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Lies or half-truths? Boko Haram's ideology from a social movement theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

Using Social Movement Theory (SMT) as a methodological framework and explicitly employing the core SMT concepts of political opportunism and framing, this paper seeks to examine Boko Haram's use of discourse in activism. As a rarely employed research method within the Boko Haram literature, SMT holds explanatory power around the movement's approach to transforming motivation potential into actual mobilisation via frame resonance. Focusing on the application of framing within (interpreted) sermons, lectures and exhortations by both Muhammad Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau as former substantive leaders of Boko Haram, this paper unpacks the discourse of Boko Haram's ideology. The paper shows that this ideology, which contrasts the softened core of the Salafist/Wahhabi doctrines from which Boko Haram broke away, relies on problematic interpretations of Qur'anic exegesis and political thought as both relate to faith and governance in northern Nigeria. One policy recommendation to emerge from this study is that counter-narratives to Boko Haram's ideology should highlight not just why but also how the group's rhetoric employs lies and half-truths in an attempt to rationalise its activism; despite what appears to be an adherence to Qur'anic exegesis, in making its claims.

KEYWORDS

Social movement theory; framing; political opportunism; Islamic jurisprudence; Boko Haram; ideology

Introduction: Social movement theory (SMT) and Islamic activism

Islamic activism, 'the mobilisation of contention to support Muslim causes',¹ is a form of contention that has gained peculiar currency within the academic discourse over the past two decades, simultaneously evolving and spreading across the globe.² This broad concept accommodates a spectrum of contentious repertoires frequently employed under the banner of Islam. The contentious repertoires include activism by terrorist groups but also accommodate for 'collective action rooted in Islamic symbols and identities, explicitly political movements that seek to establish an Islamic state and inward-looking groups that promote Islamic spirituality through collective efforts'.³

Each of these groups claims to be 'Islamic' but also differ from other similar claimants within the Muslim world in many ways. Consequentially, it would be problematic to narrowly assume that certain groups are non-Islamic, whereas others are, for the convenience of analysis or labelling. Timothy Peace, for instance, considers 'Muslims' to mean those who self-identify as that, regardless of whether they practice or whether their actions are inconsistent with

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what might be considered Islamic tenets. 'Muslim', along these lines, is, therefore, 'a sociological category for identification rather than a strict faith category'.⁴ Thus Islamic activism relates to the mobilisation and actions of those who self-identify as Muslim and assert their Islamic identity within these actions, drawing on it to make political commitments.⁵ This is regardless of what those commitments are precisely and where they lie on the spectrum of contentious politics.

Additionally, the study of Islamic activism does not exist in a theoretical or practical vacuum but instead is part of a broad knowledge base of contentious politics at large.⁶ Typical tactics of activism and dissent, including petitions, public protests, and even the use of violence, as an example, have a storeyed career. Indeed, the timing, choice and targets around the tactics employed tend to be context-specific. Nevertheless, the commonalities of the repertoires of contention are such that they 'exhibit consistency across time and space'.⁷ Indeed, as Sidney Tarrow⁸ reminds us, such tactics are so common, they can be interpreted as a reflection of modular protest forms, which can be employed: by different actors, at different times, in different places.

That Islamic activism is not unique is also revealed in the fact that other collective actors also respond to repression, are impacted by structural strain, link political opportunism to discourse, mobilise resources, and employ frames 'rooted in symbols, discourse, and practice, often designed to evoke a sense of injustice to encourage activism'.⁹ This indicates that the organisation of Islamic activism, including its dynamics and processes, can be viewed as 'elements of contention that transcend the specificity of 'Islam' as a system of meaning, identity, and basis of collective action'.¹⁰

Certainly, the ideational components of Islam and its ideological worldview differentiate Islamic activism from other forms of contention.¹¹ Nevertheless, so far as collective action within Islamic activism is concerned, the concomitant mechanisms are broadly consistent across movement types. In other words, as Quintan Wiktorowicz concludes, 'Islamic activism is not *sui generis*'.¹²

This conclusion and the supporting arguments within this introduction suggests that SMT holds such potential explanatory power for Islamic activism, regardless of the tactics employed by movement actors. Accordingly, such groups should not be situated in a separate box and given 'special explanations'. Nevertheless, despite the similarities between Islamic activism in all its forms, and other types of collective action, it has for the most part 'remained isolated from the plethora of theoretical and conceptual developments that have emerged from research on social movements and contentious politics'.¹³ The same critical approaches, such as SMT, employed in the study of activism, have not been employed to the same degree within the debate on Islamic activism.

With this relative neglect of SMT as a framework of interrogation for Islamic activism, the potential for further studies manifests, and it is here that this article seeks to advance the debate as it relates to Boko Haram. This article will show that it is possible — perhaps even necessary — in conducting a sociological enquiry of Islamic activism to treat it no more or less like a social movement such that 'the standard social movement questionnaire to ask telling questions about Islamic activism' can be adopted.¹⁴

The rationale for this non-preferential or discriminatory treatment of Islamic activism is that, like other social movement organisations (SMOs), radical Islamic groups employ frames, mobilise resources, respond to repression, and exploit political opportunism. Moreover, just like other SMO actors, Islamic activists also engage the process of 'boundary activation', whereby one of several previously existing divisions among social locations is made

so salient that any other divisions are suppressed, and most political interaction is organised around (and across) that division alone.¹⁵ Thus, insofar as SMT can help explain the sociology of political activism, it can also play a similar role within the context of Islamic activism.

This approach to analyzing Islamic activism using SMT has merits both in what it prevents and facilitates. More specifically, treating Islamic activism as part of the sphere of contentious politics makes it 'easier to avoid the reduction of Islamic activism to a straightforward product of distinctive Islamic mentalities or of a peculiar social milieu'.¹⁶ Indeed, viewed this way, Islamic activism no longer needs to be presented as a solo performance of sorts, wherein a particular doctrine or biographical entry pertinent to one actor or group is said to be the main reason for their behaviour. Furthermore, interrogating radical Islamic movements from this lens may well attenuate the so-called research taboo long associated with the study of terror movements.¹⁷ That is, if SMT research applies just as much to Islamic activism, why should SMT researchers be stigmatised for interacting with terror movements that identify with the Muslim identity?

An added benefit of treating Islamist activism as no more or less than any other form of political activism is that this makes it 'easier to grasp interactions between groups of activists (as well as between activists and governments) that shape and reshape the locus, intensity, and form of Islamic activism' by a social movement organisation (SMO).¹⁸ An SMO is 'a complex or formal organisation which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or countermovement and attempts to implement those goals'.¹⁹ And SMT applies to activism by all SMOs, including radical Islamic movements.

SMT as an underused theoretical framework within the Boko Haram debate

This article analyses how Boko Haram, as an SMO, selectively employs ideological resources (from within their political environment and religious texts) to frame discourse towards energising and mobilising receptive audiences. The article's focus use of SMT in analyzing Boko Haram's is a significant differentiator, as existing multidisciplinary research on Boko Haram is not unified by a shared research agenda. Instead, scholarly analysis of Boko Haram tends to be scattered across various disciplines.

Moreover, the research questions, theoretical frameworks and methodologies tend to be narrow because they are often pre-determined by a particular disciplinary drive. This is not unlike the existing state of affairs surrounding research on Islamic activism as a broader field.²⁰

Political scientists, for example, have primarily been concerned with how Boko Haram's interpretation of Islam impacts the state and politics.²¹ Sociological analyses of Boko Haram's constitution have mostly been interested in exploring the demographic roots of Islamist recruits and the viability of the government's rehabilitation programme.²² Islamic theologians and jurists, along with religious studies scholars, meanwhile, have predominantly focused on the ideas that motivate Boko Haram's approach to contentious politics—whether, for instance, Boko Haram's ideology is shaped by local or international influences is already an area of divided scholarly debate.²³

Historians, on their part, tend to investigate and narrate the histories of Boko Haram.²⁴ Military scholars focus more on the threat posed by the group, its evolution, along with how the Nigerian state has responded.²⁵ Human Rights reports tend to emphasise the plight of the victims and the problematic practices of both Boko Haram and Nigeria's forces in response.²⁶ The gendered view of the insurgency, meanwhile, examines the role of women and the nature of gender-based violence (GBV) within Boko Haram's calculus of war²⁷ but also points to the

'gender-bending role of women as frontline fighters, knowledge brokers, state informants, and producers of vigilante technologies'.²⁸

The result of such disciplinary fragmentation is that understanding within each sub-field around Boko Haram has evolved into a robust literature body within a relatively short time. However, so far as all these elements fit together, potentially interact, and certainly influence the nature of Boko Haram's contentious repertoire, only a few models or frameworks have been developed, and these have broadly emerged in the last few years – see, as examples, Subrahmanian et al.,²⁹ Iyekekpolo,³⁰ and Amaechi and Tshifhumulo.³¹ In this sense, as proposed by this study, SMT acts as a unifying framework and agenda by which an effective mode of inquiry can help expand existing boundaries of research on Boko Haram. Boko Haram's history, idea system, activism, response to repression, view of the political environment and the state, ability to recruit, and problematic Qur'anic exegesis will all be unified within this study.

Drawing from social movement theory (SMT) and focusing specifically on the problematic interpretations of Qur'anic exegesis and political thoughts in the lectures of two dead leaders of a northern Nigerian-based Boko Haram (Yusuf and Shekau), the paper seeks to explain how interpreted sermons of both leaders contrasted the softened core of the salafist/Wahhabi doctrines from which the group broke away.

Boko Haram's discourse is examined in the form of interpreted speeches, writings, and sermons between 2006 and 2016. The source of this discourse is a compendium within *The Boko Haram Reader* by Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa.³² As the analyzed discourse relates to faith and governance in Islam in general and the political tensions within the 'crowded religious marketplace' of northern Nigeria at the time,³³ it came to resonate with a larger audience.

One of the key themes examined within this article is how the resonance of a social movement's discourse increases motivation and mobilisation for activism. Such mobilisation is critical: grievances and dissatisfaction in existing networks do not automatically translate to mobilisation. On the contrary, grievances not effectively situated within existing discourse may not lead to any substantive action at the group level. Thus, as this paper seeks to show, such grievances need to be framed to align with the changing religious and socio-political realities in which potential recruits and activists identify.

In other words, the ability of an SMO to transform motivation potential into an actual mobilisation is contingent on the extent of frame resonance. Along these lines, a question that SMO leaders must tackle to translate grievance into activism is how the framing of such grievances resonates with the cultural symbols, languages and historical narratives with which both SMO members and potential recruits identify. Indeed, it is within such framing that potential activists see engagement as compelling and, in some instances, inevitable. The start point of framing is the movement's environment,³⁴ and it is indeed here that many of Boko Haram's influences can be found.

Debating Boko Haram as a product of its environment

In the debate of Boko Haram as a global or local actor,³⁵ the movement has been argued by one school of scholars to be a product of its immediate religious, political and social environment: a local phenomenon, not a global one.³⁶ This is consistent with the view by Gunning³⁷ that social movements do not function exogenously to localised considerations of the broader social, economic and political environment. Therefore, along this train of thought,

emergent movements are shaped by the same environment from where they come to hold relevance.

In the instance of Boko Haram, Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, and Alex Thurston believe that local references to jihad underpin Boko Haram's push for jihad.³⁸ This camp of scholars argues that international influences on Boko Haram's emergence should not be overembellished and that radical shifts within Nigeria's Salafist movement, evidenced since the 1970s, are the origins for the jihad being waged today by the likes of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State West Africa (IS-WA).³⁹

Moreover, employing Social Movement Theory (SMT), Amaechi interrogates the exploitation of political Islam as a mobilising resource for Boko Haram, arguing that the movement's isolation from the Islamic establishment, including formal political and religious institutions, lowered 'the opportunity for legitimate means' and ultimately influenced the movement's pivot towards violence.⁴⁰ Building on revolutionary theories developed by Jeff Goodwin,⁴¹ Amaechi contends that countries, such as Nigeria, which exhibit 'exclusive' and 'elite' government institutions, tend to experience more violent movements than those where such institutions are more open.⁴²

State internal repression also features within this discourse. Della Porta's research suggests that the use of the police as a coercive instrument of the state increases the likelihood of repressive response to dissident movements. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of meso-(group-level) political grievances and could then push a social movement over the precipice of contentious repertoires and into violence in response.⁴³ Applying this to Boko Haram, research findings indicate that police and military aggression against the movement in 2009, which led to the death of its leader, Muhammad Yusuf the same year, marked a turning point in Boko Haram's pivot towards violence.⁴⁴

The situating of Boko Haram within local or global contexts are helpful to understanding how the group presents its Qur'anic exegesis as a means to energise and mobilise its 'oppressed' radical base in a part of the country where religion and ethnicity supersede nationhood loyalties. Certainly, Boko Haram is not the only movement repressed by Nigeria's security forces. Nevertheless, this article shall show that the group's ability to 'frame' its discourse in a way that exploits both religious fervour and political opportunism augments its mobilisation potential. Indeed, this exploitation of political opportunism by Boko Haram is a valuable start point of analysis around the movement's use of discourse.

Political opportunism and Boko Haram's insurgency

By the time Mohammed Yusuf formed Boko Haram as a Salafi organisation c. 2002, '12 state governments in the region had already adopted Sharia as their states' binding penal code'.⁴⁵ Thus, the timing of Boko Haram's emergence is instructive as its rejection of the institution of the Nigerian government came just a few years (post-1999) after the implementation of Sharia across Northern Nigeria.⁴⁶ One interpretation is that Boko Haram's formative worldview reflected both 'a rejection of the postcolonial state' and Northern Muslims' endeavours 'to work within the postcolonial state structure to achieve an Islamic state democratically peacefully'.⁴⁷

It is also noteworthy that the political and religious institutions, which enforced Sharia, were linked to those individuals with whom Yusuf had fallen out.⁴⁸ Consequentially, Yusuf and his group criticised the loose implementation of Sharia. However, the strictest criticisms

for the non-Islamic rule of law and systems of governance, where Yusuf cautions that ‘those who follow their legal system and resort to illegitimate rulers (*tawāghit*) for judgments are polytheists, as the Parliament and representatives combine deifying themselves and associating others with Allah’.⁴⁹

However, the federal government showed no inclination to revisit Sharia implementation. This further set Boko Haram at odds with the government in addition to already being ostracised both politically and from the Muslim community.⁵⁰

With that being said, let us pause before running off with the idea that Yusuf was a pariah and that Boko Haram, by the mid-2000s, retained no support. Indeed, Boko Haram might have been gradually isolated due to its anti-Western, anti-government, and anti-establishment views. Nevertheless, the movement retained a following. After all, many others disagreed with the co-existence of Sharia with the Nigerian constitution.⁵¹

Moreover, there was also growing concern around the Nigerian government’s ‘failure to eradicate corruption’.⁵² This situation — which festered in all the years that Yusuf antagonised the police, politicians and the northern Nigerian religious establishment — was one that even the broad implementation of Sharia failed to address. All of this meant that Yusuf and his movement identified a political opportunity and exploited it: attracting large numbers of followers to Boko Haram, not despite Sharia implementation but perhaps even *because* of it.⁵³

Consequentially, Yusuf’s polemics against the government and the Islamic establishment increasingly pointed to rebellion. This was made clear within the movement’s emerging discourse, such as where Yusuf states, ‘when they commit unbelief then rebelling against them is obligatory to the one who is capable; for the one who has no capability then it is incumbent upon him to emigrate, just as we cited previously from the statement of *al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād*’.⁵⁴

Circa 2002, Yusuf did see a legitimate means of accessing political institutions through Bornu Central Senator, Ali Modu Sheriff, who was a one-time political ally. However, once elected, Sheriff failed to keep his promises to Yusuf, causing him to grow even more frustrated with the political structures he now seemed permanently denied access to.⁵⁵ This growing lack of access to political institutions led the *Yusufiyya*, the followers of Yusuf, further away from legitimate means of achieving their goals and more towards violence. Invariably, this pivot towards violence set Boko Haram at odds with Nigeria’s repressive authorities.⁵⁶

The state of affairs described above is consistent with the theories of political opportunism and the gradual pivot towards violence by social movements.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Della Porta⁵⁸ and Crenshaw⁵⁹ argue for the impact of state repression on a social movement’s pivot towards violence. Similarly, several other theorists including Brockett,⁶⁰ Zimmerman,⁶¹ Opp and Roehl,⁶² Mason and Krane,⁶³ Mason,⁶⁴ Davenport,⁶⁵ Tarrow⁶⁶ and Earl⁶⁷ suggest that states within which police and military institutions are exploited to repress dissent movements, risk facing even more violent social movements.

This theory, tested within the Boko Haram case, holds explanatory power around why the group’s violence gradually escalated as it faced more police harassment. Along this train of thought, it was repression and the murder of Yusuf in July 2009, which acted as the tipping point within the group’s pivot to violent insurgency. Whereas yielding a tactical victory for the government, such repression was a strategic mistake.⁶⁸ Moreover, the government’s repressive posture against Boko Haram was exploited by the movement’s discourse over the years that followed.⁶⁹

Moreover, as Sidney Tarrow⁷⁰ argues regarding tactics and cycles of contention, the most violent repertoires employed by a social movement are unlikely to emerge at the start. Instead, these extreme repertoires of contention tend to emerge much later in the protest

cycle, as more actors enter the fray, who decide that non-violent resistance against the government is not working. Underpinned by political opportunism theory, Figures 1–3 attempt to capture this gradual pivot towards violence.

In the case of Boko Haram, the movement in its formative years was radical but non-violent, although this would change. However, by 2009 when Yusuf was assassinated, Shekau took over, further splintering the movement into two factions: *Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad* (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa province (IS-WA). Attempting to out-compete each other while also maintaining separate military campaigns against the Nigerian government, the violence attributed to 'Boko Haram' (which is now at least two separate factions as of 2021) has escalated beyond whatever repertoires of contention the group first employed during its formative phases.⁷¹

Nevertheless, Boko Haram's violence and its ability to exploit existent political opportunism are never one part of its approach to activism. Especially where activism is violent, SMO actors often attempt to rationalise their choice of contentious repertoires.

Boko Haram's ability to justify its ideology and situate its actions within the broader justification for its jihad is captured within the way it has framed its discourse for over a decade. Boko Haram exploited political opportunities in northern Nigeria as it sustained its activism via framing processes. An examination of Boko Haram's discourse between 2006 and 2016 will reveal why and how the movement's actors have employed frames within that discourse. First, however, it is worth explaining how frames and framing processes work and the theory governing their use by SMOs.

Theoretical framework: Frames and why social movements employ them

Frames are culturally determined definitions of reality, which assist the interpretation of objects and events by enabling an individual or group to 'locate, perceive, identify, label events within their life space and the world at large'.⁷² Thus, framing is an agentic process in which actors articulate, demarcate, and narrate events with the hope of influencing

- A challenger asserting claims on upswing of protest cycle will generally fare better than challengers later in the cycle or outside its duration
- During the upswing of a cycle, many groups and movements will be asserting claims
- This places greater pressure on the system than could any group individually
- Activities of early mobilizers in turn encourages other movements to activate as well
- As a result, conflict diffuses throughout society at higher-than-normal levels of frequency
- This intensity builds, peaks and then declines to more normal levels (Brockett, 1995, 131)

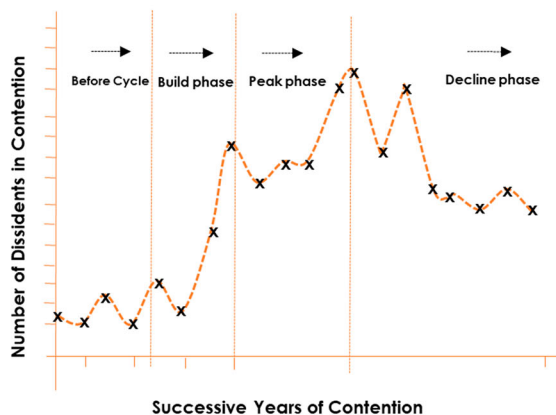


Figure 1. The Political Cycle of Contention, Explained.

Emergence of Violent Tactics Across a Contentious Actor Cycle

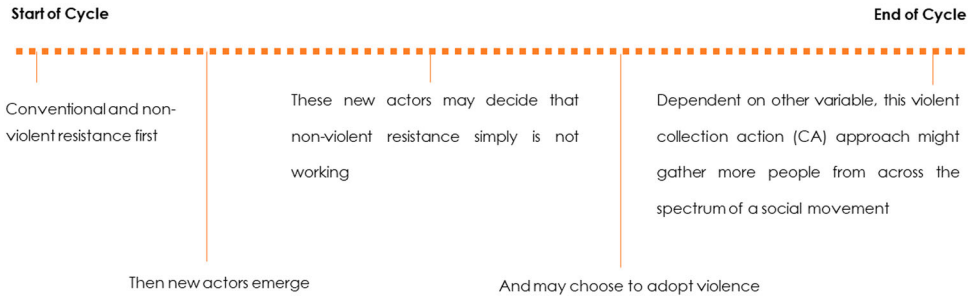
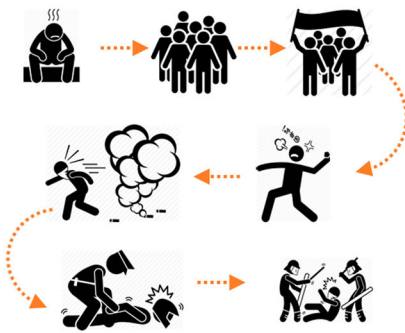


Figure 2. Emergence of Violent Tactics Across a Contentious Actor Cycle.

Explaining the Pivot Towards Violence



- Brockett (1995) recommends that, in explaining the pivot of a social movement towards violence:
- A "collectivist conception of rationality" be joined With the shared principles and the solidarity that grow from living together within social networks
- When this happens, he notes, the observation may be that:
- People will behave in ways not predicted by private-interest models
- Especially under emotionally charged conditions
- **And even where social movement activism is high-risk**

Figure 3. Explaining the Pivot Towards Violence.

others.⁷³ Viewed this way, frames ‘simplify and condense the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environments’.⁷⁴ Therefore, frames help social movements render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby organise experience and guide action.

A social movement is ‘a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society’.⁷⁵ Thus, social movement actors invariably apply frames, whether intentionally or not, insofar as they act as ‘signifying agents’. A ‘signifying agent’ is one who ‘assigns meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions’ in ways deliberately ‘intended to mobilise potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support and to demobilise antagonists’.⁷⁶

Since the seminal research by Goffman⁷⁷ on framing, the study of this concept has evolved over the decades. Leading this discourse are Benford and Snow⁷⁸ who developed three core framing tasks.⁷⁹

First, diagnostic framing identifies the problem and attributes blame or causality (that is, diagnosing a problem and a perpetrator). Such framing embellishes a situation, redefining it from being merely unfortunate to being unjust.⁸⁰ However, even the realisation of a bad situation is not enough. Action ('activism') is required. Thus, the second core framing task, prognostic framing, entails solution-seeking and strategizing. Finally, motivational framing acts as a 'call to arms' or 'rationale for action'. The product of this framing activity by SMOs are 'collective action frames' defined as 'action-oriented beliefs that inspire and legitimate the activities of SMO'.⁸¹

For an SMO to maximise 'resonance' (which is to say, provoke reactions from the public), it needs to 'align' its frames. The discourse of an SMO is critical here, as the spoken words and written exhortations could help ensure congruency between 'interests, values and beliefs [of mobilisation targets], and SMO activities, goals, and ideology'.⁸² Indeed, without discourse-driven frame alignment, the interests, activities and ideologies of an SMO and its members may not be complimentary and effective activism cannot be achieved.

The need for frame alignment can be fulfilled via four alignment processes. First, movement actors clarify and highlight an interpretive frame based on a particular issue, problem, or set of events via frame amplification. Second, via frame bridging, actors link two or more ideologically congruent but hitherto structurally unconnected frames to reach out to those with common grievances. Third, movement actors situate frames beyond primary interests to include issues and concerns of potential adherents. This process is called frame extension. Finally, frame transformation helps movement actors assign new meanings to frames.

A final note on frame theory is that the framing strategies of social movements are typically characterised by movement actors, who conceptually and rhetorically expand frames as it suits them. However, movement actors can also contract frames: by deliberately excluding frame elements. For example, a movement might need to excise a frame if it becomes politically problematic. Thus, frame contraction can be defined as the 'purposeful exclusion of frames' when changing political or cultural landscapes render specific frames irrelevant or even toxic by Lavine et al.⁸³

Overall, framing is critical as it provides an opportunity for social movement agents to amplify selective interpretations of events and 'diagnose' them as problems. Therefore, the following section shall explicitly apply framing as an analytical framework for Boko Haram's discourse.

Applying the framework: Boko Haram's use of frames in discourse

Framing processes are essential in mobilisation by providing a meaningful reason for members to participate a social movement. Boko Haram has successfully framed its discourse and evolve its use of frames over the years. Indeed, Boko Haram's use of frames in its discourse can be traced back to Yusuf's original departure from *Izala* and his pivot away from the teachings of Ja'afar Adam, his former mentor who had led the *Yan Izala* movement.⁸⁴

Yusuf, to begin with, succeeded in intra-movement framing by discrediting Adam and claiming his former Salafi movement was 'intolerably corrupt and irredeemable'.⁸⁵ This discrediting worked. Yusuf's supporters within the *Izala* were moulded into a more radical movement, Boko Haram. The group employed the previously-discussed core framing tasks as defined by Benford and Snow.⁸⁶

The diagnostic frame for Boko Haram was pointing out that the Nigerian government is secular and can therefore not accommodate Islamic laws and ways of life. Furthermore, the government's failure to implement Sharia has led to persistent socio-economic inequalities in the region.⁸⁷ More than that, the problem was what Western education had introduced in terms of normative belief systems that were un-Islamic. As Yusuf put it, 'First, the spread of the Freudian, Darwinian, Marxist, belief in the development of ethics (Lévy-Bruhl), and society's development (Durkheim), with the focus upon existential secular thought, and the supposed freedom. These are in opposition to the shari'a texts'.⁸⁸

Nor was it just the government that was blamed within this diagnostic framing. Both Kyari Mohammed⁸⁹ and Abdulkareem Mohammed,⁹⁰ along these lines, observe that Boko Haram was also persistently critical of the existing Islamic movements and their acceptance of Westernisation, as well as their willingness to co-exist in a pluralistic society with what Boko Haram view as an innovative (and thus non-permissible) form of Sharia. The prognostic framing process, however, proposed a solution: Boko Haram actors must arm themselves and go to war: put their words in action, and it was not even that difficult to do, according to Shekau's call to arms:

May Allah bring the day when we will put into action what our mouths have uttered. This is so because admonition is not admonition when it is [merely] mouthed, but not translated into action. We pray to Allah to allow us to act upon our statements and safeguard the weapons beside us. Let us put our words into actions.⁹¹

Such prognostic framing is necessary because if Boko Haram actors would only heed this call to arms, and if the movement could eventually overthrow the secular and apostate Nigerian government and implement a caliphate, northern Muslims, Boko Haram argued, would benefit from a romanticised return to a puritanical society. A Muslim society with fundamentalist interpretations of Sharia, rejection of polytheism and Western negative influence.

Lastly, the motivational framing posited that it was the duty of Muslims to wage jihad as the generations had done,⁹² and in line with the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya.⁹³ This was especially the case, Yusuf argued, where the government placed Muslims in a situation where they would be sinful. Such motivational framing — a 'call to arms' — is identifiable in the exhortations of Yusuf:

On this basis, we follow the rulers of the Muslims according to the Book and the Sunna, even if they are unjust, iniquitous and do wrong, as long as they do not command rebellion against Allah. [...] This is our proclamation, and we announce it to the umma. We call the people to reform the creed, application of the Law and to jihad.⁹⁴

Utilising emotive discourse and conveying the importance of such acts is critical to the process of the core framing tasks. Boko Haram also applies other forms of framing. As an example, all four elements of frame alignment and frame contraction, in addition, are evident within the group's exhortations. To begin with, frame Amplification, whereby movement actors embellish (and indeed overembellish) interpretive frames around a contentious issue, state of affairs or event, can be seen in Shekau's amplification of the negative impact of Western education and his linkage of this with 'Boko' in his video lecture from February 2009:

This is Western education. January, February, March, April, May, June, and July are all names of idols which people worship. [...] For instance, January is for the god of love and other months are for the god of praise, god of war etc. This is exactly the meaning of these months. The days of the week Sunday, Monday etc. are also names of idols. They are all names of idols. This is unbelief and they have surrounded us with it. They left us with prayers, fasting and alms-

giving, but you should know that if you are engaging in polytheism, all other acts of worship are null and void. Allah told Allah's Messenger: 'If you associate any others with Allah, He will frustrate your work, and you will certainly be one of the losers (Q39:65).'

[...] We are following [Lord Frederick] Lugard. We are following the constitution. Yet, we still call ourselves the people of Sunna.⁹⁵

Frame amplification can also be identified in the following exhortation by Shekau wherein the Nigerian government is identified, and the enemy and its past action are framed and amplified as provocative. Boko Haram movement actors frame this provocation as one that leaves the movement with no choice but to 'defend' itself from the Nigerian government as the chief antagonist:

You should remember what happened in the city of Maiduguri. They cleaned faeces with the Qur'an in your Western schools. [...] When they perpetrated this action, no measure was taken against them. Instead, they stationed weapons at the scene so that whoever intended to instigate chaos because of the incident could be curtailed. [...] They employed different tactics to provoke us. Afterwards, we rose to defend ourselves and our religion.⁹⁶

Next, within our conceptual analysis of framing and its linkage to the Boko Haram case is the movement's use of frame bridging as the linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally separate frames. An example can be seen in the exhortation below by Shekau:

Look at this book, the title is *al-Muḥallā* and it is written by Ibn Ḥazm. It is a well-known book. The volume I am going to quote from is the twelfth, pp. 128–129. In the book, Ibn Ḥazm said: 'If an entire town that is completely Muslim is invaded by a crusading unbeliever, who is victorious over the town of the Muslims, then says: 'I have defeated the town, but you can stay in your town and follow the laws of your Qur'an. However, you must accept that I am the leader of the land.' Ibn Ḥazm said: 'If you stay in the town, you will all be unbelievers.' Do you hear his statement? This is what Ibn Ḥazm said:

For example, America has captured Iraq, so if they would allow the people of Iraq to follow the Qur'an, but insisted that America is the country which would run the affairs of the land, both foreign and domestic affairs, including ambassadors and ministers—according to Ibn Ḥazm whoever stayed in the land would become an unbeliever.⁹⁷

Frame bridging is also identifiable within Boko Haram's stand around both Christians and secular society. Frame bridging in this context sets the stage for Boko Haram as the main protagonist in a political Islamic narrative where everyone who is *Murtaddun* (a non-believer) is at odds with the movement and, in this interpretative frame, becomes an antagonist:

[...] What is the meaning of government of the people by the people and for the people? Whatever the people want, even if it contradicts the law of Allah, will be accepted. Is that not democracy? Is this what you believe is not polytheism?

Several scholars have made explanations concerning this issue. According to Ibn 'Uthaymīn, he said democracy is the methodology of the unbelievers. It is not permissible for a Muslim to participate in democracy. He did not say that it is good, let alone for a person to participate in it, or let alone for Muslims to be encouraged to participate in it. This is what Ibn 'Uthaymīn said.⁹⁸

A second instance of frame bridging can be seen in the following excerpt from a letter to Osama Bin Laden's Deputy by Shekau, from the fall of 2010. Here, the Boko Haram leader expressed a longing for a unified jihadist struggle and was careful in framing the matter of 'joining the organisation' of al-Qaeda.⁹⁹ This specific use of frame bridging sought to

closely align Boko Haram with the objectives and organisation of al-Qaeda and bin Laden (who was still alive at the time):

O Allah! We desire to be under one banner, although it is necessary to consider closely before this, as our religion is one of close consideration and knowledge. We desire to have this close consideration, and our goal is the raising of the Word of Allah upon the face of the earth, and seeking His favor. We ask Allah Almighty to aid us in this goal, and to place us among those who are fighting in Allah's path, not among those who are unbelievers fighting in the path of the *ṭāghūt*.¹⁰⁰

Another instance of frame bridging can be identified in Shekau's bridging of Boko Haram's struggle with that of al-Qaeda and bin Laden. This form of frame bridging is closely paralleled to the Palestinian struggle and the Salafi-Jihadist worldview of the Jews as enemies of Palestine and Islam. Finally, Shekau also bridges frames by linking Boko Haram's struggle with the Islamic State of Iraq's and 'the Commander of the Believers in the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Bghdadi'. By bridging itself with this broader struggle, Boko Haram insinuates its insurgency with the frame of the so-called 'global jihad in Nigeria'.¹⁰¹

We ask Allah Almighty to help our brothers the fighters in every place. And to destroy America and its allies. And let the world witness generally, and America, Britain and other Crusader [states], and the Jews of Israel who kill Muslims in Palestine every day, the polytheists, the apostates and the hypocrites specifically, that we are with our fighter brothers in Allah's path in every place—those who have sacrificed themselves in order to raise the Word of Allah and to save the downtrodden Muslims under the humiliation of the Jews and the Crusader Christians, like in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Pakistan, Iraq, Muhammad's [Arabian] Peninsula, Yemen, Somalia, Algeria and other countries.

I will remind our brother Muslims of what Shaykh Abu 'Abdallah Osama b. Laden has reminded them [...] Lastly, I send my greeting of peace to the fighters' commanders, and to the Commander of the Believers in the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi [...].¹⁰²

As a final point on frame bridging, it is worth noting that it can also occur in other forms—through actions, as an example, not just in strictly via rhetorical expression. For example, Boko Haram, which became infamous for its beheadings, sometimes used those macabre incidents as an action-based interpretation and manifestation of Wahhabism.¹⁰³ In one Boko-Haram branded video, 40 fighters celebrated the death via beheading of captured Nigeria Police Force officers. The beheadings were preceded by 'reading them the verse from the Quran about Prophet Muhammad's ascent to heaven and excerpts from the Wahhabi book on monotheism, *Fahul Majid*, which the fighters stated that Yusuf and Shekau taught them and was 'a reminder to all Muslim scholars, especially *Izala'*'.¹⁰⁴

Concerning frame transformation, whereby new interpretative meanings are assigned to elements of the contentious issue by the movement actors, this is also identifiable within Boko Haram's exhortations. As an example, in the following statements by Shekau in response to a question around Boko Haram's use of Western appliances. The non-permissibility of these appliances is transformed to permissibility by the speaker:

[Moderator reads a question to Shekau]: This questioner is asking about your position concerning the impermissibility of Western education, but he said you are making use of loudspeakers, mobile phones and microphones. If Western education is impermissible, how would they invent all these appliances? What is the ruling on using these electrical appliances?

[Shekau responds]: Yes, Western education is impermissible, but these electrical appliances are good. [...] Even if there is no Western education, the people can learn how to create all these

appliances. Yes, even without Western education. They do not even learn about these things in Western education, they only learn deception. It is deception. You would see someone with a master's degree in engineering, but cannot manufacture even an engine to produce pasta. Yet, another person is coming from the village who has not attended primary school, in fact, he does not understand 'go and come,' but he can dismantle a machine and cobble it together. The so-called engineer cannot do this, yet someone who did not attend primary school can do this. Is it Western education that taught him this knowledge? Therefore, even without Western education, this knowledge can be learnt. Western education is not a revelation. The only thing that cannot be learnt except in front of a scholar is the Qur'ān. Western education is just about the brain. Whatever someone's brain knows, another person can also know the same thing.¹⁰⁵

What is somewhat ironic for Boko Haram's use of frame transformation is that whereas the movement finds ways to interpret its exploitation of Western imports and influence, it leaves no such room for a non-literal interpretation of the Qur'ān. Instead, Boko Haram adopts the view that 'anything which cannot be attested in the Qur'ān or the *ḥadīth* (tradition literature) is an innovation, and needs to be excised. This rather uncompromising attitude is characteristic not of Salafism, but of Wahhabi (Saudi Arabian) Islam'.¹⁰⁶

Next is the concept of frame extension, whereby the discourse is shifted to the very boundaries of a contentious issue without accommodating a less extreme interpretation. An example can be seen in the following statements by Shekau:

However, I am preaching to anyone who prostrates in prayers never to attempt to fight against Islam. Never should you fight against Islam. Even if he is a traveler, you should never fight against him to help an unbeliever. Do you understand my explanation? Even if he is a traveler, once he declares that he is a Muslim, you should never help an unbeliever against him. Do you understand my explanation? It is only permissible for both of you to join hands together and fight the unbeliever and thereafter you can both fight each other. Do you understand? This is the teaching of Islam.¹⁰⁷

What is particularly contradictory regarding the above exhortation by Shekau is that since divisions emerged within Boko Haram, his faction (JAS) nevertheless made conspicuous efforts to fight other factions and defied their overtures for a more conciliatory tone between the factions that were collectively referred to as 'Boko Haram' (Omeni 2021). This runs contrary to Shekau's exhortation to his followers that they 'join hands together and fight the unbeliever and thereafter you can both fight each other'.¹⁰⁸

Finally, in terms of frame contraction, where interpretative frames are excluded — perhaps because they have become politically toxic for the movement — we also see this in Boko Haram's failure to reference (or embellish the narrative around) the number of Muslim women and children, killed as unarmed combatants, in its suicide bombings. Likewise, on the issue of the drinking of alcohol by mujahideen (مجاهدين), Shekau contracts these interpretative frames by leaving excising other interpretations on the permissibility of alcohol consumption within the Qur'ān. Thus, in the exhortation below, specific frames are emphasised, whereas others are contracted:

[Shekau cites the chapters on tribulations and leadership in '*Tafsīr al-Manār*', '*Fathh al-bārī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*' and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.] Even if he drinks alcohol, once the law they follow is the law of the Qur'ān and the Sunna, and he sends soldiers to fight jihād, we do not care about his flaws—and it is compulsory to follow him and his land is a land of the Muslims. However, the leader who governs with the constitution, even if he was born in the middle of the Ka'ba [in Mecca], it is forbidden to follow him. Do you understand my explanation? This is our explanation. All what we are saying, we saw it written in the book.¹⁰⁹

Lies and half-truths: Interpreting Boko Haram's use of frames

So, what does this testing of framing theory concepts within the Boko Haram case reveal? To begin with, each of the concepts discussed here demonstrates some overlap. Elements of transformation are identifiable within frame contraction, as an example, as there is some scope for intertwining the various framing concepts. Nevertheless, collectively, the three core framing tasks, the four frame alignment processes and also frame extension and contraction contribute to an enriched understanding of the method, so to speak, to Boko Haram's 'madness'.¹¹⁰ Boko Haram's interpretative framing of the problem it sees, its objectives, and its motivations underpinned its discourse and helped resonate its ideologies. Resonance is critical here: an SMO's ability to attract followers — to relocate them from the out-group to the in-group — requires that the emergent discourse appeals to recruits while also staying aligned with the movement's core doctrine and the beliefs and motivations of the 'old guard'.

In its framing of discourse to employ the core framing tasks, the four frame alignment processes, frame extension and frame contraction, Boko Haram has made conspicuous efforts to justify its activism. Indeed, Boko Haram's consistent use of framing within its discourse 'provided the needed ideological resource upon which mobilisation for such activism was sustained'.¹¹¹

Conclusion

In summary, whereas it is unlikely that Boko Haram will substantively change its narrative and thus its preferred repertoires of violent activism, this paper makes it evident that the movement's use of frames, and the emergent discourse, has not held well under closer scrutiny. In theory, this should translate to opportunities for the Nigerian government to discredit Boko Haram's narrative with a powerful religious and political counter-narrative.

Moreover, Shekau's death in May 2021¹¹² may have removed the last vestiges of the most hardened frames within the original movement. Again, in theory, this should allow for a softened core to gradually emerge within Boko Haram's discourse, as Shekau's detractors within Boko Haram had long resented his Qur'anic exegesis and the controversial ideologies he presented as fact.¹¹³ However, in practice, Boko Haram, leading into the final months of 2021, has shown no signs of becoming more moderate or 'softer'. Nor has the group demonstrated a willingness to back-pedal from violence in its activism.

Time will tell what this means for the future of security in a part of Nigeria where the Salafi religious debate remains divided, interpretations of injustice framing continue to exploit the victimhood narrative perceived by some Muslims, and the historical tensions between Islam and Western influences endure.

Shekau's demise and inter-factional tensions along political and schismatic lines within Boko Haram might weaken the movement in some ways.¹¹⁴ However, the aftermath of the disintegration of *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA) in Algeria case serves as a cautionary tale: that even where SMOs splinter and the operational environment becomes 'a melting-pot for very diverse factions which have little more in common than Islam', this may not always translate to a more peaceful agenda.¹¹⁵

Regardless of what Shekau's demise portends, a possible policy recommendation to emerge from this study is that the Nigerian government's counter-radicalization strategy should not only emphasise reintegration and rehabilitation via Operation Safe Corridor and the use of orientation camps such as that at Mallam Sidi, Gombe State. The government

should, in addition, develop a substantive bottom-up counter-radicalization component focused on unpacking Boko Haram's discourse and deconstructing the group's use of frames. Moreover, this discourse-focused element of government policy should popularise this study's central argument: that despite the group's claims that its narrative is strictly in line with Qur'ānic exegesis, much of what has been said and written by Boko Haram's previous leadership was carefully framed and approximates lies and half-truths.

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