

“Some Advice and Guidelines:” The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as Narrated by AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb)

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“Some Religious Advice and Guidelines to the Jihadists of Nigeria” (*Nasa’ih wa-tawjihah shar’iyya li-mujahidi Nijiriya*) is a short treatise of about 47 pages in length, originally written in late 2011 by Abu al-Hasan Rashid al-Bulaydi. Al-Bulaydi, who was one of the leading officials of AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), was later killed in 2015 during an operation of the Algerian military in Tizi-Ouzou (Kabylie). The book had been written in response to a series of concerns raised by a network of Nigerian Jihadists with links to the Saharan branch of AQIM. These concerns, written in the form of a letter, had been personally entrusted to Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd (born Mohamed Ghadir), who had transmitted them to al-Bulaydi. Until his death in 2013 in northern Mali during fighting with French and Chadian troops, Abu Zayd had been one of the top commanders of AQIM in the Sahara.

Al-Bulaydi’s text was recently published by an al-Qaeda-linked platform, *Mu’assasat Al-Andalus*, in April 2017.¹ The text is preceded by

a rich, 17-page introduction penned by Abu Nu’man Qutayba al-Shinqiti, on which this paper will focus. It is in the introduction, in fact, more than in the actual text of the epistle, that the observer can find a rare window to glance into the international connections nurtured over the years by Nigerian Jihadi cells, as seen through the eyes of their Saharan partners. Over the last few years, such connections have been the subject of a heated debate in the scholarship on Boko Haram. On the one hand, some authors, although their interpretations do not always entirely coincide, have argued that these links should be central to any attempt to understand the evolution of the phenomenon.² On the other hand are authors who insist that such links only had a peripheral role, and that the Boko Haram phenomenon should be understood primarily in the light of the local context of Nigeria.³

The authors of this paper were able to carefully study this document only in early 2018, while the publication of ARIA 2017 was already in its final

stages, and decided to submit a detailed summary of it. This paper will follow a focused descriptive method and will refrain from discussing evidence of links between Nigerian Jihadis and their global counterparts provided by sources other than this document, unless this becomes necessary in order to make a specific point.⁴ This paper was submitted before either of the authors could see the two most recent (and probably, most important) books on the topic, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* by Alex Thurston, and *The Boko Haram Reader*, by Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa.⁵ Both these books mention the text discussed here. However, neither of them provides a full summary of it.

While the goal of this paper is more empirical than interpretative, it is important to start by stressing that we will choose to avoid as far as possible the use of the term *Boko Haram*. The authors have serious doubts about the heuristic usefulness of this term, mainly for the following reasons.⁶

1. As is well known, “Boko Haram” is not, and has never been, the self-designation of any Jihadi organisation active in Nigeria. The term is a derogatory nickname originally introduced by mainstream Nigerian Salafi discourses in the mid-2000s, in an effort to delegitimise their Jihadi counterparts by focusing the attention of the Nigerian Muslim public on the weakest point of their ideology (the religious ban on Nigerian government schools), while at the same time glossing over its two most fundamental aspects (the prohibition of constitutional democracy and the connection to international Jihadi trends).
2. The ties between a group of Nigerian Jihadists and their Algerian counterparts, discussed in this paper, date to a time that predates by several years the first appearance of the term “Boko Haram” in the Nigerian press and popular discourses. Even if one had to accept the popular label “Boko Haram” as a designation of the organisation led by Muhammad Yusuf in the mid-2000s, one would still need to invent another suitable term for its precursor cells.

3. The 2012 split between the Jihadi group led by Yusuf’s official successor Abubakar Shekau, and a group of Yusuf’s followers loyal to AQIM, led by Khalid al-Barnawi and self-designated as *Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan* (usually abbreviated as Ansaru), has been widely documented in the literature.⁷ Media discourses, however, have continued to use “Boko Haram” as an umbrella term for both groups, creating additional confusion. Adherence to the general umbrella term “Jihadism” and the use of “Ansaru” (or AQIM-linked) and “Shekau’s group” for the two major organisational structures present in the Nigerian territory, will help to clear some of the confusion created by the term “Boko Haram,” which wrongly suggests the existence of one Nigerian Jihadi structure with a single strategy and a coherent theology.
4. A more recent defection from Shekau, by a group of Jihadists led by Abu Mus’ab al-Barnawi and claiming loyalty to ISIS, has also been documented;⁸ this development further empties the umbrella term “Boko Haram” of any empirical content.

After these preliminary observations, this paper will now proceed to a detailed summary of al-Shinqiti’s “Introduction” to al-Bulayidi’s text. The body of information provided in the “Introduction” is based, in the words of its author, on “oral sources from reliable witnesses” who participated in making these exchanges, as well as on “letter exchanges [between leaders of AQIM and Nigerian Jihadists] preserved in my personal archive” (p. 1). This paper will attempt to summarise as much as possible of the “Introduction to *Some Advice and Guidelines*.” Although al-Bulayidi’s text was conceived as a set of guidelines for the Nigerian Jihadists loyal to AQIM, al-Shinqiti’s introduction unintendedly provides an invaluable set of guidelines for the historians to understand the history of the “Boko Haram phenomenon.” The *interpretation* of the effects of the links between AQIM and their Nigerian partners on the development of Jihad in Nigeria certainly

remains open to question, and other sources might well provide legitimate counter-arguments to our ultimate conviction that the links between Nigerian and international Jihadis constitute a fundamental part of the contemporary history of Islam in Nigeria. However, by following the “guidelines” provided by al-Shinqiti’s text, historians can find a path to some consensus around the *basic chronology* of such connections. While the discussion of interpretative matters remains open as in every historical debate, al-Shinqiti’s guidelines might help us to find some shared empirical grounds to continue the debate about the history of the elusive Nigerian Jihadi organisation(s) in a constructive way.

Beginnings

According to al-Shinqiti, the first contacts between an unspecified number of Nigerians and the Algerian Jihadi organisations that would develop in 1998 into GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) and later (2007) into AQIM, are older than has been argued to date, even by those observers who were advancing the hypothesis that the history of “Boko Haram” needs to be read in the light of such international links. It is important to note, however, that for a long time, these links did not translate into the opening of a new front of Jihad in Nigeria:

The affiliation of the Nigerian brothers to the Jihad in the Sahara is old, and it predates the link of the Jihadi brothers in the Sahara with Nigeria. It is a link whose threads were woven starting from the year 1994 onwards. A number of them were martyred in this [Saharan] front, either in Mali, Niger or Algeria – we ask God to have mercy on them and to elevate their station in Paradise. (p. 6, fn 2).

No evidence, on the contrary, is provided by the “Introduction” on possible contacts entertained between Algerian Jihadis and Muhammad Yusuf during the most critical years of the latter’s

rise to prominence in Nigeria (2005-2009). The “Introduction” remains silent concerning those critical years. As early as October 2009, the Nigerian Salafi scholar Muhammad Awwal al-Albani, who would be murdered in 2014, had argued that organic links existed between Yusuf and “a group in Algeria.”⁹ While he may have well known something about the matter, it is also possible that, having become aware of the contacts established in August 2009 between some of Yusuf’s followers and AQIM-Sahara (which will be detailed in the next section of this paper), he was projecting them back to previous years.

The Pact: 2009

The July-August 2009 crackdown by the Nigerian government on the network that had been led by Muhammad Yusuf in the mid-2000s, is obviously the most important turning point in the history of contemporary (local and global) Jihad in Nigeria. From the “Introduction,” we learn that less than a month after the death of Yusuf on 30 July 2009, and the subsequent succession of Shekau as the new leader, a delegation of three representatives of the Nigerian Jihadi community (named as Abu Muhammad, “the trip’s appointed leader,” Khalid al-Barnawi and Abu Rayhana) reached out to Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd, commander of AQIM in the Sahara. They then asked for the establishment of an organic link and for assistance in re-organising the Nigerian Jihadi forces after the blow inflicted by the Nigerian government.

The fact that the three Nigerians had to “apply for” an affiliation to AQIM suggests that, over the previous years, Yusuf might not have entertained an organic link to the Algeria-based franchise of Al-Qaeda; that he was not recognised as one of AQIM’s official representatives; and that he was acting independently. Nevertheless, the immediacy of the visit, which took place shortly before 24 August, suggests that the links maintained with AQIM-Sahara during the previous years by *at least some* of Yusuf’s men, was an organic one: how else, in fact, could this group be able, in such a short time, to locate, and to be allowed face-to-face contact

with, the leadership of a secretive underground organisation such as AQIM?

After receiving the visitors, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd wrote a letter to Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wadud (Abdelmalik Droukdel), the central commander of AQIM. In his letter, Abu Zayd summarised the requests of the Nigerian delegation, specifying that the three delegates were already well-known to him (*fa-nahnu na'rifuhum ma'rifatan jayyidatan*), as they had previously fought in the *Katibat* (battalion) Tareq Bin Ziyad, which he personally commanded.

From the full text of Abu Zayd to Droukdel, reported by al-Shinqiti, we learn that the Nigerians had asked the following:

- The establishment of an organic connection between their leader (at the time, Shekau) and the AQIM leadership structure, to be maintained through a middleman in Niger.
- Assistance in the form of cash and weapons.
- Assistance in the form of military training in the Sahara for groups of Nigerian Jihadis.
- Advice on the feasibility of opening a new Jihadi front in Nigeria.

Abu Zayd remained vague on the issue of training Nigerian Jihadis in the Sahara, waiting for a clear directive by Droukdel on the matter. However, he reassured his Nigerian visitors about the possibility of establishing a connection with the leadership of AQIM, saying that the matter was “easy and possible to realise at any time” (p. 2). As for the establishment of a liaison in Niger, he stated that this also would be an easy matter, subject to the following provisos: any liaison would be short-lived; its identity and location were to be kept as secret as possible even among the members of the Jihadi community; and, the matter would never be put in writing in order to prevent the leaking of the secret outside the inner circle of the organisation.¹⁰

One week later (10 Ramadan 1430 / 31 August [appearing as September — probably a mistake — in our text] 2009), Droukdel responded to Abu Zayd with a letter, a long section of which is also

reported in al-Shinqiti's “Introduction.” In his response, Droukdel seemed to incline towards delegating to his Saharan deputies, as much as possible, the affairs of the new Jihadi franchise south of the Sahara. He confirmed his willingness to support the Nigerian jihadists financially, but stressed that AQIM was undergoing some financial hardship and that the amount to be transferred to the Nigerians would have to be decided by the commander of the Saharan branch. Likewise, he agreed to train Nigerian militants in the ranks of AQIM-Sahara, but delegated the decision about their number, as well as the duration of their stay, to “the brothers who are responsible for the Southern region” (p. 4). Similarly, Droukdel agreed on the establishment of a liaison, but left the exact choice of the location (Niger or elsewhere) to the new partners who would have better knowledge of the territory. Referring to the requests of the Nigerian Jihadists, Droukdel confirmed that the easiest one to satisfy was the provision of weapons; however, he postponed any decision about the exact nature and number of weapons to be delivered, to a forthcoming consultation with the treasurers of the organisation.

The Emir of AQIM then referred to the last, and perhaps the most important, of the “questions from Nigeria” transmitted through Abu Zayd. He started his answer by expressly discouraging the Nigerian delegation from prematurely declaring a Jihad against the Nigerian state without the necessary preparation and without consultation with the global leadership of the Jihadi community. The Nigerian Muslim community, argued Droukdel, had to embrace gradually the ideology of the Jihadists, and the latter had to prepare militarily before starting an open war. But if the Nigerian brothers, continued Droukdel,

...want to start their Jihad, we cannot but bless their decision, while at the same time advising them to concentrate on specific operations in major urban centres, targeted at the leaders of crime [i.e., top government institutions], at western expatriates and

at the organisations devoted to spreading Christianity amongst the Muslims; all of this while carefully avoiding to expose the Muslims and the weaker members of society to any risk (p. 4).

Following this exchange with his senior, Abu Zayd came to define an agreement with the Nigerian delegation, which he formally stipulated in a new document dated 26 Dhu’l Hijja 1430 (13 December 2009), addressed personally to Abu Bakr Shekau as “my representative” (*mumaththili*). The agreement stated the following:

- the number of Nigerians to be trained by AQIM-Sahara was not to be subject to any limitation in number;
- the number of Nigerians who would return to their country of origin after training was set at a specific limit (which, however, al-Shinqiti prefers to keep confidential);
- the expenses of their journeys were to be taken charge of by AQIM-Sahara;
- the trainees would be bound to obedience to their trainers;
- the specific mandate of the man in charge of the Nigerian trainees was defined in detail;
- and a number of other points that al-Shinqiti prefers to omit.

In sum, AQIM had welcome the new partnership with the Nigerian Jihadi group led by Shekau, but had tried to put in place some measures that would allow the Algerian leadership to keep control of its new sub-Saharan franchise. The second of the points above (the limitation of the number of trainees who would go back to Nigeria) is particularly interesting, as it suggests that AQIM’s primary goal was to use the contact in Nigeria to fill its ranks with additional military manpower, and not to open a new front of Jihad.

Logistic Support: 2010-2011

The pact established between AQIM-Sahara and the Nigerian Jihadis, with the blessing of AQIM-central, seems to have worked for some time:

And thus, droves of youth from Nigeria started to reach the Sahara in order to undergo training, coming in tens. In the Sahara, these brothers would receive training and be sent back, while the Nigerian brothers who had previously been part of the cadres [of AQIM] in the Sahara, also returned there, being subsumed under the overall leadership of Abu Bakr Shekau (p. 6).

Besides the military training, some form of financial assistance was also provided during the same years. As a witness to this, al-Shinqiti cites the text of a brief letter from Droukdel to Abu Zayd, dated 23 Rajab 1431 (5 July 2010), in which the leader of AQIM had instructed his Saharan deputy to send “the Nigerian brothers” the sum of 200,000 euro and added that he was “looking into the possibility of adding [to this sum]” (p. 6).

Weapons were also transferred to the Nigerian group, probably through the middlemen operating in Niger. For example, al-Shinqiti mentions that the weapons stolen by AQIM from the Mauritanian army during the September 2010 battle of Hassi Sidi, in which al-Shinqiti had personally participated, were transferred to the Nigerians. The latter had also contributed to the battle of Hassi Sidi with a contingent of more than twenty men, out of a total of eighty-one Jihadists participating in the attack. By 2010, the “Nigerian unit” had already become one of the biggest of AQIM, and was being used primarily, as per Abu Zayd’s original plan, to carry out operations in the Saharan front.

On 28 Shawwal 1431 (10 October 2010), Shekau wrote a long letter to his “uncle” Abu Zayd, thanking him for the support. The letter, whose full text is provided by al-Shinqiti in the “Introduction” (pp. 7-10), already shows some sign of Shekau’s characteristic, grotesque style, which would become a veritable signature of the Nigerian Jihadi leader through the videos he would release during the following years. Shekau’s unnecessary display of learned references to the canonical texts of Hadith, and his disproportionately verbose

conclusive prayers, stand in sharp contrast to the eloquent but essential literary style of all the other epistles appearing in the exchanges reported by al-Shinqiti. Turning what was supposed to be a devoted letter of thanks to a superior into an impromptu mosque sermon, Shekau's style must have sounded deeply irritating to Abu Zayd.

From the preceding discussion, we can conclude that for about two years, the Nigerian Jihadi group led by Shekau tried to promote itself as a sub-Saharan partner of AQIM, through the mediation of AQIM-Sahara. Operations such as the 2010 Christmas Eve bombings in Jos (which targeted Christian areas), the kidnappings of westerners McManus and Lamolinara (May 2011), the bombing of the Abuja police headquarters (June 2011), the bombing of the UN headquarters in Abuja (August 2011), and the bombing of churches in Madalla (December 2011), are clearly in line with the instructions sent by Droukdel to his Nigerian partners. The AQIM leaders certainly observed these developments with keen interest. At the same time, however, they maintained a cautious stance, for reasons that are quite easy to understand. The letter from Shekau had already displayed signs of his unstable personality and of his unreliable character. And more importantly, the opening of a new front of all-out Jihad was not considered to be a priority by al-Qaeda at the time, for it carried the risk of draining its resources and further fragmenting its already loose sub-networks.

The Rift

And this state of affairs went on, with delegations [of Nigerians] coming [to the Sahara], receiving training and travelling back with weapons, money and logistic support. This, until some issues started to be raised about Abu Bakr Shekau, in particular concerning his sanctioning of the confiscation of the properties of the Muslim commoners, on the grounds that they had chosen to live under the government of the unbelievers (p. 10).

The unhappiness of the Nigerian Jihadists loyal to AQIM with the extremism of Shekau, was raised very early, while the logistic coordination between AQIM-Sahara and the Nigerian Jihadists, described above, was still taking place. Already towards the end of the year 1431 (2010), Shaykh Abdallah Abu al-Hasan al-Shinqiti, a Mauritanian scholar of AQIM, wrote to Shekau stating his views on the controversial points of the latter's interpretation of the Salafi canon on *takfir* ("declaration of unbelief") (p. 10). Shekau, however, "did not benefit from this letter, continued to declare the properties of Muslims as a legitimate booty of war, and the first signs of deviancy and extremism started to appear from him, while being opposed by a group belonging to the inner circle [of the organisation]" (p. 10). Abu al-Hasan al-Shinqiti's letter had been prompted by an earlier critique of Shekau, written as a full-length treatise by a Nigerian, Abu Muslim al-Ibrahimi, whom the author of the "Introduction" mentions as *Shaykh*, describing him as "one of the exemplary seekers of knowledge in the Jihadi trend" (p. 10, fn. 2). Al-Ibrahimi, believes the author, was later killed by Shekau around the year 2012. A long citation of al-Ibrahimi's treatise, which was titled *Tanbihat muhimma 'ala akhta' man khalafa al-a'imma wa-'stabaha dima' wa-amwal al-umma*, is also included in the "Introduction" (pp. 10-11, fn. 3). In this fragment, al-Ibrahimi laments the extremism of Shekau, while claiming his adherence to the path of "the moderates" (*al-munsifin*).

The polemical engagements between the "moderates" loyal to AQIM's vision and the "extremists" loyal to Shekau extended over a relatively long period of time and was even brought up to the top levels of AQIM. On 22 Dhul-Hijja 1432 (18 November 2011), the supreme Qadi (legal authority) of AQIM, Shaykh Abd al-Rahman Ishaq, had to intervene in the dispute by writing an epistle in support of the position of al-Ibrahimi and his group.

By the end of 2011, the ideological rift between the two Nigerian Jihadi groups (the would-be *Ansaru*, loyal to AQIM; and Shekau's group, more

extreme) had become irreversible. In the words of the author of the “Introduction,” “the matter culminated in the decision of those who rejected Shekau’s extremism to separate from him and to withdraw from his group, so that some of them could form a new group” (p. 12). Many of the latter – continues al-Shinqiti – would be eventually killed by Shekau.

The differences between the two groups translated immediately into the adoption of different strategies. The January 2012 bombings in Kano, in which over two hundred people, mainly Muslim civilians, lost their lives, bear the signature of Shekau’s new strategy and indicate that by then, AQIM had virtually lost control over a large part of the Nigerian Jihadi landscape. After all, Droukdel’s original guidelines sent in 2009, had been very clear: yes to attacks on high-profile government targets, western expatriates and symbols of Christian presence in Muslim areas; no to the targeting of Muslim civilians which would alienate the Muslim masses from the Jihadi project.

After the above review of the history of the relationship between AQIM and the Nigerian Jihadis, al-Shinqiti’s “Introduction” to al-Bulaydi’s treatise concludes with the long text (pp. 12-18) of a final letter from a delegation representing the Nigerian Jihadis who were disaffected with Shekau’s extremism. Al-Bulaydi would eventually respond to this letter with his “Religious Advice and Guidelines to the Nigerian Jihadists.” In his treatise (which we will not discuss here), al-Bulaydi would attempt to strengthen the “moderate” position of the “defectors,” by providing theological justifications for their stance.

The letter to al-Bulaydi is signed by eleven men, all Nigerians. Their *nisba*-s (*al-Kashinawi*, from Katsina; *al-Ukinawi*, from Okene; *al-Kanawi*, from Kano; *al-Yarwawi*, from Maiduguri; *al-Bawshawi*, from Bauchi) show that the organisation included a diverse leadership representing several northern Nigerian states. Their titles (Army General; Commander-in-chief of the northern Region; Commander of the Tariq Bin Ziyad Battalion;

Commander of the al-Bara’ bin Malik Battalion; Commander of the Nur al-Din Battalion; Member of the Council for Research and Fatwas; Member of the Shura Council; Leader of the Department for Guidance and Propagation; Commander of the Mus’ab bin ‘Umayr Battalion) indicate that the organisational structure of the group was quite sophisticated. The letter, addressed to Shaykh Abdallah al-Shinqiti, is not dated. According to the author of the “Introduction,” it was written at the beginning of the year 1433 (end of 2011). As it starts with the greetings for Eid, which fell at the beginning of November 2011, it was probably written before the end of the month of November.

Once again, the letter starts by claiming to represent the point of view of a “moderate path” (*al-minhaj al-mutawassit al-qawim*) in Salafi-Jihadi thought. Conversely, the extremism of Shekau is understood as emanating from an alternative set of references within Salafi-Jihadi literature. In the letter, the delegation makes reference to Shekau’s position that, when it comes to issues of *shirk al-abkar* (major polytheism), the excuse of ignorance (*al-‘udhr bil-jahl*) cannot be applied, and argues that Shekau was drawing on a set of sources which included the writings of the Saudi scholar Ali al-Khudair, and those of Diya’ al-Din al-Qudusi (a pseudonym used by an author of Salafi-Jihadi literature). Those sources were being used by Shekau to apply too loosely the principle (drawn from the *Nawaqidh al-Islam*, a brief text written by the eponym of the Wahhabi school), according to which “whoever does not declare an unbeliever to be an unbeliever, is himself an unbeliever.” By loosely applying this principle, Shekau is accused of arriving at the paradox of declaring even Yusuf, the deceased founder of the group, as an unbeliever, for having refused to declare the Nigerian Muslim masses as unbelievers on the basis of their failure to denounce the Nigerian government as such. Showing a remarkable awareness of the developments in the Jihadi landscape of Algeria, the letter adds that it seems “as if Shekau was schooled by al-Zouabri,” the former leader of the GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé), who in the 1990s,

had been rejected for his extremism by the would-be founders of AQIM.

Shekau - adds the delegation - kills all the Jihadists who disagree with his decisions, and confiscates the weapons of those whom he considers to be insubordinate (p. 14). Underlying the letter is a subtle but clear sub-text that suggests that its authors were developing the suspicion that Shekau was, consciously or unconsciously, doing the work of the intelligence agencies trying to undermine al-Qaeda's plans in Nigeria. While AQIM had advised caution and good preparation before opening new fronts of Jihad, Shekau's actions were characterised by "improvisation in military matters" (p. 16). While AQIM wanted to capitalise on the mobility of the members of the Jihadi constituencies under its control to strike globally, Shekau strictly controlled the movements of his followers and prevented "any member of his group from traveling to other lands of Jihad like Somalia and Algeria" (p. 15). While AQIM, in its earlier advice to the Nigerian Jihadists, had prioritised a long-term strategy based on learning and consultation, Shekau systematically alienated the scholarly elite and the founding fathers of the group, to the point that "we are not aware of the existence, amongst those who are close to him, of any of those who used to be renowned for their teaching or their zeal in search for knowledge" (p. 15). While AQIM had called for a strategy of soft propaganda intended at gradually drawing the Muslim masses towards sympathising with the Jihadi camp, Shekau's actions were leading to diametrically opposite results: the Jihadi community in Nigeria was fragmenting into a number of competing factions, and many former members were abandoning Jihad altogether out of disillusionment; at the same time, the Muslim masses were starting to incline towards the *Murji'ites* (i.e. the religious scholars who oppose Jihad), for they had lost their confidence in the religious legitimacy of the Jihadi organisation (p. 16).

As if all of these issues were not enough, while AQIM had indicated the need to implement a strict respect for the rule of secrecy among the

members of the inner circle, Shekau was allowing the secrets of the organisation to be disclosed to outsiders:

...he has uncovered the secrets and torn apart the veil... And in addition to that, he has released three recordings called *al-Bayan al-kamil* ["The full explanation"], in which he spared no effort to bring everything to light! These recordings are now in the hands of the tyrant [i.e., the Nigerian security]!! And as a consequence of this, we had to forfeit some of our plans, and some of our leaders were arrested by the tyrants... (p. 15).

Conclusion: Boko Haram as a failed al-Qaeda story

The epistolary exchanges discussed in this paper unveil a history of intense interaction between a community of Nigerian Jihadists and the Sahara-based branch of al-Qaeda, which took place between 2009 and 2011. This interaction was part of a longer history of contacts established as early as the mid-1990s. Today, it is hard to deny that an embryonic base of the global Jihadi movement existed in Nigeria well before the 2009 crackdown on Muhammad Yusuf, and we believe that it is only by taking this fact seriously, that the successive history of global and local manifestations of Jihadism in Nigeria can be understood. This does not mean, however, that the "Boko Haram phenomenon" should be seen as the *linear* outcome of the penetration of al-Qaeda in the Nigerian landscape. Al-Qaeda's experience in Nigeria was marked by discontinuities and hesitations more than by linearity and resoluteness. The most famous contemporary international Jihadist organisation (at least before the emergence of the Islamic State) did not enter an empty Nigerian arena. Instead, it met a multiplicity of local forces that collectively shaped the development of the elusive phenomenon that has come to be known by the world as "Boko Haram." Moreover, the path threaded by al-Qaeda in the Nigerian arena also crossed, unavoidably, those of other global

forces, including (1) the multiple actors engaged in the War on Terror with its complex, and often secretive calculations and (2) rival, more extreme trends in Salafi-Jihadi theology. The face of the “Boko Haram phenomenon” that has come to be known by the world as its most iconic image, that of the erratic and unaccountable Abu Bakr Shekau, does not represent the culmination of al-Qaeda’s success in Nigeria, but the incipient manifestation of the failure of its strategy.

Notes

- 1 Abu al-Hasan Rashid al-Bulaydi, *Nasa’ih wa-tawjihah shar’iyya li-mujahidi Nijiriya*, edited by Abu Nu’man Qutayba al-Shinqiti, *Mu’assasat Al-Andalus*, April 2017. Accessible at: <https://jihadology.net/2017/04/28/new-release-from-the-archives-of-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghribshaykh-abu-al-%E1%B8%A5asan-rashid-shariah-advice-and-guidance-for-the-mujahidin-of-nigeria/>.
- 2 Andrea Brigaglia, “The volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram,” *Diritto & Questioni Pubbliche*, 15(2), 2015, 174-201; Abdulbasit Kassim, “Defining and understanding the religious philosophy of jihādī-Salafism and the ideology of Boko Haram,” *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 16(2-3), 2015, 173-200; Jacob Zenn, “Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria: Cases from Boko Haram’s Founding, Launch of Jihad and Suicide Bombings,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 11(6), 2017, 174-190.
- 3 The most exhaustive expression of this position is the collective article penned by Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos and Alex Thurston, “A response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa’ida,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12(2), 2018, 203-213.
- 4 For a more comprehensive overview of the topic, the authors are presently working on a longer article.
- 5 Alex Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa (eds.), *The Boko Haram Reader. From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State* (London: Hurst, 2018).
- 6 See Alex Thurston, *Boko Haram: What’s in a Name?* [Updated], January 7, 2013, blogpost in “Sahel Blog”. Accessible at: <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2013/01/07/boko-haram-whats-in-a-name/>
- 7 See M. Gudière, “The Charter of Jama’at Ansar Al Muslimin Fi Bilad al-Sudan’ in M.A. Perouse de Montclos (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA), 2014), pp. 246-258; N. Danjibo, “One of the first videos of Ansaru, available on 1 June 2012,” in M.A. Perouse de Montclos (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA), 2014), pp. 259-266.
- 8 Alex Thurston, “Abū Muṣ’ab al-Barnāwī’s interview with the Islamic State’s Al-Naba’ Magazine,” *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 36(1), 2017, 257-275.
- 9 Ismail Omipidan, “Boko Haram: How Yusuf imported arms into the country,” *Nigeria Best Forum*, 10 October 2009. Accessible at: <http://www.nigerianbestforum.com/generaltopics/boko-haram-how-yusuf-imported-arms-into-the-country/>.
- 10 The allegation contained in the above-mentioned October 2009 interview with Shaykh al-Albani, to the effect that the weapons for Yusuf’s group were coming from Algeria through Niger, could possibly suggest that Abu Zayd’s fears were not unrealistic, and that the information immediately leaked outside of the group, only to be projected by al-Albani to an earlier time in history, i.e. during Yusuf’s life.