

# THE ORIGINS OF BOKO HARAM, AND WHY THE WAR ON TERROR MATTERS

ANDREA **BRIGAGLIA**  
ALESSIO **IOCCHI**



# The Origins of Boko Haram, and Why the War on Terror Matters

ANDREA BRIGAGLIA

Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”.

E-mail: [abrigaglia@unior.it](mailto:abrigaglia@unior.it)

ALESSIO IOCCHI

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

E-mail: [alessioi@nupi.no](mailto:alessioi@nupi.no)

## ABSTRACT

This article, prompted as a response to a recent contribution penned by Audu Bulama Bukarti, returns to the history of an incident occurred in 2003 between the Nigerian security and a group of militants popularly known as the “Nigerian Taliban” and considered as a precursor to Boko Haram. While the historiography around this incident has been almost saturated by debates around the size of the links between the “Nigerian Taliban” and al-Qaeda, that period of Nigerian history continues to be read in isolation from the broader counter-terrorism strategies conceived at the time by the Nigerian State in the context of what, for us, is a fundamental structural factor, i.e. the then mounting Global War on Terror. Drawing on a different set of data than Bukarti, our contribution will argue that, far from having been a “local” incident, the “Nigerian Taliban crisis” shows clear signs of how, at the time, the Nigerian space was being penetrated by the War on Terror’s strategic logic, discursive structures and political imperatives. The successive explosion, over the following years, of the “Boko Haram phenomenon”, is in our opinion the result of the latter as much as of the former.

## KEYWORDS

Boko Haram, Critical Terrorism Studies, Jihad, Nigeria, War on Terror

# The Origins of Boko Haram, and Why the War on Terror Matters

ANDREA BRIGAGLIA  
ALESSIO IOCCHI

1. *Introduction: Of Small and Big Elephants* – 2. *Bukarti's paper: An assessment* – 3. *The Kanamma Incident in the War on Terror* – 4. *Where Did the "Fishing Rights' Story" Come From?* – 5. *Conclusions*.

«[...] because they are at once profoundly parochial and so obviously translocal, these fragments, and innumerable others like them, raise the same conundrums, all of them distilling down to one order of questions»<sup>1</sup>.

## 1. *Introduction: Of Small and Big Elephants*

*The Origins of Boko Haram – and Why it Matters* is the title of an article recently published by Audu Bulama Bukarti (BUKARTI 2020). The article provides some fresh empirical data on the early history of the Nigerian jihadist movement known to the world through its Hausa nickname *Boko Haram*. It revisits, in particular, a specific fragment of what can be considered as the “pre-history” of Boko Haram, i.e. the clashes that had started in Kanamma (Yunusari Local Government, Yobe State) in late December 2003, continuing through early January 2004 in other areas of Yobe, one of the thirty-six states that make up the Federal Republic of Nigeria, bordering the Republic of Niger. During these clashes, the Nigerian security forces neutralised a small group (usually described in the literature as a «Salafi commune») that was popularly known at the time as the “Nigerian Taliban”.

The Nigerian Taliban are considered by virtual consensus, in the specialised literature, as a precursor to Boko Haram. While the exact degree of continuity between the two is a matter that has been debated by specialists (THURSTON 2018, 91-95), the belief in the existence of such a connection emerges in countless statements made over the years by highly-placed Nigerian security officials and political leaders, as well as by Islamic scholars involved in the government’s counter-radicalisation programmes<sup>2</sup>. No one, thus, can question that the 2003 experience with the Nigerian Taliban fundamentally framed the official Nigerian narrative about, and strategies against, Boko Haram. For Bukarti, in any case, there is no substantial difference between the two, and «Boko Haram originally formed in 2003», i.e. when the Nigerian Taliban established their commune in Yobe State.

The connection (or lack thereof) between the Nigerian Taliban and al-Qaeda, too, remains one of the most hotly debated issues in the field. In assessing and responding to Bukarti’s paper, our central argument is that neither the origins of the Nigerian jihadi movement, nor the Nigerian state’s responses to it, can be understood outside the context of the Global War on Terror. Correctly framed, the Nigerian Taliban experience appears in our opinion as that of a

<sup>1</sup> COMAROFF, COMAROFF 1999, 282.

<sup>2</sup> For such a description of the Nigerian Taliban by a source that conflates both roles (an Islamic religious leader who has played a prominent role in the country’s counter-radicalisation programmes, as well as a minister in the second Buhari cabinet), see PANTAMI 2015. For Pantami, «the current insurgency started in Nigeria around 2002 CE, through two young people (Names withheld) [sic] who imported the ideology from abroad» (PANTAMI 2015, 4).

thwarted, would-be al-Qaeda cell: while the debate around this experience has focused on the extent of the “would-be-al-Qaeda” side of it, for us the reflection around the dynamics of the “thwarting” is also of fundamental importance.

Considering the above, we could not agree more with Bukarti’s statement that the discussion around this apparently minor fragment of Nigerian history is not a matter of a handful of Boko Haram specialists splitting hairs around details, but one that «has practical policy implications» (BUKARTI 2020, 9) on Nigerian counter-terrorism strategies. We also believe, however, that this debate reveals underlying aspects of the politics of knowledge about Boko Haram in the context of the War on Terror, a politics in which Bukarti’s paper here under discussion is inevitably – though perhaps, unconsciously – embedded. The article was published by the Hudson Institute, known for its closeness to Mike Pompeo and the “Iran hawks” of Trump’s administration; the author, moreover, is affiliated to the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, the think-tank privately owned by one of the original architects of the War on Terror discourse and, in particular, of the disastrous Iraqi War military project in the early 2000s<sup>3</sup>.

A certain degree of embeddedness is often unavoidable in the social sciences, and is not a reason of scandal. In a way, this applies to our paper as well, as our work on the Boko Haram phenomenon is framed in a methodology whose central thrust is the effort to critically interrogate the War on Terror discourse/strategy; to highlight its manifold impact on Muslim-majority societies; and to bring to light the political implications of the narratives on the emergence of terrorism promoted by security experts. It is for this reason that we see the publication of *The Origins of Boko Haram – and Why it Matters* as an occasion to open up not only the empirical reconstruction of what exactly happened in Kanamma, but also the critical analysis of the political structures underlying those events. Such reconstruction and critical analysis, in our view, have only been partially aided by Bukarti’s paper: notwithstanding the presence of some important new data, in fact, his empirical reconstruction results, at a more careful analysis, incomplete; more importantly, a critical political analysis is conspicuously absent from the paper.

Bukarti’s central argument is framed as a rebuttal to an article (BRIGAGLIA 2015) published five years ago on *Diritto & Questioni Pubbliche* by one of the authors of the present response. That article was mainly devoted to an analysis of the effects of the War on Terror discourses (in particular, the version of the latter adopted by the Saudi government) in precipitating a conflict between different segments of the Nigerian Salafi community. This conflict was clearly manifested in the debates that occurred in the mid-2000s between Boko Haram’s founder Muhammad Yusuf (d. 2009) and his mainstream Salafi critics in Nigeria – a debate that several of the most authoritative sources on Boko Haram agree on considering foundational to the formation of Boko Haram’s doctrines (ANONYMOUS 2012; THURSTON 2018, 98-104; KASSIM, NWANKPA 2018, 11-26). But before the start of that debate, an earlier manifestation of such an internal rift within the Nigerian Salafi communities – the article argued – was the Nigerian Taliban’s crisis. In our opinion, the rift between Yusuf and his Salafi critics did not emerge from a pre-existing theological divide between the supporters of supposedly coherent, rival “jihadi” and “mainstream” Salafi theologies; rather, this rift *produced*, within the Islamic discursive field of Nigeria, positions expressed in those theological terms. Nor was this rift the mere reflection of diverging attitudes vis-à-vis local politics, although it certainly led to such a divergence, and even

<sup>3</sup> In 2018, the Tony Blair Institute confirmed having received a donation of nine million British pounds from the Saudi government. See “Tony Blair confirmed receiving millions in donations from Saudi”, *The Middle East Monitor*, 6 September 2018 (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180906-tony-blair-confirms-receiving-millions-in-donation-from-saudi/>); Jim Pickard, “Tony Blair Institute confirms donations from Saudi Arabia”, *Financial Times*, 5 September 2018 (<https://www.ft.com/content/6426466c-b12c-11e8-99ca-68cf89602132>). While single Saudi investments alone, in our opinion, are not able to dictate the policy of the Tony Blair Institute, they do signal a degree of convergence in the politics of knowledge production about “Islamic extremism” and counter-terrorism strategies.

to a dramatic, violent internal conflict; instead, such a divide reflected the uneasy and partly chaotic process of re-alignment of different sections of the Nigerian Salafi community to new Islamic categories that were defined, sustained, and to a certain degree *created* by the global context of the War on Terror with its strategic imperatives and discursive structures.

As a corollary to its central argument, the 2015 *D&Q* article also suggested that the camp established by the Nigerian Taliban in Kanamma could not have been, as stated by the vast majority of previous accounts, a pacific commune that had come to clash with the Nigerian security after an ordinary dispute with a neighbouring village over fishing rights. The decision by the Nigerian authorities to target the group had to be understood, on the contrary, in the context of a broader security strategy influenced by bigger actors and devised in response to more serious concerns. Following one of its sources from the Yobe State establishment, as well as interpreting some allusive statements made in a public lecture by the Nigerian Salafi scholar Ja'far Mahmud Adam (who frequently consulted with the Nigerian security before and after Kanamma), a few days before being murdered in April 2007, the article had tentatively suggested, as a possible alternative explanation, that this commune might have hosted a jihadi camp possibly linked to al-Qaeda (BRIGAGLIA 2015, 194), discretely dismantled by the Nigerian security (with the decisive collaboration of a section of the country's Salafi leadership) precisely on that basis.

In sum, the 2015 *D&Q* article was based on the conviction, about which we are both much more confident today than we were five years ago, that the 2003 Kanamma crisis was the sign of the gradual penetration of the geopolitics of the War on Terror in the Nigerian space. While the Global War on Terror featured in the title as well as in the overall argument of the paper, the subsequent debate in the Boko Haram scholarship seems to have received and debated, of it, only the "Al-Qaeda camp hypothesis". In the introduction to Bukarti's article, for example, the central argument of the *D&Q* paper is interpreted as «promoting the role of international jihadi organizations, principally al-Qaeda, to the rise and evolution of Boko Haram» (BUKARTI 2020). In the economy of that paper, however, it was clear that mentioning one elephant in the room in the scholarship on Boko Haram (i.e. al-Qaeda's presence in Nigeria in the early 2000s; a possibility that most academic analysts had not seriously considered at the time) was but a necessary step towards a broader discussion around a second, and perhaps more important, elephant in the room (i.e. the penetration of the War on Terror in Nigeria, also occurring in the early 2000s; a factor that still today, continues to be evaded by most historical analyses of the Boko Haram phenomenon).

The fact that global and regional security paradigms are appropriated and transformed in each domestic contexts in different ways, has led many analysts to restrict their attention to purely local dimensions of both terrorist and counter-terrorist phenomena of mobilisation that have taken place outside the main regional focus of the War on Terror (Middle East and Central Asia). In this brief response, on the contrary, we emphasise how not only the mobilisation *for* the Nigerian Taliban, but also, and more importantly, the Nigerian state's mobilisation *against* them, can only be understood as local responses to, and appropriations of, global geopolitical paradigms that were emerging at the time<sup>4</sup>. Such responses and appropriations have created a specifically Nigerian configuration of the War on Terror politics, and it is only in the light of this politics that the build-up of internal tension leading to the 2009 explosion of the Boko Haram phenomenon, results intelligible.

<sup>4</sup> We hereby wish to acknowledge the contribution of Debora Valentina Malito to these reflections, through her comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

## 2. Bukarti's paper: An assessment

The paper published by Bukarti helps correcting three basic misconceptions concerning the chronology of the Nigerian Taliban's settlement in Kanamma, the nature of their project, and the reasons that triggered the clashes with the police.

The Nigerian Taliban – here the author usefully corrects a mistaken view implicitly or explicitly suggested by most previous commentators, including the 2015 *DòQ* article – did not reside in Kanamma for months, but moved there only on 21 December 2003. Correcting this fact is useful for the historical record, but it has little significance as far as assessing the experience of the group as a whole is concerned. The latter, in fact, as Bukarti acknowledges, moved to Kanamma only after having been dislodged by the security from a similar camp they had established in mid-2003 (according to our sources, precisely in June), in the vicinity of Tarmowa (not to be confused with Tarmuwa Local Government, further south in Yobe State). Tarmowa is another village located, like Kanamma, in the Yunusari Local Government. The historical reconstruction of the Nigerian Taliban's experience thus needs to include the Tarmowa phase and be extended over a longer period of time.

So why did the Nigerian authorities decide to intimate the community to dislodge from Tarmowa, ultimately pushing them to relocate to Kanamma and prepare for a confrontation they did not originally aim at, at least not at that stage and not in that form? To answer this question, Bukarti stops at the answer provided during his fieldwork by one Kachallah Ngubdo, a hunter operating in the bush of the area, according to whom the commune was dislodged because the local authorities nurtured «apprehension about the community's intentions». While not wrong *per se*, this answer only starts to scratch the surface of a security operation that, in the light of additional evidence that one cannot expect to find among Kanamma's local residents, obviously involved higher echelons of the Nigerian security. We will return to this in the core section of this article.

The second and third misconceptions usefully cleared by Bukarti's article are, respectively, (a) that the group established first in Tarmowa, then in Kanamma, was a pacific commune and (b) that the reason for the confrontation with the authorities was a mundane fishing rights' dispute with a neighbouring village. The camp, concludes in fact Bukarti, «was not the pacifist commune as presented by some writers», and «[c]ontrary to multiple published accounts, residents [of Kanamma] said there was no dispute between them and the commune over fishing rights» (BUKARTI 2020, 6). Moreover, always according to Bukarti's findings, the members used to train in «boxing and martial arts» already during the Tarmowa phase, and later prepared for the confrontation with the Nigerian security in Kanamma, after having received the eviction note, by barricading the camp «with sandbags and a trench» and arming themselves «with machetes, catapults and so forth» (BUKARTI 2020). This would already suffice to push Bukarti's conclusions closer to the hypothesis of the 2015 *DòQ* paper than to most of the previous literature on the Nigerian Taliban. As if this was not enough, Bukarti further admits that «there is evidence of ideological connection between the duo [of al-Qaeda and the Nigerian Taliban]» since the time of the Kanamma incident (BUKARTI 2020, 3). But the presence in the *DòQ* article of a mere hypothesis – no matter if followed by a question mark in the original text of the article – on the possible existence of something more than an ideological connection, is sufficient reason for the author to frame his paper primarily as a rebuttal of the “jihadi camp hypothesis”, and only secondarily, as a rebuttal of the “pacific commune hypothesis”.

The stated reasons for Bukarti's insistence on rejecting the former hypothesis are two: (a) the alleged fact that the exchanges of fire between the group and the Nigerian security only lasted «hours, not days, much less weeks» (meaning that the group was a superficial and thereby, for Bukarti, purely local threat); (b) the alleged fact that existing accounts that link the Nigerian Taliban's leader Muhammad Ali to Osama Bin Laden, mentioning the latter's promise to the

former to fund a Nigerian cell of al-Qaeda with \$3 million, originate from a single report published by the International Crisis Group (henceforth, ICG) in 2014 and based, in its turn, on a single, unverified source (BUKARTI 2020, 8).

Both the above statements amount to factual mistakes that call for a two-fold correction.

After the “Taliban” were dislodged from Kanamma, the exchange of fire did not end as stated by Bukarti. The group, in fact, moved to the offensive and attacked the police stations of Kanamma; of the nearby town of Geidam; and, after traveling ca. 140 km southwards, of Babbangida (OROPO 2004; BEGO 2004). In the process, they managed to seize two jeeps and some weapons, with which they went down to the Yobe State capital Damaturu, possibly with the intention to attack the police station and snatch more weapons. Repelled from Damaturu, the attackers moved towards the Borno State capital Maiduguri but, on the way, they were stopped by the police at a roadblock and only then dispersed. The security then continued to track the dispersed members of the group for several days, even coordinating with their counterparts in the neighbouring Republic of Niger to capture some who had found refuge across the border, in Maïné-Soroa; Muhammad Ali, considered as the leader of the group, was later intercepted and reportedly killed in eastern Borno State; part of the community found refuge on the Mandara Mountains, near the borders of Cameroon, and intermittently attacked police stations in the area before being expelled by the Nigerian military only in October 2004 (MOHAMMED 2018, 590), that is, almost one year after the Kanamma incident. Another year later, in January 2006, interviewed residues of the group reportedly gave hints of their gradual efforts to re-group and re-organise<sup>5</sup>. A local fieldwork like the one carried out by Bukarti is obviously fundamental to historical research. But suggesting that the visual of the observer of the Nigerian Taliban’s crisis should be constrained to a space of a few hundred square meters like Kanamma, and to a span of ten days like the time the group spent there, is like suggesting a myopic vision as a corrective to presbyopia. Not to mention the inherent contradiction between Bukarti’s claim that the Nigerian Taliban events are of capital importance to understand the subsequent history of Boko Haram, and the minuscule size these events assume once, as he does, they are restricted to what happened only between 21 and 31 December 2003, only in the outskirts of Kanamma.

The number of sources mentioning Muhammad Ali’s role in mediating between the Nigerian Taliban and al-Qaeda are at least four, and not one as claimed by Bukarti. Some of them have already been discussed in the literature on Boko Haram, to the point of saturation (ZENN 2017a; BRIGAGLIA, IOCCHI 2017; HIGAZI et al. 2018, 203-213; THURSTON 2018, 161). The first was Modibbo Adama University of Technology professor Kyari Mohammed, one of the foremost specialists on the history of Borno and of Boko Haram, according to whom Ali was rumoured to have undergone training with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (MOHAMMED 2014, 10)<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, according to Kyari Mohammed’s interview to current Nigerian Minister of communication Isa Ali Pantami (MOHAMMED 2018, 589), Ali was well known in northern Nigerian Muslim circles for his many attempts, started since the mid-1990s, to recruit high-ranking Muslim scholars into his jihadi cause. The second is the ICG report cited by Bukarti (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP 2014). The third is an interview to a Nigerian member of Boko Haram appeared on al-Qaeda’s online magazine *al-Risala* (ANSARY 2017). The fourth is Abu Aisha, nickname of a former member of Boko Haram interviewed by Jacob Zenn (ZENN 2018,

<sup>5</sup> Afrique France Press, *Nigeria’s ‘Taliban’ plot comeback from hide-outs*, 11 January 2006, available at: <https://mg.co.za/article/2006-01-11-nigerias-taliban-plot-comeback-from-hideouts/> (accessed 15/3/2020).

<sup>6</sup> Were these rumours circulating among the Maiduguri public, or do they emanate from Nigerian security sources? Kyari Mohammed’s article does not specify. More details on Muhammad Ali’s life are available in ZENN 2020 (23-39), published after the submission of the present article.

fn 16)<sup>7</sup>. None of these sources is necessarily immune from error. But (1) each of them is either an internal source, or relies on a different informant from within the group; (2) no internal source from Boko Haram explicitly contradicts them; (3) three of them (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP 2014; ANSARY 2017; and ZENN 2018) provide substantially the same version of the story; and (4) two of them (ANSARY 2017 and ZENN 2018) provide an additional detail (i.e., that the money Ali claimed to be expecting from al-Qaeda never managed to reach Nigeria) that can help explaining the dynamics of the Nigerian Taliban's crisis, for it provides a possible explanation of why, frustrated by the fact that the original plan to start an al-Qaeda cell had been thwarted, and threatened by the local police to dismantle the camp, the group decided to snatch weapons and strike at the authorities even while being too weak for a full-fledged "insurgency". Considering all the above, defining the hypothesis of a connection between Muhammad Ali and al-Qaeda as based on «little evidence, big claims» as Bukarti does, is a grossly hyperbolic statement. It is legitimate, in our opinion, to ask questions about the real identity of Muhammad Ali, and about whether or not this somewhat opaque individual was really acting as a representative of Al-Qaeda. Yet, based on the multiple reports from different internal sources cited above, there is little doubt that a man by this name did indeed present himself in the northern Nigerian Muslim environment, in the early 2000s, as an al-Qaeda agent; that those who followed him, did it precisely on that basis; and that the Nigerian security's decision to take action against the group Ali had mobilised, was also motivated by this.

### 3. *The Kanamma Incident in the War on Terror*

Furthermore, in our opinion engaging in hair-splitting over the role of a single man, Muhammad Ali, in trying to establish a cell of al-Qaeda in Nigeria, is unnecessary: another set of sources entirely absent from Bukarti's account, in fact, mention several other individuals who, shortly before the Kanamma crisis, either presented themselves as al-Qaeda's representatives in Nigeria, or favoured the establishment of a link between (a handful of) individual Nigerians and one or the other of al-Qaeda's branches abroad. Most of these sources are statements made by high-level political actors or security agents from within and outside Nigeria. For us, this is a crucial fact, because it shows that a number of people suspected of links to al-Qaeda had been for some time the object of surveillance, thus suggesting that Nigeria, at the time of the Kanamma incident, had already been penetrated by the War on Terror security structure. Any analysis of the Kanamma incident that ignores this structure is doomed, in our opinion, to remain incomplete.

As early as in 2001, for instance, the chief of the Nigerian intelligence, in a private meeting with the United States' ambassador, stated that his security had been keeping for years a database of Nigerian citizens who had a connection to the Algerian branch of al-Qaeda, as well as of individuals the security considered to be Algerian agents of al-Qaeda residing in, or traveling to, Nigeria<sup>8</sup>. One of the leaders of the group of Nigerians trained in the Algerian Sahara was – we will learn from later sources (BRIGAGLIA, IOCCHI 2017, 29) – Khalid al-Barnawi. According to Alexander Thurston, al-Barnawi was part of Muhammad Ali's "Taliban" network (THURSTON 2018, 163; and for additional details on his biography, ZENN 2020, 19-31). His close associate Abubakar Adam Kamar, too, according to Kyari Mohammed, was also one of the members of the Kanamma commune (MOHAMMED 2018, 590). The two (al-

<sup>7</sup> For the full text of the interview in Hausa, see: Jacob Zenn, Abu Aisha interview (2017), available at: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/03/30/abu-aisha-interview-2017/> (accessed 15/3/2020).

<sup>8</sup> United States Embassy Abuja, "Courtesy Call on Nigerian SSS Chief Are", 4 May 2001; available at: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/01ABUJA962\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/01ABUJA962_a.html) (accessed 5/11/2019).



Barnawi and Kamar) would later be among the founders of Boko Haram's al-Qaeda-aligned "offshoot", *Ansaru* (GUDIÈRE 2014; DANJIBO 2014, 259-266).

Algerian sources, on their part, considered the Kano-based Algerian Hacène Allane (aka *Cheikh Hassan*) as the man who had acted since the mid-1990s as al-Qaeda's chief propagandist in northern Nigeria, where he had also met one Imad Alwan, an alleged al-Qaeda emissary traveling from Yemen (OUAZANI 2004). Coincidentally, *Cheikh Hassan* would be killed in a military operation in the Niger desert in May 2004, that is, shortly after the Nigerian Taliban's crisis<sup>9</sup>.

In the course of 2003, members of the Nigerian Taliban also met with Adnan Harun (aka *Spin Ghul*), who was considered by the securities of at least four countries as an emissary of Al-Qaeda who had trained in Afghanistan: when he travelled to Nigeria, the traces of senior members of his cell were being followed by the Pakistani security; when, like *Cheikh Hassan*, shortly after the Kanamma incident, *Spin Ghul* too decided to disappear from Nigeria, his tracks continued to be followed by the Libyan security, who arrested him a first time in 2005, and by the Italian one, who intercepted him in 2011 and extradited him to the United States (ZENN 2017b, 17-22).

In 2006, the Nigerian Permanent Representative at the United Nations (later, Nigerian Foreign Affairs Minister) Aminu Bashir Wali, sent to the counter-terrorism committee of the UN a letter in which he detailed what he described as his country's efforts to curb global jihadi networks (WALI 2006). In this letter, Wali provided details about the contacts established by *Cheikh Hassan* in Nigeria, and presented the operation against the Nigerian Taliban as but one event of the same history of Nigeria's involvement in the global War on Terror that had previously led to the dismantling of Hassan's Algerian-Nigerian network.

In a separate article (BRIGAGLIA, IOCCHI, forthcoming), we will discuss the above sources in more detail. For now, it suffices to stress that we are not interested in assessing the degree of factual accuracy of the specific content of each of these reports, but in pointing out what their very existence demonstrates, i.e. that the events of Kanamma intersected with a period of intensive surveillance, on the part of the securities of both Nigeria and external partners, over a number of actors *believed* (rightly or wrongly, it is not relevant to this argument) to be associated with al-Qaeda and whose paths, in some conspicuous cases, crossed those of the Nigerian Taliban.

The action taken by the security to dismantle the Nigerian Taliban and curb their global links, was presented by the Nigerian political establishment, in confidential but official exchanges with their global partners, as counter-terrorism operations against global jihad. Thus, from the methodological point of view, any analysis of the Tarmowa-Kanamma incident which, like Bukarti's, is cut off from a parallel overview of such broader counter-terrorism strategies adopted by the Nigerian security at the time, is bound to remain defective, if not mystifying. The Tarmowa-Kanamma incident, in sum, can only be understood in the context of the strategic culture that Nigeria was developing at the time. Such a culture was not developed in a vacuum, but as a response to the United States' effort to secure its "enduring freedom" by calling all state actors around the world to join its global "War on Terror".

#### 4. *Where Did the "Fishing Rights' Story" Come From?*

As we have seen above, Bukarti usefully dispels the myth that at the roots of the clashes between the Nigerian security and the Kanamma group was an ordinary communal incident

<sup>9</sup> The case of Cheikh Hassan is discussed in detail in ZENN 2020 (31-34; 42), published after the present article was submitted.

like a fishing rights dispute. He does not, however, trace the latter version of the story to a precise time and source. For him, the weakness of the existing narratives around the Kanamma incident is that they are vague, confused, contradictory, and written by reporters with no access to primary sources in Yobe State. On this point, too, we disagree with him.

If one looks more carefully into the chronology of the reports on Kanamma, in fact, it will appear that some of the earliest reports are actually quite detailed; they are written by reporters from Yobe State; and their conclusions are much closer to Bukarti's overall reconstruction than the latter would admit. This is the case, for instance, of Abdullahi Bego, writing from Damaturu (the capital of Yobe State) for the *Weekly Trust* in the immediate aftermath of the crisis (BEGO 2004). Two weeks later, a report by Kamal Tayo Oropo, writing for *The Guardian* (Nigeria), adds some interesting details gathered through interviews with the Yobe State authorities, including the identities of several of the commune's members (OROPO 2004). Notwithstanding the presence of some misleading statements concerning the amount of time the group had spent in Kanamma, both Bego and Oropo reconstruct the chronology of the incident in a way that is substantially the same as Bukarti's; none of them mentions the "fishing rights' incident" and highlights instead (just as Bukarti's source, Kachalla Ngubdo) how the real reason for the authorities' concern over the nature of the commune's project remained arcane; moreover, they are cautious in their assessment of existing rumours about possible foreign links entertained by the community.

As for the "fishing rights' story", this appears for the first time, as far as we are aware, in a 6 February 2004 confidential cable by an official of the United States' Embassy in Nigeria, who informs his interlocutors in Washington that this version is the one provided by the political authorities of Yobe and Borno states that he has consulted<sup>10</sup>. Gradually, over the following months, the "fishing rights' story" would find its way in the Nigerian media, settling as the "semi-official" and virtually unquestioned explanation of the crisis. Retrieved from the Nigerian media after the 2009 explosion of the first Boko Haram crisis in Maiduguri, this version would resonate in the writings of most international researchers tracing the history of Boko Haram, before being questioned by the 2015 *DØQ* article and perhaps finally, disproved by Bukarti sixteen years after having been formulated.

In interpreting the above chronology, a problem obviously arises when trying to reconcile the following: (a) the chief of the Nigerian intelligence mentioning, in 2001, the existence of a programme of extensive surveillance (in his own words, a «database») of a group of individuals believed to be linked to al-Qaeda and operating in Nigeria; (b) a set of sources, emanating either from Nigerian and international state securities, or from Boko Haram informants, all mentioning a number of individuals (Muhammad Ali; *Spin Ghul*; Imad Alwan; *Cheikh Hassan*) operating in Nigeria, believed to have been agents of al-Qaeda, and in some cases, meeting the Nigerian Taliban; (c) a top-ranking Nigerian official, reporting to his counterparts in the United Nations and presenting the Nigerian Taliban as part of a broader set of actions against global jihad that had started various years before; (d) official voices from the Yobe and Borno states' establishment providing an ordinary, local fishing rights dispute as the *casus belli* for their operation against the Nigerian Taliban.

How to reconcile claims (a), (b) and (c) above, with the apparently discording voice represented by claim (d)? One possible explanation would be that no coordination existed, at the time, between (1) the surveillance implemented by the federal government and the national security in cooperation with external partners and (2) the political leadership of Yobe and Borno states directing the operation against the Nigerian Taliban, as well as the local police

<sup>10</sup> United States Embassy Abuja, *Nigerian 'Taliban' Attacks Most Likely not Tied to Taliban nor al-Qaida*, February 6, 2004, available at: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ABUJA183\\_a.html#](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ABUJA183_a.html#) (accessed 29/10/19).

physically engaged in the confrontation with them. The first tracked the movements of individuals it believed, either based on its own investigations or on tips from international partners, to be connected to al-Qaeda; it followed their intersection with the Nigerian Taliban; and obviously saw the latter as a potentially global threat in the making. The second had no awareness of the above policy of surveillance; it started to see the Nigerian Taliban as a threat only in the wake of a communal incident; and decided to take action against it in an autonomous way, without coordinating with the national security.

But a second possible, and in our opinion more convincing explanation, is that the operation to dislodge the Nigerian Taliban from Tarmowa and leading to the Kanamma clashes, was conducted by the local police forces at the instruction of state and federal authorities; and that the latter, in turn, had conceived this operation as a natural sequel to the surveillance made over previous years in the overall context of the external pressure created by the War on Terror. The fact of keeping the suspected al-Qaeda connection that justified such an operation undisclosed, would have been consistent with Nigeria's contrasting attitudes towards American foreign policy goals, especially in the aftermath of 9/11: while a generally pro-American stand was accepted as a strategic imperative by policy-makers of all political orientation at the federal level, the concrete choices into which this policy would be translated needed to be carefully moderated or camouflaged for the nation's Muslim constituencies who, at the time, were quite naturally (and in our opinion, not without some good reasons) prone to an anti-American sentiment.

The decision by the Nigerian authorities not to disclose the real reasons for the crackdown on the Nigerian Taliban, in 2003-2004, was thus justified. Popular support for Al-Qaeda – under the emotions generated by the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and in the absence of the necessary time, for the local Muslim scholars, to digest and publicise a political, ethical and theological reflection on al-Qaeda's means and goals – was strong in Nigeria at the time. Presenting the Kanamma incident to the public as a security operation that was meant at preventing the establishment of a cell with a connection (embryonic and loose, yes, but still a connection) to al-Qaeda, carried the inherent risk of turning the Kanamma group into victims and heroes, with an obviously counter-productive effect security-wise. But sixteen years later, and after a tragedy of the magnitude of what has hit Nigeria in the form of the Boko Haram insurgency, it is clear that more counter-productive effects, of a different nature, have occurred at some point. Such effects are obscured, in the literature on Boko Haram, by the insistence in framing the Nigerian Taliban crisis mainly as a local one. It is thus finally time to revise the history of that incident in the light of all available evidence, as Bukarti's article, we believe, does not do. Only then, the record will be straight.

Available evidence points to the fact that the Tarmowa/Kanamma incident was an operation against a network believed by the highest echelons of the Nigerian authorities, to be in the process of developing a connection to al-Qaeda. Such operation was conceived by the Nigerian security in the context of the War on Terror and thus inevitably subsumed into the logic of the latter. Security operations conceived under the GWoT paradigm, however, are malleable to the discursive and strategic needs of multiple actors; as such, any given security operation is bound to be informed by overlapping discursive and strategic interests. It is such overlap, in any given context, that creates a configuration of the War on Terror politics that is specific and local, when not even parochial, but that is also the product of a "geopolitics of engagement" (in this case, between the interests of local state actors and the strategic imperatives of the United States) that is, in its essence, multi-layered and trans-local<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> With the term "geopolitics of engagement", we refer to a conceptualisation of neoliberal geopolitics formulated by ROBERTS et al. 2003. This conceptualisation stresses the primacy of *connection* and *engagement* – in stark contrast with the Cold War-era "policy of containment" – as politically advantageous for strategic planners in the globalised era. Distance and isolation, within this paradigm, are claimed to foster threats (political mobilisation; "terrorism";

## 5. Conclusions

Re-framing the events occurred in north-eastern Nigeria in the early 2000s, and specifically of the fragment of Tarmowa/Kanamma in 2003, in the light of the War on Terror, has important implications on the broader interpretation of the long-term dynamics of what we have called elsewhere as the “Boko Haram phenomenon” in Nigeria. Through this short essay, we have started to address what we consider as the biggest “elephant in the room” in most analyses of both jihadi and counter-jihadi fields in Nigeria, that is the inter-dependency between terrorism and counter-terrorism discourses/strategies, and the concrete (at times, dramatic) weight that such discourses/strategies carry in shaping the political trajectory of a country.

From a state-actor perspective, similar reflections have been made, with reference to African cases, on Mali (BØÅS 2019), Chad (IOCCHI 2019) and Somalia (MALITO 2015), but they remain absent from the discussion on Nigeria. This absence is due precisely to the fact that the origins of the Boko Haram phenomenon have been framed mainly in “local” terms.

The different modalities through which Mali, Chad and Somalia have become able to exercise decisive leverage, establish themselves as necessary military partners of the West, and turn up as “security support recipients” in the War on Terror in Africa, show the ability of state actors to play with the malleability of the notion of terrorism. An in-depth analysis of the specific configuration that such geo-politics of engagement in the frame of the War on Terror has assumed in Nigeria, exceeds the space allotted to this response. Our present goals were limited, in a more preliminary fashion, to the following.

(1) Demonstrating the limits inherent in Bukarti’s reading of the Nigerian Taliban crisis in isolation from Nigeria’s preceding and subsequent engagement in the War on Terror.

(2) Calling for a paradigm shift in Boko Haram studies that requires essentially two things. On the one side, abandoning parochial explanations of the origins and successive transformation of the jihadi phenomenon in Nigeria. On the other side, carefully looking at the complexity of the translocal entanglements that underlie such origins and transformations, by using the methodology of critical terrorism studies rather than relying on security studies alone.

Our suggestion, thus, as far as Boko Haram studies are concerned, is to bypass the deficiencies inherent in the use of an elusive conceptual category such as the supposed dichotomy between “global” and “local” threats, by recognising not only the myriads of nuances, shades and declinations that exist between the two layers, but also the inherently political nature of the process of narrating the development of a threat as “local” or “global”. Instead of splitting hairs in a debate about the exact size of al-Qaeda’s presence in Nigeria in the early 2000s, the focus of historical research on Boko Haram’s closest “ancestor” (the Nigerian Taliban) should be shifted, in our opinion, to the following questions.

How did the War on Terror, as a global policy devised in the US and transposed in Nigeria, impact Nigerian security strategies in the early 2000s, informing the state’s engagement with the “Taliban” of Tarmowa/Kanamma? And how did the War on Terror as a religio-political discourse adopted and molded by local religious actors, impact the Islamic sphere in Nigeria, creating new fractures? In what ways did such a nascent “Nigerian version” (both as a strategy

smuggling; unregulated mobility) in “ungoverned spaces”. Thereby, a (re-)connection is enforced. Such an aggressive engagement – typical of imperial policies – is mediated today by the repertoire of neoliberal ideas and policies that, in theory, are aimed at promoting a «one-world vision of interdependency». Concretely, however (here lies the most important implication of such conceptualisation for our analysis of the War on Terror) they empower a variety of trans-local and regional allies whose individual agendas may also contradict (with varying degrees, and in a myriad of different forms) that of the imperial power on which they rely. The possibility of “unintended consequences” to emerge from such a trans-local geopolitics of engagement is thus, in our opinion, a structural aspect of the shifting and malleable War on Terror paradigm, and not an episodic, occasional occurrence.

and a discourse) of the War on Terror politics, shape vernacular narratives on the Nigerian Taliban, and later, on Boko Haram?

What triggered the transformation, in only a few years' time, from the Nigerian Taliban (a potentially dangerous but tiny network of militants with a loose tie to al-Qaeda) into Boko Haram (a devastating local insurgency that directly targeted the Nigerian institutions and civil society)?

Insurgencies transform over time and in the process, they may change the pattern and/or the intensity of their global ties. We all seem to agree that this has been the case with Boko Haram. Such changes in Boko Haram's pattern of integration into global jihadi networks, have usually been read in the light of the standard "spill-over" narrative, one that sees insurgencies starting as "small-local" and trying to get "big-global" (and suggests measures to contain them by preventing or cutting global ties). But is this necessarily the best-suited paradigm? What if, at times, the reverse might be the case? What if we found out that, in the early 2000s, the Nigerian Taliban were "small-global", and that it was partly as a consequence of the counter-terrorism strategies enacted against it, that they gradually transformed into something "big-local" as Muhammad Yusuf's and later, Abubakar Shekau's faction of Boko Haram? How would this change the ways in which we perceive the politics of knowledge production on the Boko Haram phenomenon? The strategic interests of which states, and the lives of which peoples are threatened the least, when a tiny militant network, originally animated by a global agenda, is contained within an African nation's borders and gradually transforms into an all-out local insurgency against such nation's institutions? And which states, which peoples, pay the highest price when this happens?

## References

- ANONYMOUS 2012. *The Popular Discourses of Salafi Radicalism and Salafi Counter-radicalism in Nigeria: A Case Study of Boko Haram*, in «Journal of Religion in Africa», 42, 2, 2012, 118 ff.
- ANSARY A.U. 2017. *A Message from Nigeria*, in «Al Risalah», 4, 2017, 18 ff.
- BEGO A. 2004. *Nigeria: 'Taliban' of Nigeria: Who Are They?*, in «Weekly Trust», 3 January 2004, available at: <https://allafrica.com/stories/200401050254.html> (accessed 5/11/2019).
- BØÅS M. 2019. *The Sahel Crisis and the Need for International Support*, Policy Dialogue no. 15, Uppsala, The Nordic Africa Institute.
- BRIGAGLIA A. 2015. *The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram*, in «Diritto e Questioni Pubbliche», 15, 2, 2015, 174 ff.
- BRIGAGLIA A., IOCCHI A. 2017. "Some Advice and Guidelines": *The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as Narrated by AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb)*, in «Annual Review of Islam in Africa», 14, 2017, 27 ff.
- BRIGAGLIA A., IOCCHI A. (forthcoming). *The Global War on Terror and the Early History of Boko Haram (1990s-2009)*, in «African Conflict & Peace-Building Review», forthcoming.
- BUKARTI A.B. 2020. *The Origins of Boko Haram - And Why It Matters*, in «Current Trends in Islamist Ideology», 13 January 2020, available at: <https://www.hudson.org/research/15608-the-origins-of-boko-haram-and-why-it-matters> (accessed 13/3/2020).
- COMAROFF J., COMAROFF J. 1999. *Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony*, in «American Ethnologist», 26, 2, 279 ff.
- DANJIBO N. 2014. *One of the first videos of Ansaru, available on 1 June 2012*, in PÉROUSE DE MONTCLOS M.A. (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, Leiden-Ibadan, Africa Studies Centre & Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique, 259 ff.
- GUDIÈRE M. 2014. *The Charter of Jama'at Ansar Al Muslimin Fi Bilad al-Sudan*, in PÉROUSE DE MONTCLOS M.A. (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, Leiden-Ibadan, Africa Studies Centre & Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique, 246 ff.
- HIGAZI A., KENDHAMMER B., MOHAMMED K., PÉROUSE DE MONTCLOS M.A., THURSTON A. 2018. *A Response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida*, in «Perspectives on Terrorism», 12, 2, 203 ff.
- INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP 2014. *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, in «Africa Report», 216, 3 April 2014.
- IOCCHI A. 2019. *Economia politica della Guerra al Terrore in Ciad: emergenza securitaria, "profitti di contingenza" e potere militare*, in «Afriche e Orienti», XX, 3, 158 ff.
- KASSIM A., NWANKPA M. (eds.) 2017. *Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*, London, Hurst.
- MALITO D.V. 2015. *Building terror while fighting enemies: how the Global War on Terror deepened the crisis in Somalia*, in «Third World Quarterly», 36, 10, 1866 ff.
- MOHAMMED K. 2014. *The Message and Methods of Boko Haram*, in PÉROUSE DE MONTCLOS M.A. (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, Leiden-Ibadan, Africa Studies Centre & Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique, 9 ff.
- MOHAMMED K. 2018. *The Origins of Boko Haram*, in LEVAN C., UKATA P. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 583 ff.
- OROPO K.T. 2004. *Nigeria: How Talibans Recruit, Operate Nationwide*, in «The Guardian (Nigeria)», 18 January 2004.

- OUAZANI C. 2004. *Sale temps pour le djihadistes*, in «Jeune Afrique», 10 May 2019, available at: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/119449/archives-thematique/sale-temps-pour-les-djihadistes/> (accessed 29/10/19).
- PANTAMI I.A. 2015. *Theology and Jurisprudence in the Ideological Framework of Current Insurgencies: Towards an Alternative Islamic Discourse*. Paper presented at the «Regional Conference on Islam, Youth Militancy and the Challenges of Peace-Building», Abuja, 10-11 August 2015, available at: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/drisaaliipantamitheologyandjurisprudenc-e-.pdf> (accessed 19/5/2020).
- ROBERTS S., SPECOR A., SPARKE M. 2003. *Neoliberal Geopolitics*, in «Antipode», 35, 5, 886 ff.
- THURSTON A. 2018. *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- WALI A.B. 2006. *Letter dated 27 September 2006 from the Permanent Representative of Nigeria to the United Nations addressed to the Chairman of the Counter-Terrorism Committee*, United Nations Security Council, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/46de9f880.pdf> (accessed 20/05/2020).
- ZENN J. 2017a. *Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria: Cases from Boko Haram's Founding, Launch of Jihad and Suicide Bombing*, in «Perspectives on Terrorism», 11, 6, 2017, 174 ff.
- ZENN J. 2017b. *Before Boko Haram: A Profile of al-Qaeda's West Africa Chief Ibrahim Harun (a.k.a. Spinghul)*, in «Militant Leadership Monitor», 8, 3, 2017, 17 ff.
- ZENN J. 2018. *A Primer on Boko Haram Sources and Three Heuristics on al-Qaida and Boko Haram in Response to Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, and Alex Thurston*, in «Perspectives on Terrorism», 12, 3, 2018, 74 ff.
- ZENN J. 2020. *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner.