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The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the genesis of Boko Haram as an offshoot of the Nigerian Salafi movement. In particular, it looks at the ambivalent relationship between Boko Haram's first leader Muhammad Yusuf and the leaders of the mainstream Salafi group Ahlus Sunna. Using as a starting point Quintan Wiktorowicz's threefold model of purist (or quietist), politico and jihadi Salafis, the article challenges the conclusion of two recent publications, which tend to see Boko Haram and Ahlus Sunna in terms of, respectively, jihadi and quietist Salafis. While agreeing that the rift between the two Nigerian groups reflects global Salafi debates, the article advances two critical arguments and one hypothesis. The first argument is that in terms of their political theology, the positions of quietist and jihadi Salafis are virtually identical, the differences between the two being contextual and volatile. Of the three categories identified by Wiktorowicz, only the politicos contain the germs of an alternative Salafi political theology. The second argument is that the War on Terror, encouraging the Saudi policy of promoting the exclusivist political theology of quietist Salafis in order to counter the jihadis, has created a context in which the politicos have been isolated and paradoxically a new, more extreme generation of jihadis like Yusuf (and, in the Middle east, ISIS) has been empowered. Finally the hypothesis, is that the rift between the Ahlus Sunna leaders and Yusuf was a consequence of the initial collaboration of the former in establishing a jihadi camp in Nigeria, followed by their decision to collaborate with the authorities in dismantling it.

KEYWORDS

Boko Haram; Nigeria; Salafism; War on Terror.

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1. *Political Blame Game and Collective Frustration: Boko Haram and its Perceptions in Nigeria*

In March 2015, the octogenarian presidential candidate of the opposition party (APC, All Peoples' Congress), retired-General Muhammadu Buhari, won the Nigerian presidential elections. For the first time since the 1999 democratic transition, a candidate of the opposition was breaking the monopoly previously exercised by the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) on the federal government of the most populous African state, the top oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa and the biggest economy of the continent. The crowds that queued in front of the polling stations of the mainly Muslim states of northern Nigeria bear witness to the (temporary) failure of Boko Haram's campaigns to take roots among the masses¹. In line with its distinctive position that democracy is a form of *shirk* (worship of an object other than God) and participating or voting in elections constitutes *kufir* (unbelief), the terrorist network had actively attempted to prevent Muslims from voting. Vast areas of Borno and Adamawa states were still under its control during the presidential elections, leading to the practical impossibility of setting polling stations there. At the same time, the enigmatic leader of the movement, Abubakar Shekau, had explicitly threatened to bomb the polling stations located in the areas of the north outside his direct control².

From the onset of Buhari's presidential mandate, the Nigerian army has continued in its efforts to push the militiamen of Boko Haram away from the area that, since the beginning of the first ground offensive by the group in June 2014, had gradually fallen under its control. This area, roughly the size of Belgium, stretched between the two north-eastern states of Borno and Adamawa, including several major towns like Gwoza (fallen to the insurgents in August 2014, then liberated in March 2015), Bama (fallen in September 2014, freed in March 2015) and Mubi (fallen in October 2014, freed in March 2015). The

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¹ Nigeria is a federal republic composed of thirty-six states plus the territory of the Federal Capital Abuja. The thirty-six states are grouped in six "geo-political zones": Core North; Northeast; Middle Belt; Southwest; South-south and Southeast. Of its roughly 400 ethno-linguistic groups, the dominant ones are Hausa (mainly in the Core North), Yoruba (Southwest) and Igbo (Southeast). Islam is the dominant religion in the Core North and the Northeast, while Christianity is dominant in the Southeast and South-South areas. The Southwest and the Middle Belt have a mixed population of Muslims and Christians.

² www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2015/02/boko-haram-threatens-disrupt-nigeria-poll-150218042214031.html.

belated Nigerian counteroffensive had been inaugurated only in February 2015, during the last weeks of the mandate of President Goodluck Jonathan, and had benefitted from a recently established coordination with the Chadian army. By the late spring of 2015, all major urban centres have been liberated, and most of the training camps that Boko Haram had been running in the Sambisa forest since (at least) 2010, have been dismantled. This has resulted in the *de facto* demise of the short-lived, unofficial “Jihadist Emirate” that the Boko Haram leaders had declared in August 2014³, officially pledging its allegiance to ISIS (The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) in March 2015 and changing their official denomination from *Jamā’at Ahl al-Sunna li’l-Da’wa wa’l-Jihād ‘alā Minhāj al-Salaf* (Association of the People of the Sunna for Preaching and Jihad According to the Salafi Method) to *al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya Wilāyat Gharb Ifrīqiyyā* (The Islamic State, West African Province)⁴.

Dispersed but still active, the militiamen of Boko Haram have responded with a new campaign of suicide bombings that has targeted the major urban centres of the states of Borno and Yobe (where the movement had originally started) as well as, for the first time since the beginning of its activities, the Chadian capital Ndjamena⁵. In all its tragedy, the use of girls in their early teens as suicide bombers, which has become a signature of the group, shows that the success of Boko Haram’s religious/ideological recruitment is at its historic lowest. Most of the girls, in fact, are recruited by force through a campaign of mass abduction in the villages of north-eastern Nigeria that has been going on for at least two years⁶. While Boko Haram was also able to recruit a considerable number of mercenary fighters attracted by the salaries offered by the group⁷, its media campaign, as well as its recruiting tours in rural villages, have not been successful enough to provide it with a sufficient number of ideologically motivated young male activists, devoted to the cause to the point of sacrificing their lives in “martyrdom operations”. Events like the mass lynching, in the streets of Nigeria’s most populous Muslim urban centre of Kano, of a man vaguely suspected to be associated with the insurgents only because rumoured by a street vendor to be in possession of a gun⁸, are additional signs of the rejection of the terrorist organization by the Nigerian Muslim public of all theological orientation, including the Salafi one, with which Boko Haram shares its main theological references⁹. The ongoing campaign of assassination of

³ www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28925484.

⁴ www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31784538.

⁵ www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/15/us-chad-blast-idUSKBN0OV14S20150615.

⁶ The most famous event related to Boko Haram’s abduction strategy is the abduction of 276 girls from a secondary school in Chibok in April 2014. According to Amnesty International, however, the number of girls abducted by Boko Haram only in 2014 amounts to at least 2,000 (www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/04/nigeria-abducted-women-and-girls-forced-to-join-boko-haram-attacks/).

⁷ www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27107375.

⁸ www.dailytrust.com.ng/weekly/index.phpnew-news/18760-boko-haram-suspect-lynched-at-kano-mosque.

⁹ The presence of Islam has been recorded in the court of Borno (a kingdom spanning between today’s Chad and today’s north-eastern Nigeria), since at least the eleventh century. Other major waves in the islamisation of northern Nigeria occurred in the fourteenth/fifteenth century, with the migration of Mande-speaking Muslim traders and clerics from today’s Mali, and in the early nineteenth century, with the establishment of an Islamic state, known as the “Sokoto Caliphate”, as a result of the Jihad led by the Fulani Usman Dan Fodio (d. 1817). The territories of the Borno kingdom and the Sokoto Caliphate were incorporated in the British colony of Nigeria in 1903. When the country achieved independence in 1960, most of its Muslim population was Sunni, and Sufism was widely practiced by its religious elites. After independence, the exposure to global Islamic trends has contributed to diversify the theological orientation of its Muslim public. In 1978, Izala (*Jamā’at ‘Izālat al-Bid’a wa-Iqāmat al-Sunna*) was established as the first Salafi-oriented Sunni movement in Nigeria. Izala’s religious vision is close to the one promoted by the religious establishment of Saudi Arabia, and focuses especially on criticizing Sufi-oriented Sunnis and, more recently, also Shiites. Like Salafism, Shiism is relatively recent in Nigeria, its presence dating back only to the early 1980s. The most popular Shiite movement is the IMN (Islamic Movement of Nigeria), which is supported by the post-revolutionary Iranian leadership. Although it is very difficult to quantify the influence of the different groups, it is

Muslim religious scholars by Boko Haram, which has targeted leaders of Salafi orientation as well as those of other groups¹⁰, is a further proof of the group's current ideological isolation and at the same time, of its organizational strength¹¹.

Notwithstanding this isolation, the achievements of the group so far have been remarkable. Although it does not officially control mosques in any major urban centre, the group has cells active everywhere in the country. It controls an important sector of the (legal and illegal) informal economy of the Lake Chad region, in a delicate area between the borders of Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad. Its propaganda is intermittently active on the internet, and its recruiting tours in rural villages, where its members give preaches in mosques attempting to attract youth, have been reported from the Extreme North Region of Cameroon¹², to as far as Jigawa State in northern Nigeria¹³, to the Department of Diffa in south-eastern Niger Republic. Its army of militiamen has been estimated at numbers that range between 6,000¹⁴ and 15,000 fighters¹⁵, while the propaganda videos posted online by the movement proudly display the tanks and sophisticated fire weapons in its possession¹⁶.

In order to explain the military exploits of Boko Haram in the face of their ideological isolation, over the last two years the Muslim public opinion across the north of Nigeria has been voicing a number of partly overlapping, partly contradictory theories. These theories variously blame (1) the PDP-run government of President Goodluck Jonathan, (2) the Evangelical-dominated Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), (3) the neighbouring government of Chad and (4) the American administration, for their supposed role in secretly sponsoring the insurgency, at one point or another, during its apparently inexorable rise from 2010 to 2014. Such an external support – these theories argue – was provided to the insurgents with the goals of, respectively, (1) weakening the chances of Muslim candidates of the opposition party APC to win the 2015 elections, (2) tarnishing the image of Islam and dominate the competitive religious sphere of Central Nigeria (known as the Middle Belt), (3) preventing Nigeria to exploit the oil fields located next to the Nigeria-Chad border, (4) providing the United States with an excuse to establish a base of Africom, the US Africa Command started in 2007, within the Nigerian borders.

These theories are mirrored by an opposed one, which has often been voiced by interest groups close to Jonathan's government. According to this theory, the Boko Haram's insurgency has received the support of the political opposition to Jonathan and the PDP in the north, with the goal of destabilizing the government, convincing the Nigerian masses of the latter's inability to rule the country, and eventually taking power.

The involvement of a number of northern politicians during the early stages of Boko Haram's genesis is undisputable, as shown by the case of former Borno state governor Ali Modu Sheriff. Sheriff provided some support to the group during its formative period, and he famously appointed Buji Foi, a

obvious that the vast majority of Nigerian Muslims today are Sunnis, more or less equally divided between Sufi-oriented, Salafi-oriented and neutral. Boko Haram is a recent Salafi offshoot. For a brief but useful overview of Islamic groups in northern Nigeria, see MUSTAPHA 2014b. For a historical monograph on Islam in pre-colonial Nigeria, see LAST 1967. On Islam in post-colonial Nigeria, see LOIMEIER 1997a.

¹⁰ On the case of Shaykh Muhammad Auwal Albani, probably the most famous of the Salafi scholars recently murdered by Boko Haram, see BALA 2014. On the suicide bombing that targeted the Tijaniyya Sufi leader Shaykh Dahiru Usman Bauchi, see BRIGAGLIA 2014a. On the murder of the Tijaniyya scholar Shaykh Adam Nafada (also known as Adamu Misra), see www.dailytrust.com.ng/daily/news/38689-boko-haram-attacks-nafada-kills-5.

¹¹ On the mobilization for and against Boko Haram in Nigeria, see HIGAZI 2015.

¹² www.edition.cnn.com/2015/03/03/africa/boko-haram-recruiting-cameroon/.

¹³ www.allafrica.com/stories/201405260853.html.

¹⁴ www.voanews.com/content/boko-haram-attacks-niger-border-town-/2631583.html.

¹⁵ www.amnesty.org/latest/news/2015/04/nigeria-abducted-women-and-girls-forced-to-join-boko-haram-attacks/.

¹⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dg4fna60eA.

collaborator of Boko Haram's original leader Muhammad Yusuf, as the state's Commissioner for Religious Affairs. This occurred when the group was operating in the open and had not openly declared its all-out war on the Nigerian state, including on Sheriff. Still, the fact that Sheriff, or some groups associated with his interest, might have continued to exert some ambiguous leverage on the group in more recent times is not, in itself, entirely impossible. However, it is important to note that during the 2014 campaign, Sheriff shifted his affiliation to the PDP¹⁷, becoming one of the closest allies of Jonathan's government in the north. Due to the continuous un-making and re-making of regional inter-party and intra-party alliances, Nigerian internal geo-politics is much more complex and unstable than the rhetorical trope of a north/south divide would want one to believe. Even if the north/south competition plays a central role in the power-sharing agreements that take place at the federal level, as well as in the "politics of emotions" that influences the mobilization of popular consensus in times of elections, it is rarely an essential factor in determining the concrete decisions of the political elites. In addition to this general observation, it must also be remembered that Boko Haram's belief-system, with its total war on representative democracy and its attacks on Muslim elites accused of collaborating with the Nigerian state, clearly worked against the interests of the northern block that sustained the APC presidential candidate Buhari, which was attempting to mobilize northern votes against Jonathan and the PDP. It is therefore extremely implausible that Boko Haram might have been manipulated by a supposedly cohesive, northern political block in opposition to Jonathan.

The opposite idea, i.e. the belief in an involvement of Jonathan's administration in deliberately allowing the insurgency to grow in the north, was based on the frustration of the northern public with the slowness and inefficacy of the army's response to the insurgency during Jonathan's mandate, as well as on the fact that over the years, Boko Haram has barely ever hit any target in the south¹⁸. This speculation was also fed by the temporal coincidence between the beginning of the campaign for the presidential elections and the decision by Boko Haram to inaugurate a new strategy, formally occupying a territory and establishing its own "state". The additional coincidence of the establishment, more or less around the same time, of an alliance between the above-mentioned Ali Modu Sheriff and Jonathan, as well as the issuing of a report by the Australian negotiator Stephen Davis indicating the names of Sheriff and of Jonathan's Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Azubuike Ihejirika, as alleged sponsors of Boko Haram's insurgency¹⁹, were some of the factors that pushed a huge sector of the northern public opinion to believe that the government had a direct hand in the crisis. The assassination of religious scholars who had publicly voiced such an opinion²⁰, as well as Boko Haram's targeting of several APC-linked individuals in 2014, contributed to strengthen this idea²¹.

Now, the possibility that individual PDP figures in the north might have decided to fuel the insurgency in an attempt to prevent the APC's predictable electoral victory, cannot be ruled out

¹⁷ www.allafrica.com/stories/201411201043.html.

¹⁸ Boko Haram's attacks are concentrated in the north-eastern states (Borno, Yobe, Adamawa), where the militiamen are based, and in the north-central ones (Kano, Bauchi, Plateau), where the group has hit a number of targets via bombings. In several occasions, Boko Haram's attacks have also hit the Federal Capital Abuja.

¹⁹ www.saharareporters.com/2014/08/31/australian-negotiator-insists-modu-sheriff-ihejirika-sponsor-boko-haram-exonerates-buhari.

²⁰ See the case of Shaykh Auwal Albani discussed in BALA 2014.

²¹ During the electoral campaign, the opposition presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari himself barely escaped a July 2014 suicide bombing that killed over eighty people (www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/23/us-nigeria-violence-idUSKBN0FS19L20140723). Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, who was a figure widely associated with the APC and a personal opponent of Jonathan before ascending to one of the most influential Muslim hereditary positions as the new Emir of Kano, was also the probable intended target of Boko Haram's Friday 28 November suicide bombing at the Kano central mosque, which killed up to 200 people (www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/29/us-nigeria-violence-idUSKCN0JD0MKL20141129).

completely. The idea of a direct involvement of Jonathan at any stage of the insurgency, however, is unconvincing. Although his administration solicited the support of the least reliable of the northern PDP elites in a desperate bid to compensate the overwhelming support of the northern masses for the APC, the overall conduct of Jonathan with the Boko Haram issue appears to have been rooted in his inexperience with the complexities of Nigerian internal geo-politics, and in the simplistic tones of his anti-northern prejudice, rather than in Machiavellic calculations of sorts²².

The currency of these theories among the Nigerian public must be understood, on one side, as part of a blame game functional to maintain the north/south rhetorical cleavage, which is a systemic one in the political culture of post-colonial Nigeria. On the other side, however, it must also be seen as the symptom of a genuine frustration of the public, and of its failure to account for the various strategic metamorphoses Boko Haram has gone through, from its foundation in the early 2000s to its more recent terrorist and militarily exploits. Described by most observers, at its onset, as an obscure religious sect, in fact, Boko Haram was drawn, without apparent reasons, into a confrontation with the police forces that lasted intermittently from December 2003 to July 2009. After the killing of its leader Muhammad Yusuf and the destruction of its headquarters in the July 2009 military operation led by the Nigerian government, it re-emerged in 2010 under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau as a well-organized terror organization, launching a campaign of suicide bombing attacks. Finally, after the probable killing of Shekau in August 2013, it continued to be active under the shadowy leadership of a Shekau-pretender²³ who, in 2014, led a territorial military offensive with a well-organized army of

²² As for the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), which is called into question by the third of the theories outlined above, it is an organization that is widely perceived in the north, not without any reason, to be actively pursuing an “anti-Islam” agenda. While it claims to represent the whole spectrum of Christian denominations in the country, CAN has gradually come to be dominated by the thriving Evangelical Pentecostal churches. During Jonathan’s government, the increased politicisation of CAN prompted the Catholic Church to officially quit the organization (www.premiumtimes.com/news/116774-why-we-pulled-out-of-can-catholic-bishops.html). The global Pentecostal network, especially in Africa, is closely associated with the interests and the religious views of American Evangelicalism (GLIFFORD 1990). The so-called “Armageddon Lobby” (HAIJA 2006) has made some in-roads among African Pentecostals, promoting an interpretation of contemporary world politics that sees the role of the US in the lights of an apocalyptic/millennial scenario, whose cornerstones are Israel’s redemptive role and Islam’s embodiment of the Antichrist (ALDROVANDI 2014). This view finds some resonance in Nigeria among Christian communities living in areas with a history of local ethnic-religious conflict (KALU 2008, 225-248). The perception of CAN’s gradual move over the years towards increasingly anti-Muslim tones, and the role played by the organization in the micro-conflicts of the multi-religious Middle Belt region of Nigeria (especially southern Kaduna state and Plateau states), have fed Muslim speculations suggesting that CAN might have a vested interest in the Boko Haram insurgency. To fuel such rumours was also an international case involving two unidentified Nigerian citizens and an Israeli contractor, who were arrested by the South African police at the Lanseria airport in Johannesburg (South Africa) while attempting to smuggle an undeclared sum of 9.3 billion dollars in cash (www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29348983). The three men, who declared that the money was intended to purchase weapons on behalf of the Nigerian government, were traveling on the private jet of CAN’s president, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor. This event raises legitimate concerns about the possibility that CAN might be directly or indirectly involved in arming Christian militias operating in the most sensitive areas of the Nigerian Middle Belt. On the contrary, the idea that CAN might have conceived the plot of arming a movement like Boko Haram, which has virtually wiped Christian minority groups out of southern Borno and northern Adamawa states, and that Christian Evangelical organizations could be able to infiltrate the tight network of Jihadists of various nationality (Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger) that have been mobilized by Boko Haram, is preposterous. CAN is likely to continue exploiting the Boko Haram phenomenon to feed its millennial interpretation of global politics, but it cannot be held responsible for the phenomenon itself. For the theory of an involvement of Chad, see BERGHEZAN 2015. Finally, the theory of a combined US and Algerian interest in extending the activities of AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb) across the Sahara has been advanced by Jeremy Keenan (2013), whose theories, if validated, could be extended to the Nigerian case.

²³ For my argument about the probable death of Shekau, see BRIGAGLIA 2014b.

militiamen. The frustration of the public with the elusive nature of Boko Haram's metamorphoses and its chameleonic leadership, has resulted in a sort of collective phobia that, fed by the political blame game, has reached its peak during the recent presidential campaign.

The chances that at some point, cells of the fluid, de-centralized jihadi network associated with the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria, might have been manipulated by state and non-state actors in order to achieve specific strategic goals of their own, is very high. This does not explain, however, the genesis of the group, which must be seen as a by-product of the political-religious entanglement of the global Salafi *da'wa* (mission) in the Nigerian context, between theological purism and political violence.

2. *Islamist Utopia and Salafi Purism*

There is no disagreement that the birth of the movement known to the world by its Hausa nickname *Boko Haram* can be traced back to the years 2003-2004 and to the preaching of Muhammad Yusuf (d. 2009)²⁴. Yusuf had a previous history of activism within the Islamist movement known as *Jamā'at Tajdīd al-Islām* (JTI), a protest movement that had been active in the late military era, especially under the Abacha junta (1993-1999). I use the term Islamism here as a broad political category, more or less in the sense of "modern political Islam". Following James Piscatori, I call Islamists those «[m]uslims who are committed to political action to implement what they regard as an Islamic agenda»²⁵ within the context of the modern nation-state. Islamist activism, as intended by Piscatori, is inherently political, but is not necessarily associated with political violence. Islamists are actors who use a variety of strategies in order to achieve a variety of goals, including the recognition by the state of the right to form Islamic political parties, the implementation of Sharia-inspired legal reforms and, in some cases, overthrowing the government to establish an elusively defined "Islamic state". In most cases, Islamist leaders are not religious clerics, and they are heavily influenced by modern Western (including leftist, nationalist and Fascist) political thought, in that they incorporate ideas like mass mobilization, popular struggle, national interest etc., translating them in an Islamic religious idiom. Egypt's Muslim Brothers can be considered as the quintessential Islamist movement.

After the 1999 democratic transition, Nigeria did not witness the creation of an Islamic party or mass movement that would absorb the various Islamist actors that had agitated against the military government. Most existing Islamist networks in the country were involved in the agitation for the implementation of a Sharia-inspired penal code in the majority Muslim states of the north²⁶. At the forefront of the pro-Sharia agitation, however, was not an organized Islamist network with a political vision, but an extended network of Salafi actors. As suggested by Thomas Hegghammer and Quintan Wiktorowicz, Salafism should be used as a theological, and not a political category²⁷. Salafism is an increasingly important school of thought within modern Sunni Islam, of which the Wahhabi movement, thanks to its position as the official religious doctrine of the modern Saudi Arabian

²⁴ There is a growing literature on Boko Haram. I find the two recently published monographs by Mike Smith and Virginia Comolli (SMITH 2015 and COMOLLI 2015) unconvincing in their analysis. David Cook (2014) is theoretically more articulate, but out of touch with Nigeria. Many interesting materials, on the contrary, are included in the collection of essays edited by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos in 2012 (PÉROUSE DE MONTCLOS 2012), as well as in the one edited by Abdul Raufu Mustapha (MUSTAPHA 2014a). Many valid articles on the topic will be mentioned later in the paper.

²⁵ PISCATORI 2000, 2.

²⁶ On the Sharia implementation in Nigeria, see HARNISCHFEGGER 2008 and WEIMANN 2010.

²⁷ HEGGHAMMER 2009 and WIKTOROWICZ 2006.

kingdom, has gradually become the most influential manifestation²⁸. Salafi thought is characterized by its sharp emphasis on theological purity. This tendency is reinforced by the belief of being entrusted with a mission to revive the original creed of the forebears (*Salaf*) of Islam, purportedly lost at some point in the history of Islam. Salafis, especially those of the Wahhabi persuasion, believe that they constitute the historical embodiment of the “saved sect” (*al-firqa al-nājiya*) mentioned in a famous statement attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, which they interpret in an exclusivist sense²⁹. Such an exclusivist attitude is directed not only towards Shiite beliefs, but also towards much, if not most, of the historical manifestations of Sunni religiosity and theological thought, which Salafis variously categorize as spurious (*bid‘a*) or as outright unbelief (*kufir*).

In matters of religious practice, Salafis de-emphasize the traditional Sunni idea that the believer has to rely on the opinion of one of the four orthodox schools of jurisprudence (*madhhab*) which had formed during the first two centuries of Islamic history. In contrast, they advocate the need for the independent effort of the believer to directly interpret, rigorously filter and literally apply the foundational texts of Muslim sacred scripture (Quran and Hadith)³⁰. In matters of creed and belief, Salafis reject the validity of the theology of Ash‘arism, a large body of doctrines that functioned as the most widely accepted form of Sunni orthodoxy from the twelfth century to the advent of modernity. Finally, they discard the devotional practices of Sufism (Islamic “mysticism”) which pervade traditional Sunni piety.

While the Salafis, by their very nature, are engaged in a permanent doctrinal confrontation with competing Sunni theological trends, Islamists, at least in principle, privilege a less stringent definition of what is to be considered as the proper Islamic creed. Their conception of Islam, in facts, needs to be broad enough to provide the basis for the political mass mobilization that is at the core of their project³¹. In practice, however, local contexts can create the conditions for a hybridization between Salafī exclusivist theology and Islamist political movements, especially when none of the two is in power. This was the case in Nigeria in the early 2000s, when most Islamist actors were absorbed in the ranks of the Salafī network.

²⁸ On the history of the Wahhabi movement and its relationship with the Saudi state, see RASHEED 2010.

²⁹ «My community will be divided into seventy-three sects, all of which will be in the Fire except one» (as reported in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī). Most classical Sunni interpretations of this hadith argued that, as the words used in the text of the hadith are “my community” (emphasis added), this statement refers to groups of Muslims who cannot be considered as unbelievers. They will stay in the Fire for a determined amount of time, but God will ultimately free them from its torment. On the basis of this interpretation, as well as of another well-known hadith according to which «no man accuses another man of being a sinner or an unbeliever except that this statement will reflect back unto him, if [the one accused] was not so» (as reported in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī), classical Sunni theologians normally refrained from declaring other Muslims as *kāfir* (unbelievers), even when they held interpretations of the creed considered as unorthodox. For the views of a classical Sunni scholar like Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) on the definition of unbelief, see JACKSON 2002. The eponym of the Wahhabi school Muḥammad ibn al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), on the contrary, enunciates rules that significantly extends the parameters of *takfir* (“accusing a Muslim to be a non-believer”; “excommunication”). Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb also personally brought this *takfir* to its extreme conclusions when he wrote to the Qāḍī of Dir‘iyya that he considered that anybody who claimed that any of the religious scholars of the Arabian Peninsula, including Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s own teachers, knew “the meaning of Islam” before the beginning of his (i.e. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s) mission, had lied, as reported by the official Saudi historiographers (IBN AL-QĀSIM 2004, vol. 10, 15; I thank Fakhrudin Owaysi for drawing my attention to this epistle).

³⁰ Because of their common emphasis on the principle of *sola scriptura*, as well as on the de-centralization of religious authority, the argument has been advanced that the emergence of the Protestant reform in sixteenth-century Christianity and the Salafī trend in modern Islam can be considered as similar phenomena in the history of the two religions (see LOIMEIER 2005).

³¹ For an insightful discussion of the Salafism vs Islamist dilemma in Sudan’s politics, see SOLOMON 2009.

In Nigeria, the Salafi trend is of relatively recent introduction, but has a considerable appeal, perhaps more than anywhere else in West Africa³². In the early 2000s, it was represented primarily by the two partly overlapping networks of *Izala* (*Jamā'at 'Izālat al-Bid'a wa-Iqāmat al-Sunna*) and *Ahlu Sunna*. The first is an organization established in 1978 by the students of Abu Bakr Mahmud Gumi (d. 1992)³³. *Izala*'s main goals were to promote and popularize Gumi's critique of the traditional religious scholars (which are for the most part Ash'ari and Sufi) and to encourage the "eradication" (this is the meaning of the word *'izāla*) of spurious practices (*bid'a*), a term of classical Islamic heresiography which *Izala*, following standard Wahhabi texts, liberally applies to most Sufi practices³⁴. While *Izala* represents an earlier Salafi leadership in Nigeria, *Ahlu Sunna* emerged around a generation of younger Nigerian Salafis, many of whom had studied at the Islamic University in Medina (Saudi Arabia) and could boast a more robust grasp of the Wahhabi theological corpus than their *Izala* counterparts, as well as a closer link with the global network of the students of Saudi Arabia-based Salafi religious establishment³⁵.

Starting from the late 1990s, the success of *Ahlu Sunna* in attracting followers from the urban educated elites of northern Nigeria was due to the symbolic capital gained by its leaders through their studies in Medina. This capital was used to continue, and revitalise, *Izala*'s campaigns against the Sufi religious scholars, while at the same time, partly delegitimise the older leadership of *Izala*, accused of petty factionalism³⁶ and of having a superficial knowledge of the Salafi canon. In other words, *Ahlu Sunna* entered the Muslim public sphere of Nigeria as the quintessential face of global and modern Islam. This is the main reason why its contiguity with a movement like Boko Haram, portrayed in the media as a characteristically anti-modern one, is an apparent irony that even *Ahlu Sunna*'s supporters are often unable to explain.

After the absorption of the would-be founder of Boko Haram Muhammad Yusuf, around 1999, in *Ahlu Sunna*, all sources concur that by 2004 a serious rift occurred between him and the main *Ahlu Sunna* leaders. The two issues that caused a disagreement between the two groups were Yusuf's edicts which affirmed that «modern Western education was religiously forbidden to Muslims» and that «employment in the government of Nigeria was also religiously forbidden»³⁷.

In the context of post-Sharia reforms northern Nigeria, Yusuf's radical rejection of the Nigerian state also translated into a rejection of the Islamic courts operating the Sharia-inspired codes launched by the governments of the Muslim states of the north after the popular agitation of the years 1999-2002. The origin of a sense of disillusionment with the Sharia reforms was twofold. The popular passion elicited by the Sharia mobilization in the period 1999-2002, had been based on the combination of two overlapping utopias, which I would define as an "Islamist utopia" and a "Salafi utopia". The first was a political dream based on the assumption that the implementation of the new Sharia-inspired penal codes would lead to the creation of a perfect, united, secure and corruption-free Islamic society³⁸. The second was a puritanical religious utopia, based on the assumption that the Sharia reforms would ultimately empower the Salafi movement, providing it with new tools to enforce its creed and to implement "correct" religious practices. None of the two aspirations was fully realized in practice. On one side, in fact, the northern Muslim political class, after trying to resist the popular

³² For an excellent introduction to Salafism in contemporary Africa, see ØSTEBØ 2015.

³³ For Gumi's biography, see LOIMEIER 1997b.

³⁴ For a sociological study of *Izala*, see KANE 2003. For a historical approach, see BEN AMARA 2011. On *Izala* intellectual discourses, see UMAR 1999.

³⁵ For a study of *Ahlu Sunna* between Nigeria and global Salafism, see THURSTON 2015a.

³⁶ By the mid-1990s, *Izala* had split in two factions (popularly known as *Izala Kaduna* and *Izala Jos*). The *Izala* split is discussed in detail in BEN AMARA 2011, 242-290.

³⁷ ANONYMOUS 2012, 122.

³⁸ On the role of the aspiration for security in nurturing the Sharia mobilization in northern Nigeria, see LAST 2008.

pressure to implement the new codes, gradually assumed full control of the Sharia implementation process. This led to a practical compromise being made between the revolutionary expectations of the masses who agitated for Sharia and the conservative needs of the political power groups that controlled the Sharia reforms process. On the other side, in creating the Sharia committees that would advise the governments of the various “Sharia states”, the political elites ended up recruiting many of the traditional, prevalently Sufi scholars, who still constituted, in many states, the majority of the clerical class at the grass-root level. Paradoxically, therefore, the Sharia reforms that had been the trademark of Izala and Ahlus Sunna³⁹, in many states ended up empowering the Sufis and forced the Salafis to accept a doctrinal compromise that some, within the movement, saw as a threat to the purity of the mission as a whole.

The rapid shift from a collective atmosphere of utopian euphoria to one of disenchantment towards the local experiment of Sharia implementation in Nigeria, explains some of the psychological dynamics that fed the Boko Haram militancy. As I have argued elsewhere⁴⁰, the disenchantment with the Sharia implementation is a factor that needs to be taken into account to explain the formation of a public of young, idealistic Salafis who positively responded to some of Yusuf’s central ideas and to his call for a total disengagement from the Nigerian state.

The break between the “mainstream Salafis”⁴¹, as represented by Ahlus Sunna, and the radical ones represented by Yusuf’s group, however, was not a sudden, but a gradual one. Many of Yusuf’s ideas started to resonate within a sector of the young Muslim public almost in an unconscious way. Contrary to a common perception that Yusuf’s ideas appealed to a rural, uneducated public, it was among the urban, modern-educated youth that the classical jihadi propaganda videos portraying militants training in Afghanistan or Chechnya started to circulate. At some point, Yusuf’s followers produced a sort of “anthem” of Boko Haram in English, which became ubiquitous through the social media and was adopted as a phone ringtone throughout the country. The song was especially popular among Muslim students in universities and high schools:

«I pledge to Islam, my religion / to be faithful, loyal and honest / to serve Islam with all my power / and I pray for Allah’s assistance. / I have promised to be a Muslim / I have promised to work for Islam / I have promised to serve for [sic] Islam / so that I may get eternal bliss. / We want Qur’an as constitution / we want Hadith as constitution / we want Qur’an as constitution / we will no more accept the theories. / Human theories are barbaristic [sic] / human theories are barbaristic / human theories are aimless theories / we will no more accept the theories. / Oh you brother, Jihad is coming / oh my brother, jihad is coming / oh my sister, jihad is coming / we will no more accept the theories!»⁴².

The song was produced by one Ibrāhīm al-Barnāwī KSA (i.e., Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), seemingly a Nigerian resident in Saudi Araba. The text mimics and ridicules the Nigerian national pledge that is recited on a daily basis in the country’s public schools: «I pledge to Nigeria, my country, to be faithful, loyal and honest; to serve Nigeria with all my strength, to defend her unity and uphold her honour and glory». To add to its intended effect of mockery, on the internet it circulates in the form of a video clip in which the song is superposed to the images of a group of Nigerian schoolboys and

³⁹ On the significance of the Sharia implementation mobilization for the Nigerian Salafi movement, see BEN AMARA 2013.

⁴⁰ BRIGAGLIA 2012, 38.

⁴¹ I borrow the terms from Alex Thurston (THURSTON 2015b).

⁴² Available online at www.youtube/watch?v=y_X4v86Q3qs. The video is introduced by a note in Arabic reassuring the listener that the voices used for the recording are artificially produced in studio, and not a choir of authentic female voices, which some may consider a sin to listen to.

schoolgirls dancing during a school recital. Of recent, the initial lines of this “Boko Haram pledge” have been solemnly quoted by (pseudo) Abubakar Shekau, before histrionically burning a Nigerian flag, in one of his internet video messages⁴³.

The vast majority of the Salafi and non-Salafi young Muslims who had adopted this song as a ringtone were (and still are) completely unaware of its association with Boko Haram’s ideas, which they reject with the same sincerity with which they appreciate the song. Looking at the text critically, however, it is difficult not to recognize it as a synthetic statement of the programme that, during the same years, was being promoted by Yusuf’s group: rejection of the Nigerian constitution; rejection of public, secular education and of the “human theories” it promotes; finally, preparation of jihad. Yusuf’s message had started to penetrate the young Muslim public via unconscious, almost subliminal ways. Most would ignore the threat. Some would acknowledge it and be on the alert. Others would answer the call.

3. *Muhammad Yusuf and Jihadi Salafism*

During the last three years, some important publications have appeared, providing insightful accounts of the intra-Salafi debates that have given birth to Yusuf’s movement. By carefully looking at Boko Haram’s intellectual genealogy instead of brushing it away as an obscure “extremist sect”⁴⁴ or as a social protest movement in religious guise⁴⁵, these publications have started to fill what was probably the most serious gap in the existing literature on the subject. Quite importantly, these publications serve as a powerful corrective to the widespread assumption that Boko Haram’s militancy was only started by Abubakar Shekau in 2010, who is wrongly believed to have been the first to «ignite the Jihad that Yusuf spoke of in ideological terms»⁴⁶, allegedly as a vendetta for the killing of Yusuf and the dismantling of his group.

The first serious attempt to understand Yusuf’s religious ideology was an anonymous article appeared on a 2012 issue of the *Journal of Religion in Africa*⁴⁷. The article unpacked the religious arguments of Yusuf as well as those of the Ahlus Sunna leaders who had criticized him from within the framework of the Salafi canon. The author’s main sources were audio or video recordings of sermons in Hausa by Yusuf and by his two Salafi opponents: Yusuf’s former teacher Shaykh Ja’far Mahmoud Adam (who would later be murdered, probably under the orders of Yusuf himself)⁴⁸ and Isa Aliyu Pantami. The discourses of the two opposing sides are defined by the author, respectively, as “Salafi radicalism” and “Salafi counter-radicalism”. The author’s conclusion is that, although both sides participated in the Salafi tradition, and although both agreed on the desirability of a struggle to establish a Muslim form of government, Yusuf’s answer to the question of *how* should Muslims establish the desired government led him «toward radicalism and violent confrontation with the Nigerian government»⁴⁹. In contrast, the leadership of Ahlus Sunna followed the «non-radical path of tactical acceptance of the necessity of working within the non-Islamic government in order to achieve incremental improvement pending the establishment of an Islamic government»⁵⁰.

⁴³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQDpWgWCXVI.

⁴⁴ See, among others, DANJIBO 2009.

⁴⁵ HANSEN, MUSA 2013.

⁴⁶ ZENN 2014, 108.

⁴⁷ ANONYMOUS 2012.

⁴⁸ For a biography of Ja’far Adam, see BRIGAGLIA 2012a.

⁴⁹ ANONYMOUS 2012, 139.

⁵⁰ ANONYMOUS 2012, 139.

Two very recent works by Abdulfassit Kassim and Alex Thurston have provided additional, important insights into Boko Haram's intellectual genealogy, shifting the emphasis from the Nigerian to the global Salafi arena⁵¹. Kassim, in particular, points out that the debates between Boko Haram and Ahlus Sunna in Nigeria are the local manifestation of a tension existing between global "quietist" and "jihadi" Salafi trends. The terms are reminiscent of the model articulated by Quintan Wiktorowicz in an influential 2006 article⁵². In the latter's definition, the quietist Salafis (which he preferred to call "purists") are defined as those who focus on "nonviolent methods of propagation, purification, and education"⁵³. They discourage their followers from political activism, sticking to the classical, Sunni principle that obedience to the Muslim ruler is mandatory. The second trend, on the contrary, calls for "violence and revolution" to overthrow the governments of their countries⁵⁴.

The militant call of a jihadi like Yusuf – both Kassim and Thurston argue – was based on a more rigid application of the principle of *takfir* (excommunication) of the Muslim ruler who «rules by other than God's revealed law» (*al-ḥukm bi-ghayr mā anzala Allāh*)⁵⁵, as well as on the basis of the associated principle of *al-walā' wa'l-barā'* («loyalty [to Islam] and disavowal [of everything else]»), which implies that a deficiency shown in one's loyalty to the laws of Islam or in the disavowal of non-Islamic systems constitutes, by itself, an act of unbelief (*kufir*)⁵⁶ putting the one (in this case, the Muslim ruler) who commits it, out of the fold of Islam.

Both Kassim and Thurston concur that it was mainly due to the intellectual influence he received from the texts of the *māitres à penser* of global jihadi Salafi thought, in particular the al-Qaeda ideologue of the post-9/11 generation Abū Muḥammad al-Maḥdī, that Yusuf developed an exclusivist worldview demanding his followers to «chose between Islam and a set of allegedly anti-Islamic practices: democracy, constitutionalism, alliances with non-Muslims, and Western-style education»⁵⁷. The two articles convincingly demonstrate that «Boko Haram has not only successfully internalized the religious philosophy of *jihādī-Salafism* but it is also actively promoting the dissemination of the theological discourses of *jihādī-Salafism* among receptive audiences in

⁵¹ KASSIM 2015 and THURSTON 2015c. John Azumah (AZUMAH 2015) also contains a reflection on Boko Haram's ideology and makes some valid points. However, his review of the primary sources used by Yusuf, which mainly consist of Arabic texts, is not very thorough. This prevents him from fully grasping the nuances and implications of Yusuf's political theology. Moreover, his attempt to establish a connection between the nineteenth-century jihad movement of Usman Dan Fodio and the twenty-first century one led by Muhammad Yusuf, is ultimately unconvincing. Although it is true that Dan Fodio, in order to justify his war with the nominally Muslim rulers of Hausaland as well as with the Islamic kingdom of Borno, had to stretch the accepted parameters of *takfir* (excommunication), he still continued to operate within the classical theology of Ash'arism, wherein *takfir* of Muslims is the exception rather the norm. Yusuf, on the contrary, operates within the context of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's theology, wherein the parameters of *takfir* are exceptionally loose (see, for example, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's pamphlet *Nawāqid al-Islām* "The Nullifiers of Islam", RAAJIHEE 2003). While Usman Dan Fodio had to justify his *takfir* of the rulers of Borno with long, elaborate (and not always entirely convincing) treatises, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's epistles against his contemporaries are made of a few lines of simple syllogisms, just like the statements of Yusuf against his Nigerian contemporaries.

⁵² WIKTOROWICZ 2006.

⁵³ WIKTOROWICZ 2006, 208.

⁵⁴ WIKTOROWICZ 2006, 208.

⁵⁵ On jihadi Salafi interpretations of this principle, see KASSIM 2015, 179-187.

⁵⁶ On this topic, Thurston's analysis (THURSTON 2015c, 8 s.) is more articulate than Kassim's. It is important to note that one of the most important treatises of the al-Qaeda ideologue Ayman al-Zawāhirī (*al-Walā' wa'l-Barā'*: *Aqīda manqūla wa-wāqi' mafqūd*), written in 2002, is dedicated to a theoretical analysis of this principle. The book is discussed by Mohamed Bin Ali (BIN ALI 2015), along with other texts written by non-jihadi Salafis on the same theme. For a more extensive discussion, see BIN ALI 2012.

⁵⁷ THURSTON 2015c, 1.

Nigeria»⁵⁸. Both papers, however, fail to quote – except for the recorded speeches of Nigerian Ahlus Sunna leaders – authoritative and global sources from the quietist Salafī school arguing that “democracy, constitutionalism” etc., are *not* incompatible with Islam. For this reason, their conclusion (or rather, assumption) that quietist and jihadi Salafis operate on the basis of opposed political theologies is far from being established. The fact that these articles show the probable influence of al-Maḳḳisī on Yusuf, however, should alert to the possibility that the quietist vs jihadi clash may not be the most appropriate lens to analyze the Ahlus Sunna vs Boko Haram rift. As shown by Joas Wagemakers’ insightful monograph, in fact, al-Maḳḳisī represents a new generation of al-Qaeda ideologues, whose theology is so close to that of the quietists, to deserve being labelled with the apparent oxymoron “quietist jihadi”⁵⁹.

The basic assumption, for both Kassim and Thurston, is that the jihadi interpretation of the two concepts of *al-ḥukm bi-ghayr mā anzala Allāh* and *al-walā’ wa’l-barā’* is more rigid or extreme than that one advocated by the quietists. In the following pages, I will try to show that these two principles, along with their corollary that democracy is unbelief (*kufṛ*) or at best, unlawful (*ḥarām*), are fundamental to the theoretical edifice of contemporary Salafī political theology across the quietist vs jihadi divide. Salafī political theology will thus appear as an inherently fragile edifice, built on an uneasy amalgam between the absolutist monarchic principle of unconditional obedience to the legitimate Islamic authority and a quasi-anarchist attitude towards the definition of the criteria that make a legitimate authority Islamic in the first place.

Before getting to my central argument, it is important to note that, while agreeing that theological doctrine prepares for militancy, Kassim and Thurston moderately disagree on whether theological beliefs alone can explain Boko Haram’s extreme outbursts of violence. For Kassim, Boko Haram’s violent campaigns do not constitute «acts of revenge for the government repression and extrajudicial killing of its members»⁶⁰. Even before the government crackdown of July 2009, Boko Haram’s ideology was already «geared toward the preparation of a cataclysmic confrontation with the secular authorities in Nigeria»⁶¹. The government’s repression is therefore «nothing but a precipitant that triggers the violent upsurge of the group»⁶². On these bases, Kassim convincingly refutes the idea that «poverty, deprivation, misrule or poor governance» are the main reasons explaining Boko Haram’s militancy, as argued by the proponents of the relative deprivation theory⁶³. Thurston’s analysis overlaps with Kassim’s, but leaves some space for a more nuanced understanding of the causal links between theological exclusivism and political violence. Boko Haram’s “religious exclusivism”, which leads the group to label all its opponents (including the majority of their fellow Salafis) as unbelievers, is indeed for Thurston, the fundamental ingredient of the group’s worldview. Such exclusivism, however, activates a recipe for violence only because it is combined with a second one, i.e. the group’s “politics of victimhood”⁶⁴. I find this observation a very important one, as the formation of Boko Haram’s group identity has been clearly a twofold process, at the same time ideological and emotional⁶⁵. Boko Haram’s politics of victimhood clearly served to activate the emotional side of the

⁵⁸ KASSIM 2015, 187.

⁵⁹ WAGEMAKERS 2012.

⁶⁰ WAGEMAKERS 2012, 19.

⁶¹ WAGEMAKERS 2012, 19.

⁶² WAGEMAKERS 2012, 19.

⁶³ See especially AGBIBOA 2013.

⁶⁴ THURSTON 2015c, 1.

⁶⁵ The role of emotions in contemporary politics has been argued, among others, by Jack Barbalet (2002) and Paul Hogget (2009). More recently, Aini Linjakumpu has used emotion as a lens to explain the processes of engagement and disengagement from Islamic terrorist groups (LINJAKUMPU 2014).

recruiting process. Yusuf's last recorded speech to his audience in Maiduguri, with its detailed and graphic descriptions of the wounds inflicted by the Nigerian military on the injured members of his groups, is a magisterial example of his ability to trigger in his followers an emotional process of victimization⁶⁶, more or less as what happens, on the global scale, with the diffusion of graphic jihadi propaganda videos. Although I find Thurston's observation on Boko Haram's "politics of victimhood" very insightful, in the context of this paper I will continue to focus on issues related to ideology and in particular, on the genealogy of Boko Haram's political theology.

4. *Salafi Political Theology and the Quietist vs Jihadi Fallacy*

As I have noted above, both Kassim and Thurston heavily rely on Wiktorowicz's 2006 «anatomy of the Salafi movement»⁶⁷. In Wiktorowicz's model, the quietist and the jihadi are only two of the three trends of Salafi political theology, the third being the "politicos", i.e. those who «emphasize application of the Salafi creed to the political arena»⁶⁸ and allow the formation of Islamist parties. Wiktorowicz (wrongly) assumed that there is a continuum in the chances that Salafi groups might resort to violence, ranging from the pacifism of the quietists, to the activism of the politics, to the militancy of the jihadis.

Kassim and Thurston rightly see Boko Haram as the purest representative of the jihadi trend in Nigeria. Conversely, Kassim locates Ahlus Sunna in the quietist camp⁶⁹. A similar approach can also be seen in the anonymous author of the 2012 article. Although he does not explicitly refer to Wiktorowicz, his categorization of "radical" and "counter-radical" Salafi discourses⁷⁰ parallels Wiktorowicz's "jihadi" and "purist" categories.

My problem with this approach is twofold. First of all, the position of the main Ahlus Sunna leader Ja'far Adam (who was also Yusuf's most articulate opponent) on the global jihad of al-Qaeda, has always been ambiguous, from the early 2000s up to his 2007 murder. There is no doubt that Adam unambiguously rejected Yusuf's ban on public education and on the Nigerian institutions, and that he attempted to stop Yusuf from his plan to start a jihad against the Nigerian state. In the public engagement between the two, however, there is barely any trace of an explicit disagreement over the issue of the legitimacy of the jihad against the Americans waged by al-Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan. A prudently sympathetic view towards al-Qaeda's cause in Iraq, on the contrary, can be gauged not only from many of Adam's speeches in the early 2000s, but also from his last recorded speech, dated 12 April 2007, in which the author numbers an impressive series of points against Yusuf's doctrine – without ever touching the issue of al-Qaeda's global jihad as such. On the contrary, Adam's speech mentions the names of Osama bin Laden (d. 2011), Abū Mus'ab al-Zarqāwī (d. 2006) and Ayman al-Zawāhirī as examples of «Muslims who have used western knowledge to retaliate against the aggression of the Americans against Islam»⁷¹. In other words, their examples are quoted not to make a

⁶⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxWs6cUq_gs.

⁶⁷ WIKTOROWICZ 2006.

⁶⁸ WIKTOROWICZ 2006, 208.

⁶⁹ KASSIM 2015, 176, nt. 9. At page 188, Kassim seems to allude to the possibility that some of the Ahlus Sunna was more on a politico position than on a quietist one. He seems, however, to assume that the two (politico and quietist) are virtually indistinguishable. On the contrary, a central part of my argument in this paper is that the quietists share with the jihadis more than they do with the politics – except for their unconditional loyalty to the Saudi monarchy, which the jihadis, as the politics, challenge.

⁷⁰ ANONYMOUS 2012.

⁷¹ ADAM 2007.

point against Yusuf over the legitimacy or illegitimacy of al-Qaeda's global jihad, but to argue that acquiring western education (Bin Laden had a degree in engineering, while Z̄awāhirī is a medical doctor) is compulsory to better serve the cause of Islam. My purpose here is not to indict Adam by claiming that statements such as this amount to a full declaration of loyalty to al-Qaeda and to an endorsement of the latter's attacks targeting civilians. His could have been only a rhetorical device to argue against the logic of Yusuf's combined support for global jihad and veto on the western education that only provides the necessary tool to conduct jihad in the modern world. Adam's speeches on the issue of al-Qaeda's global jihad followed a complex trajectory, evolving from a seeming support in the early 2000s, to an increasingly wary attitude from 2004 onwards, that led him to avoid taking any position publicly⁷². My intention, therefore, is not to apply one of Wiktorowicz's simplistic labels to the trajectory followed by Adam over the years. If Adam's oscillations on al-Qaeda's global jihad are not sufficient to label him as a jihadi, however, depicting him as a quietist would seem offensive to most of his followers, who loved him precisely for what they perceived as his courage to «speak the truth to power» at all cost⁷³.

My second problem is the assumption that Yusuf's most characteristic and extreme edicts, which were rejected by the leadership of Ahlus Sunna, should be considered as typical of the jihadis, and that they distinguish the latter at the same time from quietists and politicians. Kassim makes the following point, which is central to his argument:

«The literal interpretation of these verses according to the *jihādī-Salafīs* is the supremacy of divine legislations over un-Islamic laws or secular political ideologies. Based on this theological strain of thought, *jihādī-Salafīs* interpret any attempt by political rulers to trade away the *Sharī'a* for secular laws or to govern by democracy as an act of profanity, polytheism [*shirk*] and major unbelief»⁷⁴.

The point Kassim seems to be missing here is that the equation between participating in democratic elections and unbelief is the very cornerstone of the political theology of the most quietist trend of Salafis, whose thought has been promoted by the Saudi government over the last fifteen years. In its efforts to counter the *Ṣaḥwa* (awakening) movement, in fact, whose leaders combined Salafī purism with Islamist political thought and agitated for political reforms in the Kingdom⁷⁵, the Saudi establishment has promoted the fatwas of a strand of ultra-purist scholars like, among others, Rabī' al-Madkhalī⁷⁶. Most of these fatwas absolutely forbid any form of political activity in a democratic and constitutional context, arguing that as a man-made system, democracy is a form of unbelief. The fatwas of the purists, which in the Saudi context from which they emanate reinforce the stability of the country's absolute monarchy, can have an opposite, unintended effect when they are transferred in different contexts, like Nigeria, where they undermine the position of Salafis who – like Adam – tried to argue in favour of democracy and constitutionalism.

The argument of Rabī' al-Madkhalī on democracy, representative elections and political parties is articulated especially in his book *Jamā'a wāḥida lā jamā'āt wa-ṣirāṭ wāḥid lā 'aṣharāt* ("One

⁷² This avoidance could be interpreted in many different ways. Only a careful chronological study of his speeches, which is beyond the scope of this article, could illuminate the trajectory of his thought on this issue.

⁷³ This is a recurring theme in the many obituaries written to celebrate him. See, for an example, Ibrahim Sulaiman's obituary available online at www.halifapure.blogspot.co.za/2011_02_01_archive.html.

⁷⁴ KASSIM 2015, 179.

⁷⁵ On the *Ṣaḥwa*, from which Osama Bin Laden drew some (but not all) of his ideas, see RASHEED 2006 and LACROIX 2011.

⁷⁶ On al-Madkhalī's thought, see MEIJER 2011.

Community, not Many and One Way, not Tens”⁷⁷). This argument is based on the idea that just as “Islam is one community” (*milla wāhida*), so is unbelief (*kufr*). Such an argument is strictly linked to the principle of *al-walā’ wa’l-barā’* (loyalty and disavowal), and it is so close to al-Maqdisī’s jihadi argument on the same issue to be barely distinguishable from it.

In his attempt to establish the irreducibility of quietist and jihadi Salafi political theologies, Kassim makes the following argument.

«In this context, the Muslims who support or choose to participate in the political regimes ruling with secular law are accused [by jihadi Salafīs] of not disbelieving in *tāghūt* [i.e., un-Islamic objects of worship] and therefore lacking in *tawhīd* [i.e., monotheism]; [...]. This is probably why *jihādī-Salafīs* criticize Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas for betraying the goals of *tawhīd* and even accepting to participate in what they often refer to as “godless” democratic structures and blemished human inventions that expunge God’s sovereignty of divine governance»⁷⁸.

Again, Kassim seems to ignore the fact that the very same criticism (when not outright excommunication) of the Muslim Brotherhood on the basis of their acceptance of democracy, while certainly shared by a recent generation of al-Qaeda leaders like al-Maqdisī, has been in fact, and for a long time, the characteristic hallmark of the most quietist strand of Salafīs! In the Salafi internet sites aligned with the quietist school, statements accusing the Muslim Brothers of “Leninism”, *tāghūt*-worship etc., are daily currency, side by side the various statements accusing the jihadis of being *Kharijites* for their rebellion against established authority⁷⁹. These statements are all based on fatwas by well-established quietist scholars, who use the very same arguments against democracy attributed by Kassim *only* to the jihadis. It is only in the ranks of the politicians, as well as, perhaps, of the earlier generation of al-Qaeda and of some minority voices within today’s confused jihadi camp like Abū Mus‘ab al-Sūrī⁸⁰, that one may find a less rigid stance towards the Muslim Brothers and in general, towards non-Salafi Islamist parties. While Kassim seems to move from the assumption that a more revolutionary militant action is necessary the result of a more exclusivist religious doctrine, in the Salafi debate between quietists and jihadis, the exact opposite is often truer.

From the theological point of view, the difference between so-called quietist Salafīs and so-called jihadi Salafīs operating in the Arabian Peninsula, is virtually only on whether or not *takfīr* (excommunication) should be declared on the Saudi monarchy for its strategic alliance (*muwālāt*) with the United States of America. On this particular point, the theological nuances mentioned by Kassim to differentiate between quietists and jihadis effectively apply. It is also true that most quietists do not normally advocate the launching of a jihad against the governments of other Muslim countries which they believe to be ruled with human-made laws, while some jihadis do. Here, however, the difference has nothing to do with a supposedly milder degree of *takfīr* of the rulers of (virtually all) Muslim countries who enact man-made laws, but is merely a corollary of the first point (i.e. the loyalty of the quietists to the Saudi kingdom): as jihad can only be declared by a legitimate ruler, in fact, the quietist Salafi scholars refrain from explicitly advocating jihad against the governments of other Muslim countries, while still holding their systems of government to constitute outright *kufr*.

Besides al-Madkhali, another influential voice in the quietist camp is that of Muqbil b. Hādī al-Wādī‘ī (d. 2001), probably the most celebrated Salafi scholar of Yemen. After having been accused of

⁷⁷ The book can be downloaded at the website www.rabee.co.uk.

⁷⁸ KASSIM 2015, 185.

⁷⁹ Especially www.salafitalk.net.

⁸⁰ On al-Sūrī, see LIA 2009a. On his critique of Salafi sectarian exclusivism, LIA 2009b.

association with religious extremism, al-Wādi'ī became one of the most notable Salafi opponents of the jihadis and the politicians⁸¹. Just like al-Madkhalī, al-Wādi'ī left no ambiguity to his students as to what he considered as the correct ruling on the issue: «democracy is disbelief (*kufīr*) because it means that the mass rules itself by itself; it means there is no Book and no Sunna and no Islam»⁸². When asked whether his ruling was based on the principle of *maṣlaḥa* (public benefit), and was therefore negotiable under certain circumstances, or rather on the doctrine of *al-walā' wa'l-barā'* (loyalty and disavowal), and therefore an absolute one, al-Wādi'ī answered: «It is based on *al-walā' wa'l-barā'*»⁸³. Exceptions do exist, and some cautious arguments in favour of the possibility of participating into elections have been advanced by Salafi scholars. In the 1990s, several influential Salafi scholars held the position that, while elections are indeed *ḥarām* (prohibited), they are not necessarily *kufīr* (unbelief). This left some room for a legal reasoning that allowed participating in the electoral process under exceptional circumstances. Islamic Law, in fact, allows to use the principles of *maṣlaḥa* (public benefit) and *ḍarūra* (necessity), to permit an action prohibited under normal circumstances, if this serves to fulfil another, more important religious or social obligation. In the early 1990s, the late mufti (highest religious authority) of Saudi Arabia, 'Abd al-'Azīz Bin Bāz (d. 1999), as well as the most celebrated Salafi scholar of recent times, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999), had all famously issued fatwas that cautiously allowed Muslims (read: Salafis) to participate in elections based on the principles of *maṣlaḥa* (public benefit) and *ḍarūra* (necessity). This permission was meant to create a space for the then rising Algerian Salafi movement to participate in the 1992 elections within the ranks of the FIS (*Front Islamique du Salut*). These fatwas are still used by politico Salafis worldwide in order to justify their participation in democratic governments. Among all the Saudi-based Salafi scholars of the time, Muḥammad ibn 'Uthaymīn (d. 2001) was the one who had stretched this permission to its broadest limits, famously stating that participating in elections, in countries where the political system does not allow a Muslim to have his voice heard in another way, becomes *wājib* (obligatory)⁸⁴. The Ahlus Sunna leader Ja'far Mahmoud Adam certainly had these fatwas in mind when he argued, against Yusuf, that there was a clear benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) for Muslims to participate in the government.

However, such permissive fatwas emanating from the Saudi religious authorities of the early 1990s were not, after all, as permissive as Adam and his fellow Nigerian Ahlus Sunna leaders would have liked them to be. After issuing the edit that cautiously allowed participating in the Algerian elections, for instance, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (probably under pressure from the Saudi government) had famously retreated it, stating that participating in such elections was prohibited (*ḥarām*), because none

⁸¹ On Muqbil al-Wādi'ī, see HAYKEL 2002.

⁸² KASHMEEREE [n.d.], 3. The quote is from a rich collection of al-Wādi'ī's writings and statements on democracy translated into English. The collection is based on al-Wādi'ī's writing *Tuhfat al-mujīb 'alā as'ilat al-hāḍir wa'l-gharīb* as well as on his biography *al-Riḥla al-akhīra li-Imām al-Jazīra*, written by his wife Umm Salama al-Salafiyya.

⁸³ KASHMEEREE [n.d.], 12. The internet abounds with similar statements by al-Wādi'ī's many students. A statement of one of the most influential of them, Yaḥyā b. 'Alī al-Ḥajūrī, is widely circulated as follows: «Elections are prohibited. It is blind following of the disbelievers and from the branches of democracy. And democracy is prohibited. It is the ruling of the people by themselves without a Book or Sunnah. And democracy is disbelief. And partisanship (*hizbiyya*) is prohibited except for the party of Allah» (from a fatwa that I have not been able to verify, apparently recorded in 2002 as quoted in the forum: www.salafitalk.net/st/viewmessages.cfm?Forum=9&Topic=5880). A long discussion of various similar statements by an impressive number of quietist Salafi scholars, including well-known religious authorities (Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, 'Abd al-'Azīz Bin Bāz, Rabī' al-Madkhalī, 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Wasābī, 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Bur'ī, 'Abdallāh b. 'Uthmān al-Ḍammārī, 'Uthmān b. 'Abdallāh al-'Utāmī, Yaḥyā al-Ḥajūrī), all outlawing elections and, in many cases, making the equation between democracy and unbelief, has been compiled in 1996 by Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Raymī. This text (RAYMEE 1996), translated into English by a Canadian (Shākir al-Kanādī), is available on the internet via the quietist Salafi forum www.salafitalk.net.

⁸⁴ This fatwa continues to generate controversy to this day. Contemporary quietist Salafis like al-Raymī feel compelled to devote long discussions to its refutation (RAYMEE 1996).

of the conditions for its permissibility were in place, in Algeria or elsewhere⁸⁵. Moreover, al-Albānī's ruling was not meant to apply to countries where Muslims constitute a minority. Answering to a question on whether participating in elections in America was permissible for a Muslim in order to represent the interests of his religious community, al-Albānī had answered:

«Unbelief constitutes a homogenous community (*al-kufr milla wāḥida*). God – may He be exalted – says, as a reminder to those Muslims who believe that they are implementing the principle of the lesser of two evils (*akḥaff al-ḍararayn*): “Neither Jews nor Christians will be pleased with you until you follow their religion” [Qur’an 2: 120]. I am greatly amazed at the youth who rely on a delusion such as the one mentioned in your question – may God’s benediction be upon you. God – may He be exalted – says: “Do not incline towards the wrongdoers, lest you be touched by the Fire” [Qur’an 11: 113], a fire of this world before a fire of the Hereafter. Therefore, I say that it is not permissible (*lā yajūz*) to participate in such elections, because such a participation implies taking the unbelievers as friends by ways of your actions (*muwālāt ‘amaliyya li’l-kuffār*), and this is impermissible according to the Qur’anic text in which the Lord of Creation says: “Whoever amongst you takes them as friends, he is surely one of them” [Qur’an 5: 51]»⁸⁶.

As for Bin Bāz, he too had specified in his fatwas that his permission was not a general, but an exceptional one, whose validity depended on the presence of a number of conditions. These included that the political system within which one is running for office or voting, does not operate according to any law other than the Sharia, and/or that there is a concrete hope, for the person running for office, to use his participation as a means to overthrow the system:

«It is not permissible for a Muslim to nominate himself, hoping to participate in a system that rules according to anything other than God’s revelation (*ghayr mā anzala Allāh*) and operates according to anything other than the Laws of Islam. It is not permissible for a Muslim to vote for him or for anyone else who will work for that government, unless the one who nominates himself, or those who vote for him, hope that by getting involved in it, they will be able to change the system into one that operates according to the Laws of Islam, and that they are using this as a means to overthrow the system of government»⁸⁷.

This last fatwa, which was signed by Bin Bāz and released by the Permanent Committee for Research and Fatwas (the official religious body of the Saudi government) can be considered as the fragile result of the attempt to strike a balance between the excommunication (*takfīr*) of democracy advocated by most Salafī scholars in the Arabian Peninsula and the conditional impermissibility (*tahrim*) advocated by al-Albānī and Bin Bāz. This is why it is ambiguous enough to allow for different possible interpretations. It reflects an attempt by Bin Bāz to restrain his previous, more permissive ruling on elections, without completely retracting it. From the point of view of political history, this edict is probably the product of complex negotiations between the Saudi political authorities, the Salafī religious establishment of the Kingdom, and the global network of Salafī constituencies operating in different political contexts around the world. In the early 2000s, in the context of the neo-born Nigerian democracy, the above fatwa could be interpreted in favour of Ahlus Sunna’s position, by arguing that a Salafī could participate in the democratic institutions of Nigeria with the hope of influencing, and ultimately overthrowing the system. But it could also be interpreted to support Yusuf’s opposite argument that, as such conditions are not realistic and as many Ahlus Sunna and

⁸⁵ Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-Hudā wa’l-Nūr*, audio-recordings, 1, 352.

⁸⁶ This statement can be listened to at www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxWs6cUq_gs.

⁸⁷ DUWAYSH 1999, vol. 23, 406 s.

Izala do not actually seem to be fully committed to overthrow Nigeria's democratic dispensation, participating in them becomes *ḥarām*.

In his argument against Yusuf on democracy and the Nigerian state, Adam found himself in a very awkward position. The Salafī fatwas that cautiously allowed elections, which he wanted to promote against Yusuf's contrary argument, had been subjected by the same scholars who had released them to a number of conditions that did not necessarily apply to the Nigerian case. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, immediately after the death of their authors (Bin Bāz, al-Albānī and 'Uthaymīn all died between 1999 and 2001), they had been subjected to a process of reinterpretation by a new generation of Salafis, who had added a number of additional conditions rendering them practically impossible to apply anywhere. Finally, to make things even worse, a number of fatwas had also started to circulate worldwide, which clearly argued for an equation between democracy and unbelief. Paradoxically, these extreme fatwas were released prevalently by the students of the ultra-quietists Rabī' al-Madkhalī in Saudi Arabia and Mubqil al-Wādī'ī in Yemen, and were being promoted by the Saudi government, ostensibly in the name of its fight against extremism.

Obviously my point is not to decide who, between Adam and Yusuf, was a "more authentic" Salafī, nor to argue that Yusuf was a quietist. The latter's early and uncompromising commitment to an extreme jihadi project is clearly evident from his speeches. My point is that Yusuf's ruling forbidding participating into Nigeria's democratic and constitutionalist dispensation, around which most of the public debate with Ahlus Sunna rotated, was not a marginal position entertained by jihadi extremists: it was rooted in a political theology that, by the mid-2000s, had come to dominate the global Salafī landscape, *across* the quietist vs jihadi spectrum. This ruling was followed both by quietists like al-Madkhalī, who used it to support the Saudi monarchy, and by jihadis like al-Maqdisī, who used it to support jihadi insurgency.

As for the second main point of dispute between Yusuf and Adam, i.e. the idea that secular schools are *ḥarām*, this was certainly less entrenched in mainstream Salafī thought. However, this point too was not derived from some pamphlet written by an obscure jihadi fighter writing from the mountains of Afghanistan or the forests of Chechnya. As the anonymous author of the 2012 article highlighted for the first time, in fact, the ruling was inspired to Yusuf after his reading of a book written by Bakr b. 'Abdallāh Abū Zayd (d. 2008)⁸⁸. Abū Zayd was a well-placed scholar in the Saudi religious establishment. He served for many years as imam and *khaṭīb* (pulpit preacher) in the Prophet's mosque in Medina and as general procurator for the Saudi Ministry of Justice; he was a member of Saudi Arabia's Permanent Committee for Research and Fatwas (*al-Lajna al-Dā'ima li'l-Buḥūth wa'l-Iftā'*) and the President of the International Islamic Fiqh Assembly (*Majma' al-Fiqh al-Islāmī al-Duwalī*). The idea that the fatwa against government school was inspired to Yusuf by Algerian jihadist fighters, argued by the Ahlus Sunna leader Auwal Albani in one of his speeches⁸⁹, was probably an attempt by the latter to conceal his own embarrassment for the effect such Saudi fatwas would have in front of the Nigerian Salafī public attending his lectures, made especially of academics and professionals educated in the modern system.

What, in fact, could the Ahlus Sunna leaders, who owed their popularity in Nigeria to the boldness with which they had promoted the views of the "real scholars of the Sunna" (*malaman Sunna na gaskiya*, i.e. the Salafīs of Medina) against the opinions of the "scholars of innovation and local traditions" (*malaman bidi'a na gargajiya*, i.e. the Ash'ari and Sufi Nigerian scholars), retort to a man who was relying on the plain text of the fatwas of the scholars of Medina to argue against them on issues like constitutionalism and western education?

⁸⁸ ANONYMOUS 2012, 123-125.

⁸⁹ BRIGAGLIA 2012b, 39.

5. *The Kanamma Experience and the War on Terror in Nigeria*

The only subject on which Adam (as well as Pantami and other Nigerian “counter-radical” Salafis) could have articulated an argument against Yusuf’s extremism using the fatwas of the quietist Salafis, was the strategy and goals of al-Qaeda’s global jihad. He could have quoted, for instance, the fatwas of Rabī‘ al-Madkhalī and others to the effect that the Osama Bin Laden’s followers are outright *Kharijites* (heretics who dissent with authority). But he never did so, and in the following pages I will advance a hypothesis over the reasons behind his silence on this issue.

First of all, let us make it clear that my use of Wiktorowicz’s three categories (purists or quietists; politicos; jihadis) through this paper only constitutes a partial endorsement of Wiktorowicz’s model. Within the Saudi Arabian context, although individual Salafis might have continuous oscillations, the three positions are valid to some extent: the quietists support Saudi absolute monarchy; the politicos advocate for political reforms; the jihadis threaten to overthrow the Saudi dynasty to establish another absolute rule. As the Salafī movement is a quintessentially global one, however, these categories become virtually meaningless. Nothing prevents, in fact, a group of Salafis in a specific country to rely on some early fatwa by Bin Bāz or al-Albāni to cautiously advocate participation in their national politics, while at the same time promoting (openly or secretly) the cause of jihad somewhere else in the world (yesterday Iraq or Chechnya, today Syria or Libya), but also recognizing the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy. Instead of explaining the Ahlus Sunna vs Boko Haram rift in Nigeria as the mechanic product of the influence of two separate doctrines acquired from Salafi literature of different persuasion, I suggest that by looking at the making of the rift between the two as a gradual process that probably involved complex strategic considerations as well as local and global negotiations, one might be able to detect nuances of the Boko Haram phenomenon in Nigeria that often pass unnoticed.

The existing literature dealing with the Ahlus Sunna vs Boko Haram rift⁹⁰ is based entirely on sources that date only to after the mid-2000s, i.e. when the split between Adam and Yusuf had already clearly emerged⁹¹. Nobody would argue that, by that time, Yusuf’s group was advocating for militancy, while the Ahlus Sunna leaders were arguing against it. The assumption that is drawn from this fact is that *before* the rift between the two, Yusuf was yet to develop his “jihadi worldview”. While Yusuf’s trajectory is described as a crescendo of extremism, the Ahlus Sunna leadership is assumed to have maintained a stable quietist persuasion. The reason of the outburst of the crisis between the two, therefore, is identified in Yusuf’s gradual movement towards jihadi positions. Although this is not entirely impossible, in the absence of evidence of a clear debate between the two over the issue of al-Qaeda’s global jihad, this must be considered as a hypothesis, and not as a proven fact. A careful reading of the events leading to Adam’s assassination in 2007 shows that the opposite hypothesis, i.e. that it was a gradual shift of the Ahlus Sunna leadership towards less militant positions to precipitate the crisis between the two, is more likely.

What we know for certain is that during the years 1999-2003 Yusuf had emerged as a spokesperson of Ahlus Sunna in the states of Borno and Yobe. He regularly appeared on TVs and radio stations. In the Borno state capital Maiduguri, his students frequented the Alhaji Ndimi mosque, which was considered as the headquarters of all Ahlus Sunna activities in the area.

⁹⁰ ANONYMOUS 2012, KASSIM 20125 and THURSTON 2015.

⁹¹ Both Muhammad Yusuf’s manifesto *Hādhihi ‘aqīdatunā* (YUSUF 2009) and his sermons grouped in a recently appeared collection (YUSUF 201[5]), are difficult to date precisely. However, internal evidence, in the form of references to confrontations with the Nigerian police, suggests that most of these materials date from the second half of the 2000s. The same is true for the recordings of Ahlus Sunna sermons against Yusuf that are mentioned at various points in the literature I have quoted in this paper.

Virtually all the literature on Boko Haram also mentions that sometime before 2003, a handful of youth from the Ndimi mosque and other Salafi centres in the north withdrew from urban life in order to establish a puritanical Salafi “commune” near Kanamma, a village in neighbouring Yobe state, close to the border between Nigeria and Niger. Most accounts describe the Kanamma commune as an extremely puritanical, but substantially pacific community, attended especially by sons of wealthy families of Borno and Yobe state⁹². Its goal was purportedly to practice the Salafi puritanical ideals in isolation from the moral corruption of the wider Nigerian society.

It is important to stress that, when it was established, the Kanamma community, which was known to the wider Nigerian public as the “Nigerian Talebans”, functioned as an appendix of the Salafi network in Yobe and Borno states. Not only of the Ndimi mosque in Maiduguri (Borno) but, perhaps more importantly, of the Salafi centres in Damaturu, capital of Yobe state. Yusuf, who was already in charge of Kanamma, was appointed by Malam Hudu Muhammad, then Yobe State’s Commissioner of Religious Affairs, as the representative of Jakusko Local Government at the Yobe State Religious Board. According to some sources, the Salafi leaders of Damaturu, including, besides Hudu Muhammad, the imam of Damaturu’s main Salafi mosque, Shaykh Diyar, were personally in charge of the liaison between the Kanamma community and the wider Salafi network – as well as, probably, of their international sponsors⁹³. My point here is to stress that until the end of 2003, when it was dismantled, Kanamma was a sort of “outpost” of the mainstream Salafi mission, and not an independent religious community.

During the year 2003, seemingly in the wake of a banal dispute with local villagers over fishing rights in a nearby river, a series of clashes occurred between the Nigerian police and the Kanamma youth, believed to “number around seventy members and to possess some weaponry, albeit only for defensive purposes”⁹⁴. This conflict rapidly escalated in December 2003 into a siege, which ended only after several days, in January 2004, with the killing of several members of the group and the dismantling of the Kanamma commune.

That a simple dispute for fishing rights could so rapidly escalate into a siege, and that the Kanamma youth had collected their weapons merely for defensive purposes, are both so implausible, that I find it hard to understand how this version continues to circulate in the literature on Boko Haram. It is also difficult to believe that the Kanamma youth could have been able to keep the Nigerian security busy in a fire exchange that lasted over several days, if they had not been previously trained to the use of firearms. Likewise, it is very unlikely that such training, as well as the associated movement of hard-core Salafis (and money) from the Salafi mosques of Borno and Yobe states to Kanamma, could have occurred without the knowledge of the Ahlus Sunna leadership.

In the light of the above, my hypothesis is that Kanamma was not hosting a simple commune, but a training camp for (al-Qaeda’s?) militants, and that the confrontation with the authorities occurred during 2003 was not the unintended outcome of a disputation between local villagers and an overzealous religious community over fishing rights, but the result of an attempt by the Nigerian security to dismantle the camp – possibly the first of its kind in the history of Nigeria. If this is the case, Ahlus Sunna leaders like Adam, who were consulted on a regular basis by the political authorities, were certainly involved in the decision to dismantle the camp. Thus, the Ahlus Sunna vs Boko Haram rift was caused by the decision of the first to *pull back* from its temporary flirtation with the jihadi project, rather than by the decision of the second to abandon a quietist strategy.

⁹² WALKER 2012, 3; COMOLLI 2015, 47. Muhammed Kabir Isa rightly mentions the fact that the Kanamma youth had started very early to amass and use weapons (ISA 2010, 330 s.). He does not, however, clearly advance the hypothesis that Kanamma might have been a camp with international connections.

⁹³ Information received from A.I. (Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria) and confirmed with other residents of Damaturu.

⁹⁴ COMOLLI 2015, 47.

It is virtually impossible to know the exact reasons for Ahlus Sunna initial support, and for their decision to back off. Adam might have supported the Kanamma camp based on an understanding that its sponsors, whoever they were, intended to train a selected number of his students to use them in one of the al-Qaeda struggles he approved of (Afghanistan or Iraq). This training – whether in Kanamma or elsewhere – most likely occurred for some time: Salafi students from the University of Maiduguri are reported to have travelled to fight in Afghanistan in the early 2000s, and apparently some even died there⁹⁵. Likewise, Adam’s withdrawal from the Kanamma project might have been due to his realization that the Kanamma militants were being pushed by their unknown (to us, not to him) sponsors to launch a new front of global jihad in Nigeria, a decision he would have certainly disapproved of.

The decision to stop the Kanamma camp, however, might not have come only from Ahlus Sunna and the Nigerian security, but could also be explained in the context of the global War on Terror, as part of a wider counter-terror operation directed from outside the country. It is not impossible, in fact, that in 2003 the Ahlus Sunna leadership had received some pressure from Saudi Arabia to close down Kanamma. We cannot know exactly if anything transpired between Adam, Yusuf, the Nigerian security, global Salafi leaders and Saudi intelligence before December 2013, but there is evidence that some negotiation among these various parties happened immediately *after* the dismantling of Kanamma. During the December 2003 crisis, in fact, Yusuf managed to flee to Saudi Arabia, where he enjoyed the protection of unspecified “friends”⁹⁶. He remained there for months, until he negotiated with the political authorities of Borno state and the Nigerian security his return to Nigeria. This negotiation was personally mediated by Adam, who was still considered by all, at the time, as Yusuf’s main mentor⁹⁷.

Upon his return to Nigeria, instead of following the advice of his *shaykh* and pull the break, Yusuf decided to push on the accelerator – or, more probably, he was directed by some of his external contacts to do so. It is at this point that Yusuf started to articulate in public what were to become the characteristic points of his doctrine. But, perhaps more importantly, Yusuf started to mobilize and militarily train more youth, independently from his former Ahlus Sunna patrons. This led to the rapid solidification of the rift between the leadership of Ahlus Sunna and Yusuf’s group, which was now emerging as an independent organization under the name of *Ahl al-Sunna li'l-Da'wa wa'l-Jihād 'alā Minhāj al-Salaf* (The People of the Sunna, for Preaching and Jihad according to the Salafi Methodology), claiming authentic and exclusive ownership of the Salafi mission in the country. Although he was, by that time, *de facto* autonomous from the well-organized and well-funded Ahlus Sunna network, Yusuf somehow succeeded in mobilizing enough resources to establish an impressive network of mosques of his own in Borno and Yobe states: not only his biggest centre in Maiduguri, the *Markaz Ibn Taymiyya*, but also the *Markaz al-Salafiyya*, the *Markaz Abū Hurayra*, the *Markaz 'Ubāda bin Šāmit* and the *Markaz al-Ṭā'ifa al-Manşūra*.

The rapid, undisturbed growth of Yusuf’s network after its marginalization from Ahlus Sunna; the financial support it continued to receive from his sponsors; the ongoing training his followers were undergoing and the intensification of their extremism, entrenched in Adam the conviction that the

⁹⁵ According to A.A. (University of Maiduguri; personal communication to the author), the movement of University students to Afghanistan was well known in the campus, and the name of the first Nigerian to die in Afghanistan in 2002 is Mahmud (surname withheld). If this group was in some ways connected to Kanamma, the nickname “Nigerian Talebans” earned by the Kanamma militants would be more than the product of the fantasy of the Nigerian public.

⁹⁶ ADAM 2007.

⁹⁷ ADAM 2007.

jihadi project of his former protégé was receiving an impulse from outside Nigeria. Some of Adam's suspects were directed against his own contacts in the global Salafī network⁹⁸.

The polemical exchanges between mainstream Salafis (Ahlus Sunna and Izala) and Boko Haram in the period 2004-2009 suggest that both sides were starting to see each other not only in the light of Nigerian politics and of Islamic theological debates, but also as being manipulated by obscure interests linked to the global War on Terror. If my interpretation of the Kanamma experience is true, then such a reciprocal perception would be the natural result of the mistrust generated in the two sides by the establishment and dismantling of Kanamma. To this day, in fact, Boko Haram accuses the mainstream Salafī leadership not only of being “sold out” to the Nigerian government, but also for its alleged association with American and Saudi interests and for having been used in order to «suppress the mission of the Salafīyya in Nigeria»⁹⁹. Some of Yusuf's own lectures still available on the internet, in which he engages an imaginary interlocutor who accuses him to be a *Kharijite* (heretical dissenter from authority), are clearly directed at fellow Salafis who have «sold the cause of jihad»¹⁰⁰. In his last public speech before his confrontation with the Nigerian army, dated Friday, 18 Jumāda al-Thānī 1430 (12 June 2009) and delivered in the form of an “Open Letter to the Government of Nigeria”, Yusuf explicitly accuses mainstream Salafis (*yan Izala*) of duplicity and of hypocrisy for continuing to befriend “the Muslims” (i.e.: Yusuf's jihadi Salafis) while at the same time collaborating with the government to crash them:

«They follow the religion of Democracy, the religion of Bush. Their faults have come to light and they should know that the time for preaching is over. Let them go and tell their masters that the time for preaching and teaching and polemical engagements (*raddi*) is over. Let them be prepared for a change in the rules of the game, because the game has changed and they are the ones who have decided to change it!»¹⁰¹.

An opposite perception, i.e. that the growth of Boko Haram was part of a strategy by the American intelligence to undermine the “Salafī mission” (*al-da'wa al-salafīyya*) in Nigeria by covertly sponsoring the latter's most extreme offshoots, was articulated for the first time by Adam himself, in a speech delivered less than twenty-four hours before being gunned down by an anonymous commando¹⁰². From then on, especially after the insurgency entered into its most severe phases, this belief has become deeply entrenched in the Ahlus Sunna public¹⁰³. Such a perception might have been based on the suspects generated in the Ahlus Sunna leadership by the apparently unstoppable growth of Yusuf's group after Ahlus Sunna had agreed to collaborate with the authorities in dismantling Kanamma and marginalizing Yusuf. In his last speech¹⁰⁴, Adam also expressed wonders at why Yusuf, when coming back to Nigeria from Saudi Arabia after Adam's own mediation, was not arrested by the

⁹⁸ During the years following the Kanamma experience, Adam gradually took the distance from Al-Muntada Islamic Trust, the London-based NGO that had sponsored Ahlus Sunna's activities over the previous years. Perhaps convinced that Al-Muntada was directed by western intelligence, in 2005 Adam decided to discontinue some of the activities that had been previously sponsored by the NGO (interview by author with an anonymous student of Adam). The evidence pointing to the possibility that some of Al-Muntada's staff was involved in the genesis of Boko Haram has been presented in BRIGAGLIA 2012b. After an interrogation in the British parliament over its alleged links to the Nigerian terrorist group, Al-Muntada has commissioned to a corporation of lawyers linked to European and Saudi oil companies, Faris SPM, a report clearing it of the accusation. The report is available online at <http://www.almuntadatrust.org/pdf/am-international-report.pdf>.

⁹⁹ Interview by author with anonymous Boko Haram supporter (Abuja, June 2014).

¹⁰⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf1TCBXLtWC.

¹⁰¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=f89PvcpWSRg.

¹⁰² ADAM 2007.

¹⁰³ Interview by author with anonymous Ahlus Sunna supporter (Cape Town, August 2014).

¹⁰⁴ ADAM 2007.

Nigerian security. If Adam expected the arrest of Yusuf to occur upon the latter's return, Yusuf's subsequent hatred towards Adam would be explained by his conviction that he had been betrayed and "sold" to the security by his former mentor. Conversely, Adam's belief in the involvement of outsiders and insiders, interested in "bringing chaos in Nigeria" (*kawo fitina a Najeriya*), would be explained by his anxiety for failing to see the security taking the promised action against Yusuf.

6. Conclusion: The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology and the War on Terror in Nigeria

The debate between Adam and Yusuf is a crucial one to understand the genesis of the Boko Haram phenomenon in the context of the expansion of the War on Terror in Nigeria. Indeed, Boko Haram is to be understood, as argued by both Kassim and Thurston, as the local manifestation of global developments in the Salafi landscape, and not as a direct «outgrowth of the social, economic, and political troubles in northern Nigeria», as unconvincingly argued by Jacob Zenn¹⁰⁵. However, interpreting the Ahlus Sunna vs Boko Haram debate in terms of Wiktorowicz's quietist vs jihadi categories is not entirely convincing. In terms of political theology, the disavowal (*barā'*) of representative democracy and constitutionalism, which was the main point of the debate between the two groups in Nigeria, is advocated at an analogous degree by global jihadi Salafi authorities and by their quietist Salafi counterparts in the Arabian Peninsula.

In the 1990s, the fatwas proscribing democracy were either unknown to the Nigerian Salafi leadership, or they were considered irrelevant in the context of Nigeria's military rule. In the early 2000s, the Saudis were promoting the most absolutist fatwas of the Kingdom's quietist Salafis, equating democracy and elections with unbelief, in order to counter internal Islamist opposition. At the same time, Nigeria had just completed its transition to democratic rule. The Nigerian Salafi leadership included people with different orientation towards politics¹⁰⁶. The more permissive stance towards democracy advocated, in principle, by Adam, became extremely difficult to argue from within the Salafi canon: the politicians within Ahlus Sunna came to be in a fragile position and paradoxically, the extreme jihadi views of Yusuf came to be empowered. Ahlus Sunna imploded naturally, due to the inherent volatility of Salafi political theology, between its absolutist monarchic principle of obedience to authority and its semi-anarchic attitude to the legitimacy of authority.

On this basis, the conclusions of Wiktorowicz's 2006 influential article need to be seriously questioned. Wiktorowicz acknowledged the existence of a "purist paradox" in the fact that purist interpretations of the Salafi canon differ from the ones of the jihadis on issues that are inherently contextual, and not doctrinal in nature. However, he failed to realize the full consequences of his statement. In particular, his conclusions that «the primary concern should be how strategy can influence these interpretations of context to empower the purists» and that «to the extent that the United States can amplify the purist contextual reading at the expenses of the jihadis, the movement of Salafis toward the radical extremists will likely slow»¹⁰⁷, are tragic fallacies. Purist fatwas clearly *speed* the movement of the Salafis towards theological and ideological extremism, while at the same time partially diverting such an extremism from Saudi (and, consequently, US-related) targets. With their a-contextual disavowal of any form of constitutionalism and electoral politics, coupled with their insistence on absolute obedience to "the ruler", the purist fatwas that equate democracy with unbelief on the basis of *al-walā' wa'l-barā'* create a whirlpool that quickly drives the Salafi believer towards

¹⁰⁵ ZENN 2014, 113.

¹⁰⁶ An excellent overview of the Ahlus Sunna network is THURSTON 2015a.

¹⁰⁷ WIKTOROWICZ 2006, 234.

an ideological bottleneck where even al-Qaeda, with its decentralized leadership and its flirtations with the politico Salafi and the non-Salafi Islamists, becomes too “impure”. At the end, the only remaining alternatives in the terms of Salafi political theology are the following: sacralising Saudi Arabia’s monarchy (with its corollary of strategically accepting, at least temporarily, US hegemony in the Middle East); applying the very same Salafi interpretation of *al-walā’ wa’l-barā’* used to disavow constitutionalism, to the Saudi alliance with the US (thus declaring unbelief against the monarchy and pledging loyalty to the global Salafi Caliphate of ISIS); finally, falling into unbelief. Following Wiktorowicz’s recommendations (which obviously coincide with the advice of the Saudi intelligence), the US might have had evident short-term strategic benefits in the context of the War on Terror: the purist fatwas, in fact, bring to an end the flirting between the politico Salafis of Saudi Arabia and the most radical branches of various Islamist parties around the world, which had brought about the formation of the al-Qaeda network. In the medium term, however, these fatwas have a devastating effect on the stability of the Muslim world, because they increase the alienation of the global Salafi constituencies from the various political contexts in which they live, feeding their aspiration for separate, pure, Salafi-compliant islands. Just one step away from the ISIS Caliphate and its “West Africa Province”.

We will never know if any of the global Salafi authorities who advised Adam and Yusuf after the dismantling of Kanamma was directly or indirectly under the influence of foreign intelligence, as the followers of the two continue to argue, for opposite reasons, years after both have been murdered. At the end of the day, however, this is irrelevant. Because of the contradiction between his politico convictions and the Salafi canon, Adam died alone, abandoned by the global Salafi establishment that had promoted him for years and that still celebrates him as its “martyr”, and crashed by the extremism of Yusuf, which he had, wittingly or unwittingly, contributed to nurture during the years of Kanamma. Adam’s dramatic death, as well as the contemporaneous birth of Boko Haram, is the tragic result of the volatility of Salafi political theology, exposed the pressure created by the War on Terror.

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