regional studies should focus more on the influence the group has had on the contiguous areas close to Niger, Chad and Cameroon, which have experienced spill-overs of the movement’s actions, in several cases. This might disclose important dynamics, especially considering that the area presents porous borders, with the possibility for militants to smuggle people and resources. Both the presented cases of study could extensively benefit from such contributions, as well as many other aspects of the research on the phenomenon of Boko Haram.
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