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## “Framing” contentious activism: a sociological analysis of Boko Haram’s ideology, through its discourse (2008 – 2016)

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### ABSTRACT

How does a terror movement like Boko Haram employ language and discourse towards collective action? This is the central question our paper addresses. Focusing on Boko Haram as a militant *jihād*ist social movement organisation (SMO), our article shows how the movement’s ideology, evidenced through its discourse, “frames” narratives that identify the problem, call for action and motivate adherents and potential recruits towards violent repertoires. Using interview data, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Social Movement Theory (SMT), specifically framing analysis, we interrogate Boko Haram’s Qur’anic exegesis based on the group’s publications, exhortations, lectures and sermons between 2008 and 2016. Along with calls for *jihād* (holy war, within the movement’s interpretation) and criticism of Nigeria’s federal constitution vis-à-vis *Shari’a* (Islamic law) as a superior social alternative, Boko Haram employs a specific *takfir* (apostate declaration) doctrine that divides the world into two camps: unbelievers (*al-kāfirūn*) or (*kuffar*) and believers. Such identity construction constitutes part of a “framing” approach to mobilisation and recruitment. In this sociological analysis of Boko Haram’s discourse, we identify diagnostic, prognostic and motivational “framing” patterns employed alongside an injustice master frame as a means to encourage collective action by the “in-group” (adherents and potential recruits) against “out-group” identities.

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### “Framing” our paper within the SMT and terrorism studies literature

As Peter R. Neumann and Brooke Rogers remind us, research on terror groups has often focused on what recruits do or are tasked with doing once they become part of such terrorist “in-groups”. Furthermore, since the turn of the century, primarily driven by the September 11 attacks<sup>1</sup> by al Qaeda in the US and the decades-long fallout, there has been a wealth of critical terrorism studies research that has enhanced our understanding “of the kinds of conditions and conflicts that prompt people to drift into political extremism (that is, radicalisation)” (Rogers and Neumann 2007, 1). Nevertheless, when it comes to critically connecting terror recruitment and subsequent terroristic action, “little systematic insight” can be identified (Rogers and Neumann 2007, 1).

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Focusing on the terrorist organisation *Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna lid Da'wati wa al-Jihād* (JAS), commonly referred to as Boko Haram,<sup>2</sup> we seek to fill this gap in understanding between how Boko Haram as a social movement organisation (SMO) recruits and eventually motivates some adherents to collective action. To facilitate this central objective, and at the heart of this paper's sociological enquiry, is the concept of "framing", a critical aspect of SMT.

Erving Goffman (1974), who developed the framing concept, posited that individuals make sense of the world using "frames", which guide perceptions of reality and organise or filter one's experiences in some way. These frames denote "schemata of interpretation", or what he describes as a "lens" through which individuals "locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their social world (Goffman 1974, 21). Frames help render events or occurrences meaningful, organising experiences and guiding action.

In social movement theory, framing has been employed to explain how social movements present themselves and their actions to supporters, opponents, and potential supporters. As Snow and Benford (1988, 198) contend, "[m]ovements function as carriers and transmitters of mobilising beliefs and ideas, to be sure; but they are also actively engaged in producing meaning for participants, antagonists, and observers. This productive work may involve the shaping and structuring of existing meanings. Thus, social movements function as "signifying agents [who] assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions" through "collective action frames" (Snow and Benford 1988, 198).

Social movements attempt to mobilise individuals through the deployment of collective action frames. These action-oriented frames perform a similar interpretive function by simplifying and condensing intended aspects of the "world out there" in a way that articulates, demarcates, and narrates events to mobilise (potential) adherents, garner support, and delegitimise antagonists (Lavine, Cobb, and Roussin 2017, 275). In this regard, framing processes become "conscious strategic efforts [...] to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action" (Doug et al. 1996, 6), while simultaneously delegitimising adversaries. Consequently, essential elements of such a collective action framework comprise notions of injustice stemming from individual cognitive evaluations and emotional responses towards specific situations, agency and identity – thus involving constructing a community ("us") while differentiating certain others ("them") (Gamson 1992, 7).

Collective action frames can be broken down into three mutually constitutive "core framing tasks": diagnostic framing, which features are "[a] diagnosis of some event or aspect of social life as problematic and in need of alteration;" prognostic framing, which involves articulating "a proposed solution to the diagnosed problem that specifies what needs to be done;" and motivational frames, which provide "a call to arms or rationale for engaging in ameliorative or corrective action" that goes beyond diagnosis and prognosis to establish a vocabulary of motive (Snow and Benford 1988, 202). Therefore, studying frames can allow for a clearer understanding of how social movements present and justify their actions to diverse audiences and how (potential) recruits are mobilised (Kavrakis 2023, 1235–1237; Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2018).

Terrorism and political violence scholars have also drawn parallels with social movements (Snow and Byrd 2007). Some, such as Cristina Archetti (2013, 4), argue that "terrorist groups are, effectively, social movements." However, studies of terrorism and political violence have been criticised for failing to unravel how ideological concepts are

articulated and employed through collective action framing, coupled with an over-reliance on static conceptualisations of ideology to “provide the rationale for individual and collective action” (Snow 2004, 397; Snow and Byrd 2007, 120). Whereas ideological expression and collective action frames serve as forms of political thought that inspire action and create meaning, they are not interchangeable. According to Kevin Gillan (2008, 258), there is a fundamental distinction between the two. Ideology is not all-encompassing for movement activity; rather, it affects the construction of collective action frames as the interpretative blend of historical, religious and ideological elements, grievances and events (Snow and Byrd 2007). Furthermore, articulating a frame means linking events and experiences with chosen ideological elements “in a relatively integrated and meaningful fashion” (Snow 2004, 400).

Consequently, the formation of collective action frames constitutes an ongoing and dynamic process that does not occur in isolation but within an “interactive and constructionist” social landscape (Snow 2004, 384). Framing is also an agentic process driven by movement leaders, who employ language and discourse to influence members’ commitment and encourage collective action without removing adherents’ agency.

As part of a broader application of SMT, framing analysis remains a relatively novel research approach within the Boko Haram discourse. On this matter, for example, Omeni contends that “political scientists [...] have primarily been concerned with how Boko Haram’s interpretation of Islam impacts the state and politics” whereas “sociological analyses of Boko Haram’s constitution have mostly been interested in exploring the movement’s demographics, both of which do little to address the disciplinary gap in the study of Boko Haram as a social movement (Omeni 2022, 176). Whereas research on Boko Haram has indeed emphasised the group’s actions and the Nigerian state’s response, there also have been publications that employ SMT to interrogate Boko Haram as a social movement.

Aside from work by Omeni (2022), Amaechi, for instance, examining Boko Haram’s violence from a social movement theory perspective, contends that Boko Haram is better understood as a movement that employs a “fluid and evolving spectrum” of tactics consistent with groups that try a range of approaches, violent and non-violent, “to achieve their goals within the particular socio-political environment in which they identify” (Amaechi 2017, 52). Boko Haram’s ideology and discourse have also been analysed with identifiable SMT aspects. Examples include research in *The Boko Haram Reader*, and by Kassim and Zenn (2017) in their critique of Abu Shekau’s comparison of Nigeria’s apparently flawed constitution and its incompatibility with “the law of Allah”. Our study seeks to develop such existing research, drawing from Omeni’s argument that “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” (Omeni 2022, 177).

Our work also draws from the broader discourse that employs SMT to interrogate the ideology of Salafi *Jihād*ist organisations as niche movements which, in the words of Della Porta and Diani, “‘irritate’ social systems” in the broader sense (Della Porta and Diani 2014, 41). Such movements fall within the category of Islamic activism, which Quintan Wiktorowicz defines as “the mobilisation of contention to support Muslim causes” (Wiktorowicz 2003, 2). On the one hand, it would seem problematic to situate terrorist organisations like al Qaeda and Boko Haram within the same broad conceptual umbrella (Islamic activism) as the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt and Jordan), *Jamiat Ulema-I-Islam*

(Pakistan) and northern Nigeria's Salafis. Yet, Wiktorowicz concedes that this concept of Islamic activism is "purposefully broad" because

It accommodates the variety of contention that frequently emerges under the banner of "Islam," including propagation movements, terrorist groups, 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 (Wiktorowicz 2003, 2)

The debate on religious "revivalist" movements and the explanatory power of SMT within their analysis is also relevant here. Lasse Lindekilde and Lene Kühle, for instance, point to "seemingly deviant forms of religiosity carried out in 'cults' or 'sects'" and how early social movement theory helps "explain recruitment and conversion" within such movements (Lindekilde and Lene 2014, 174). Our study aligns with this position insofar as Boko Haram is indeed a "deviant" sect from the Sufi establishment of northern Nigeria (Omeni 2019, 25, 115, 173) and insofar as the group "frames" its discourse towards recruitment and collective action against the Nigerian government and Islamic establishment.

Overall, we contend that there is much learning potential in evaluating the discourse of terror movements such as Boko Haram using frame analysis. As Konstantinos Kavrakis observes, frame analysis has "a proven value in understanding movement participation and mobilisation" as this aspect of social movement theory enables a more robust examination of how terror movements choose to "frame the boundaries of their mobilisation activities by constructing in-group and out-group identities" (Omeni 2022, 1235–1237). Insofar as such groups create "in-group" and "out-group" identities that influence the acceptable actions in support of the former and against the latter, so too does Boko Haram. This identification of Boko Haram within the broad field of social movement organisations that practice Islamic activism makes it a viable candidate for SMT interrogation, particularly when employed alongside critical discourse analysis (CDA). The section that follows expands further on our paper's methodology.

## Our methodology

For Snow and Byrd (2007, 119), "the monolithic use and application of the concept of ideology to Islamic terrorist movements is of questionable analytic utility because it [...] glosses over the kind of discursive work required to articulate and elaborate the array of possible links between ideas, events, and action". The writers instead argue that adopting a framing perspective better illuminate both the development and articulation of mobilising ideas – reading frames as "key discursive mechanisms" (Snow and Byrd 2007), which movements employ to build upon an established "ideological heritage" (Klandermans 2004, 368). Framing, therefore, is a particular approach to communicating language and developing discourse towards achieving movement objectives. Both language and discourse are operative terminologies here. Employing CDA, our paper investigates how language – used by Boko Haram in framing its discourse – becomes an instrument of power and control targeted at adherents and potential recruits.

Boko Haram's language and discourse inform our choice of methodology. Even so, why is CDA as a research method particularly suited for our lines of enquiry? Critical Discourse Analysis is defined as a social science research method that "is, or should be concerned

[...] with discourse as the instrument of power and control as well as with discourse as the instrument of the social construction of reality” (Van Leeuwen 1993, 193). This suggested definition of discourse by Van Leeuwen aligns with Weiss and Wodak’s that “CDA takes a particular interest in the relationship between language and power [...]. This research specifically considers more or less overt relations of struggle and conflict” (Weiss and Wodak 2002, 12). Other scholars such as Bouvier and Machin adopt a similar view, contending that CDA,

[...] Focuses on the role of language in society and in political processes, traditionally targeting texts produced by elites and powerful institutions, such as news and political speeches. The aim is to reveal discourses buried in language used to maintain power and sustain existing social relations (Bouvier and Machin 2018, 178)

Employing such CDA tenets, we argue that Boko Haram’s worldview, via discourse and language, seeks to achieve three broad objectives. First, to socially construct an alternate reality inconsistent with the intended meaning within the principal texts being employed, such as the Qur’an. Second, within this socially constructed alternate reality, a binary is established: an “in-group” constituting Boko Haram, its membership and sympathisers and an “out-group”, which this paper shall explore later. Finally, Boko Haram leverages language both in creating power distance between movement adherents and leaders and as a validation of prescribed collective action against the “out-group”.

Furthermore, political science research on language and its applications helps us understand how Boko Haram leverages language within “in-group” and “out-group” contexts. As Ruth Breeze contends, language operates on three broad levels: “an ideational level (construction and representation of experience in the world), a relational level (enactment of social relations) and a textual level (production of texts)” (Breeze 2011, 502). Employed this way, language connects meaning with its written and spoken expression. Our research explores such connections in Boko Haram’s discourse and how the movement leverages “language as a power mechanism” (Fairclough 1989) that persuades, influences, encourages and controls.

Our view on discourse as employed by Boko Haram also aligns with Omeni’s position regarding Boko Haram’s formative worldview as a rejection of postcoloniality and an expression of the incompatibility of Westernisation vis-à-vis the existence of a puritanical Islamic state (Omeni 2022, 178). Moreover, our discourse analysis is also critical because, as Michael Toolan affirms, the use of the term “critical” in CDA recognises that the use of language and discourse within social practice comes, intentionally or otherwise, with causes and effects that may not, under normal conditions, be readily apparent (Toolan 1997, 85).

However, when movement leaders employ discourse and language towards SMO adherents and potential recruits, both are potent mechanisms of power and control. Moreover, as Fairclough further observes along these lines, “the normal opacity of these practices to those involved in them – the invisibility of their ideological assumptions, and of the power relations which underlie the practices – helps to sustain these power relations (Fairclough 1996, 54).

Our paper thus seeks to unpack these otherwise “invisible” ideological assumptions inherent in Boko Haram’s use of language and discourse as an instrument of power and control towards collective action by the “in-group” against the “out-group” and

towards resolving a diagnosed problem. Building on the forgoing, we argue that examining how language frames are articulated (frame articulation) facilitates an analysis of how “events, experience, and strands of moral codes” can be combined in a collective action frame so that they “hang together in a relatively unified and compelling way” (Snow and Byrd 2007, 130). Therefore, frame theory can bridge the analytical gap between ideology expressed via language and discourse and collective action. Framing analysis enables us to bridge this gap by allowing for a conceptualisation of the discursive strategies that terror movements employ to communicate mobilising ideas to (potential) adherents.

If we take discourse as the site where meaning is both constructed and contested, it is also where framing “takes place” (Westphal 2018, 22). Therefore, discourse analysis provides a suitable methodology for investigating framing activity (Johnston 2013, 219), and uncovering links between events, experiences, and ideology (Benford and Snow 2000, 623). Our discourse analysis unfolds in three broad steps. The first step involves an interrogation of discourse that identifies (diagnoses) a “problem” to be addressed. The second entails examining discourse that defines seemingly “simple” solutions that promise redemption and a viable course of action for the in-group; this is known as prognostic framing. Finally comes the provision of reasons and justifications for the proposed action, incentives to participate and disincentives to not participate (motivational framing).

The subject of discourse would be Boko Haram’s Qur’anic exegesis, evidenced via published texts, exhortations, lectures and sermons between 2008 and 2016. A key point here is that when discussing “Boko Haram”, we do not distinguish between the various factions and affiliates, to wit: Ansaru (*Jamā’atu Ansāril Muslimīna fī Bilādīs Sūdān*), the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and *Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’adati wal-Jihād* (JAS) (EUAA 2021). Instead, we examine the discourse from the movement at large and acknowledge that differences in Qur’anic exegesis exist across the factions.

The primary source of discourse, translated from Hausa and Arabic, is Abdulbasit Kassim, Michael Nwankpa and David Cook’s edited volume, *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*, published in 2018. Employment of material from this extensive collection of Boko Haram discourse was based on how the various sermons, speeches, writings and exhortations were framed in a way that selectively interpreted the Qur’ān and hadith to align with the group’s ideology and method selection. This is part of what Omeni (2022) calls Boko Haram’s use of “lies or half-truths”. Nevertheless, our methodology interrogates a different selection of Boko Haram’s discourse than Omeni’s, with a more expansive methodology profile. Along these lines, we seek to expand the still-embryonic critical debate on Boko Haram’s selective application of discourse for its adherents and potential recruits. In so doing, we employ Benford and Snow’s three “core framing tasks”, to wit, diagnostic framing, prognostic framing and motivational framing (Benford and Snow 2000, 615–618) towards problematising Boko Haram’s ideology in three areas. First, around Boko Haram’s claims that *Shari’a* (Islamic law) is incompatible with the federal constitution in Nigeria’s pluralistic society. Second, we explore the framing of Boko Haram’s discourse in the movement’s calls for *jihād* (holy war) against the Nigerian government.<sup>3</sup> Finally, we explore how Boko Haram employs a specific *takfir* (apostate declaration) doctrine that divides the

world into two camps: unbelievers (*al-kāfirūn*) or (kuffar) and believers, as part of a “framing” approach to recruitment and mobilisation.

Other sources of Boko Haram lectures and writings will also be employed for discourse analysis. Furthermore, the three principal speakers and writers selected as representative figureheads of Boko Haram’s ideology are Muhammad Yusuf, who led the group until his demise in 2009, Abubakar (“Abu”) Shekau, who led Boko Haram more recently until his death in 2021 and Muhammad Mamman Nur, who is widely viewed as one of the most influential members of Boko Haram, and its “operational mastermind” both before and after Yusuf’s death (Omeni 2019, 4).

In conducting discourse analysis of Boko Haram’s statements, lectures and sermons using SMT, we explain how the movement makes sense of events and experiences and communicates a particular interpretation of the world, that is, how Boko Haram “frames” its narrative in specific ways to validate its ideology and legitimise violent action. Furthermore, our analysis reveals the influence of ideas and concepts delivered within collective action frames aimed at mobilising action amongst Boko Haram’s audiences. Our paper thus offers a snapshot of the critical diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames employed by Boko Haram to communicate key ideas between 2008 and 2016.

### *Criticisms of discourse analysis*

Notwithstanding the advantages of employing CDA in tandem with SMT in our study, it is worth ending our methodology discussion on a cautionary note regarding the limits and criticisms of critical discourse analysis. Whereas CDA helps us make sense of the discourse and language and their applications in various context, not all theorists are sold on this research method’s heuristic value. Martyn Hammersley, as an example, questions whether CDA researchers would not be better referred to as post-structuralists who merely opted for a given viewpoint (Hammersley 1997, 242–245) but may well have adopted any other perspective insofar as their position was not “a result of extended deliberation based on examination of the facts and issues” This creates concerns around CDA’s theoretical and heuristic validity: after all, why should readers “accept CDA’s political stance rather than any other”, which in turn casts doubts on CDA’s claim to “interpretive power” and “emancipatory force” Such criticisms indicate sobering prospects for discourse analysis findings “as mere assertions that one can accept if one chooses to share their point of view, or not, as the case may be” (Breeze 2011, 500).

Furthermore, as discourse and language are social constructions, their interpretation by different actors, intentionally or otherwise, may vary. Thus, Boko Haram’s interpretations of principal holy texts may not be “misguided” as interview data for this paper suggests (Ahmed 2012). After all, its leaders, like those of radical Islamic movements globally, might simply have opted for a more “deviant” interpretation of such texts (Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeh 2015). This notion of interpretative variance has implications not just for how source material is explained but also for our paper’s own discourse analysis.

On this matter, for example, H.G. Widdowson, in his critique of critical discourse analysis, argues that “if critical discourse analysis is an exercise in interpretation, it is invalid as analysis. The name ‘critical discourse analysis’, in other words, is, [...] a contradiction in terms” (Widdowson 1995, 159). Widdowson thus concludes that, CDA



is more akin to “literary criticism” than scientific analysis partly because “there is rarely a suggestion that alternative interpretations are possible. There is usually the implication that the single interpretation offered is uniquely validated by the textual facts” (Widdowson 1995, 169). Therefore, for Widdowson, discourse analysis may lack criticality as it favours particular interpretations, ignores alternatives, and construes “texts as having unique interpretations” (Fairclough 1996, 50).

In response to such criticism of CDA, as we employ it in this work, we do not claim that our analysis of Boko Haram’s discourse is the only possible interpretation. Moreover, in co-opting CDA, our methodology is not merely “literary criticism” (Widdowson 1995, 169). At the very least, Boko Haram’s leaders interpret the movement’s discourse differently to us – we merely problematise such “deviant” interpretations using CDA in concert with SMT and interview data. Moreover, as Norman Fairclough points out, Widdowson (1995) takes a “very narrow view” of what constitutes analysis. Pointing out instead that analysis entails “any reasonably systematic application of reasonably well-defined procedures to a reasonably well-defined body of data”, Fairclough counter-argues that if analysis is viewed on the above account, “then CDA is *analysis*.”<sup>4</sup> It [CDA] provides an analytical procedure [...] and applies it systematically to various types of data [...].” (Fairclough 1996, 54).

Our paper’s methodology aligns with Fairclough’s view of CDA. Notwithstanding, we accept that our interpretation of Boko Haram’s discourse may itself be subject to different interpretations. By “interpretation”, we refer to our use of language and discourse analysis as a critical approach to developing “connections between both properties of texts and practices of interpretation” (Fairclough 1996, 54).

## Background to Boko Haram

*Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihād (JAS)*, translated in Arabic as “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and *Jihād*” and widely known as Boko Haram, is a radical Salafi-*Jihād*ist movement currently active in Nigeria, since the 2000s. Muhammad Yusuf, an Islamic-educated scholar and cleric who fell out of favour with the radical Sufi movements he once was associated with, is generally accepted to have co-founded Boko Haram with the “shadowy” Muhammed Ali (Zenn 2020). Ali, “a Nigerian who was radicalised by *jihādi* literature in Saudi Arabia and was believed to have fought alongside the mujahideen in Afghanistan” (K. Mohammed 2014, 10), is said to have “imported the ideology” espoused by Boko Haram in its formative years, from abroad (Pantami 2015). Whereas Yusuf would continue to grow Boko Haram until his death in police custody in late July 2009, Ali was killed in a Nigeria’s security forces’ siege on a Boko Haram commune at Kanamma village, located in Yobe State in Nigeria’s north-east, mid-December 2003 (Walker 2012, 3). Ali’s group had split from Yusuf’s shortly before and relocated to Kanamma from Tarmowa village, also in Yobe (Bukarti 2020).

As for Boko Haram’s grievances, which crystallised in open violence by July 2009 and an insurgency the following year, these were influenced by a mix of local and global factors; although there remains scholarly disagreement regarding which of these factors carry more weight.<sup>5</sup> Domestically, the politicisation of *Sharī’a* implemented across 12 Muslim states in Northern Nigeria in 1999, widespread disquiet regarding Nigeria’s decades-long military interregnum (the 1960s – 1999), local

grumblings around government officials and police corruption along with the latter's targeting of Boko Haram, and rejection of the traditional Muslim authority of the Sufi *tariqas* (schools or orders) were relevant influences on Boko Haram's formative years.

Regarding global influences, radical interpretations of al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks and the US military response also shaped the movement's formative years. Supporting this view, one of the sons of Boko Haram's erstwhile founder, Muhammad Yusuf, points to the latter's "moment of clarity" while on pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia during 9/11 (Al-Tamimi 2018). Yusuf's criticism of the response to 9/11 and his praise of al Qaeda informed Boko Haram's creed and its eventual accommodation of violence in response to perceived threats to the Muslim faithful (Cook 2018a). Nevertheless, Boko Haram's anti-American framing of post-9/11 events was part of a larger protest movement by angry Muslims in northern Nigeria. On this matter, as an example, Wiktorowicz points to one anti-American protest rally in Kano State, in the north of Nigeria, where over 3,000 Muslims attended. At that gathering, the Kano State Council *Ulama*<sup>6</sup> president summarised the city's Muslims' sentiments in his declaration that "America's definition of terrorism differs from the rest of the world. America is the biggest terrorist nation, given its record of unprovoked attacks on countries like Libya, Iraq, and Sudan" (Wiktorowicz 2003, 2).

This is not to say that 9/11 was a proximate cause for Boko Haram's emergence. Whereas those attacks and the US response were one of several long-term influences on Boko Haram's emergence (Zenn 2020), the sect would not emerge as a terrorist organisation until almost a decade after 9/11. Indeed, aside from the deadly skirmish with the Nigerian security forces at Kanamma in 2003, interview data indicates that Boko Haram was little more than a "local nuisance" for years (Adeoye 2012). Nevertheless, Boko Haram's July 2009 rampage – a tactical miscalculation by all indications – ended with a military intervention that left hundreds dead, including Yusuf, who was later killed in police custody (Comolli 2015, 55). Yusuf's extra-judicial killing was likely motivated by revenge due to Boko Haram's previous targeting of police personnel in the July violence, according to interviews conducted by the authors and employed for this paper (Adeoye 2012).

It is broadly accepted that Yusuf's death at the hands of Nigerian authorities was pivotal in transforming a radical social movement to a violent insurgency (Al-Tamimi 2018; Comolli 2015; Omeni 2019; Zenn 2020). Indeed, so far as proximate causes for Boko Haram's insurgency go, Yusuf's extra-judicial murder was arguably a principal one that marked the end of one era within Boko Haram and heralded another – a bloody, violent and ongoing episode in Nigerian history. As the Borno State State Security Service (SSS) Director observed in an interview employed for this study, unbeknown to the various actors involved in the events of July 2009, those events took Boko Haram from the hands of a demagogue, in Muhammad Yusuf, to those of a "madman", in Abu Shekau a year later (Ahmed 2012).

Along the above lines, in re-emerging from a hiatus in late 2010 when it began its insurgency, Boko Haram turned to terrorism and soon became Nigeria's biggest security concern, supplanting the militancy threat much further south in the oil-rich Niger Delta. Furthermore, whereas Borno State in the north-east of Nigeria remains both the conflict's epicentre and the origins of Boko Haram's first violent spell, its threat has since spread to Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Moreover, this threat endures today, despite the death of Abu

Shekau, the movement's leader and the mastermind behind its military campaign, in May 2021.

Shekau's role in evolving Boko Haram's creed and sanctioned methods cannot be overstated. From his re-emergence in June 2010 until his death, most likely by suicide in May 2021 while confronting rival Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) fighters who cornered him in Sambisa forest located in Nigeria's north-east (Adebajo 2021), Shekau led Boko Haram. Under Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram embraced terrorism as the weaker side's expedient, and its *takfir* (apostate declaration) doctrine was applied even to common northern Nigerian Muslims obedient to the Nigerian constitution and living within the contiguity of its writ.

Rather than focus any further on Boko Haram's threat or its origins story, which has now been retold several times within the literature related to the group and its insurgency (Bukarti 2020; Comolli 2015; Omeni 2019; Zenn 2020), we now shift focus to Boko Haram's Salafi-*Jihād*ist ideology. Specifically, we next examine how, by emphasising this creed in interactions with adherents and potential recruits, Boko Haram "frames" its discourse.

### Boko Haram: an introduction to the movement's ideology

Salafism emerged during the nineteenth century as a movement to revive and restore Islam to its original, purified form: a return to the Golden Age of Muhammad. This return was not necessarily to be achieved through violent means but was viewed as a legitimate response to the perceived threat of Western norms and values to Salafi beliefs (Westphal 2018, 24).

However, during the Afghanistan War in the 1980s, more extremist and politically motivated Qur'anic exegesis led to the development of more conservative and violent forms of Salafism (Hellmich 2008, 114). This ideological strand, known as Salafi-*jihād*ism, advocates for armed struggle (*jihād*) to eradicate those deemed enemies of true Muslim believers (Alvi 2014; Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeh 2015; Rosiny 2015). Boko Haram's ideology, internalised in the early 2000s from such external theological influences, is rooted in Salafi-*jihād*ism. Taking these ideological concepts to extremes, Boko Haram's discourse indicate it aims to eliminate all non-believers and establish a strict interpretation of *Shari'a* (Islamic law) (Brigaglia 2015a; Omeni 2019; Shekau 2018a).

Salafi beliefs are founded on the concept of *tawhid* (monotheism), recognising Allah (God) as the singular divine entity. Salafi-*jihād*ist doctrine further asserts that this implies a singular adherence to Islam without any scope for religious pluralism, *shirk* (polytheism or sharing or associating partners with Allah) or doctrinal innovation (Hellmich 2008; Westphal 2018, 24). For Boko Haram, the principle of *tawhid* extends beyond individual conduct into statecraft. More specifically, the group's doctrine advocates for the state being structured according to Islamic law, with the principles of *Shari'a* being strictly guarded, and non-adherence being punishable (Shekau 2018a).

*Takfir*, the "charge of unbelief" (Wehr 1979, 833; Zenn 2020), and a methodology that Boko Haram has come to embody, divides the world into two camps: non-believers (*kuffar*), and believers. During Abu Shekau's leadership tenure, Boko Haram interpreted *Takfir* to extremes (Cook 2018b). For instance, the group contended that the label of *kufir* applies not only to non-Muslims, such as Christians and Jews, but also to Muslim leaders who fail to adhere strictly to Islamic principles and who, in tolerating or co-existing with

secular governance regimes, effectively dilute the tenets of *Shari'a* (Shekau 2018a). Moreover, Boko Haram takes this idea further still to include all non-Sunni Muslims as idolaters and rejectionists, making anti-Shi'ism a core component of its ideology (Zenn 2020).

Based upon these principles of *tawhid and takfir*, Boko Haram has historically advocated for two courses of action regarding the mainstream Nigerian society, which it considers *dar alkufr* (abode of unbelief). The first of these actions, incumbent on Muslims according to Boko Haram, is *hijrah* (migration) away from that society. Along these lines, the group points out that "*hijra* is an obligation and you must flee with your religion to a place where you can practice it" (Nur 2018, 449). According to Boko Haram's doctrine, the second incumbent action is *jihad*. Boko Haram's embrace of the former, in the practice of *hijrah*, was more evident in its formative years (Bukarti 2020).

However, even later, as Boko Haram matured and its Consultative Council entered "the stage of mutual consultation and study" regarding the decision to give *bay'ah* (swear allegiance) to "the Caliph of the Muslims, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi" as head of Daesh, it called on Muslims already in al-Shām, with the Islamic State, to "make *hijra* to us, to help us in the administration of districts under our control, and to fight the alliance of the unbelievers" (Cook 2018b).

*Hijrah* calls upon all Muslims to migrate to a region governed by Islam. This follows the example of Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina to establish Islamic law and continue building a community of the faithful (*Ummah*).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, *jihad* is viewed as a religious and moral obligation to defend Islam against the threat of *kufr*. The concept of *takfir* is used to ideologically justify violence against those deemed to be unbelievers, whose eradication is required to bring Islam back to prosperity (Zenn 2020). It is a driving force behind the extremist ideology that underpins Boko Haram's extremist actions.

As for the etymology of the movement's name, Boko Haram originated when Muhammad Yusuf, a popular and still at the time-respected Salafi activist, issued a *fatwā* (or religious edict) in 2002 (Brigaglia 2015a) In this *fatwā* — and it remains contested whether Yusuf even had the authority to issue one — he "declared it impermissible (*haram*) for Muslims to attend public school (*boko*) or work for the government. This led to Nigerian Muslims mockingly dubbing the group Boko Haram" (Brigaglia 2015a).

## Boko Haram's use of "framing" to shape a persuasive ideology

### Diagnostic framing

*Ab initio*, Boko Haram identified the socially constructed problems that informed its quarrel: Westernisation, Western education, and Western materialism. For Boko Haram's leadership, in rhetoric carefully framed for adherents and potential recruits, these were the central ills that undermined pious Muslim existence in northern Nigeria. On the matter of Western education, as an example, according to Yusuf, it "offers some benefits but is untrustworthy and should be accepted only when it does not contradict authentic Islamic knowledge" (Zenn 2020, 3). This ideological position informed the construction of further problems by Boko Haram. For instance, the group attributed blame to *boko* (inauthentic or deceitful) teachings such as English law,

philosophy and Darwinism insofar as such knowledge could translate to atheism at worst or the abandonment of *Shari'a* and even questioning Qur'anic teachings at best. Similarly, singing the Nigerian national anthem (Shekau 2018b, 120) and Western education, which “undermined Islamic gender codes, the *shahada* (Islamic testimony of faith), and Arabic” were all framed as prohibited practices (Zenn 2020, 3). Such construction of diagnostic frames by Boko Haram is consistent with Benford and Snow's argument that,

Since social movements seek to remedy or alter some problematic situation or issue, it follows that directed action is contingent on [the] identification of the source(s) of causality, blame, and/or culpable agents. This attributional component of diagnostic framing attends to this function by focusing blame or responsibility (Benford and Snow 2000, 616)

Benford and Snow point to an overlap of the core framing tasks, whereby the implementation of one informs decision-making around the next (Benford and Snow 2000, 615–617). Consistent with this theoretical framework, Boko Haram's “diagnosis” of Westernisation and Western education as social pathologies informed a “prognosis”: the boycott of schools and government work. Over time, Boko Haram's worldview and northern society's interpretation of it came to stick. Thus, “for Muslims, it was a way of creating distance from the movement. For non-Muslims, it was a way of labelling Islam, which made the nickname so popular” (Brigaglia 2015a).

Regarding the substance of the group's position around its assigned name, Boko Haram disavows several – though not necessarily all – forms of Western influence as problematic or altogether non-permissible. Democracy; pluralistic society (including co-existence with *Murtaddun* — infidels, apostates or disbelievers); non-Islamic law; and a general departure from fundamentalist Islamic conservative norms all appear to be areas with which Boko Haram has taken issue. Where strict Islamic customs are relaxed to be tolerant of non-Muslim practices, which arguably has to be the case in Nigeria due to the pluralistic nature of society, Boko Haram frames such doctrinal concessions and social practices as *Bid'ah*. This Arabic term connotes innovation or heresy: doctrines and practices that contravene or potentially oppose the teachings of the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*.<sup>8</sup>

For Boko Haram, this diagnostic framing leads to the government and existing Islamic order's positioning as the “out-group”, whereas Boko Haram's followers, who seek to adopt a more puritanical life governed by strict *Shari'a*, are situated within the “in-group”. And the followup admonition is clear: there is zero room for co-existence, and indeed no religiously acceptable compromise, between believers and non-believers. It is a clear binary that Boko Haram has outlined since its early years. For instance, in one of his sermons, Muhammad Yusuf (2018b, 179–198), who at the time led the movement, would note that,

Right from the beginning, the hatred that an unbeliever and a hypocrite have for a believer is everlasting and long-standing for as long as the heaven and earth continue to exist. There is no way that they will love you or that you will love them. It will never happen because they do not love us and Allah has said it in the Qur'an.

[...] The plan of the hypocrites and unbelievers in this world is to extinguish Islam and to destroy it. [...] Should we sit and remain quiet, when all the carnage that occurred in Iraq during the time of the Mongols is exactly what they will replicate here?

This problematisation of Westernisation and Western materialism, along with a portrayal of unbelievers as hostile enemies of Islam who attack believers' religious truth and imperil their very existence, can be read as a strong injustice frame employed by Boko Haram. As Yusuf later states in the same sermon, "This enmity, as we have previously mentioned, Allah said it is forever. It will not end because a believer will not compromise his faith, while the unbeliever and the hypocrite will not abandon his polytheism and evil plotting" (Yusuf 2018a, 181).

However, Boko Haram's references to an enmity between Muslims and non-Muslims – and its firm establishment of a binary – has been dismissed by other northern Nigerian Muslims, interviewed for this paper, as an "over-reaction to religious differences in a country [Nigeria] where Christians and Muslims have always co-existed so well". One respondent, a government official, for instance, points to Boko Haram's tendency to "pick and choose" Qur'anic interpretations for little else than to energise often "disgruntled and hungry, actually hungry, young men who are neither theologians nor interested in investigating the Qur'an for themselves" (Ahmed 2012). "Boko Haram claims to speak from the Qur'an", the Muslim respondent continued, "but how much of what it says can stand up to scrutiny by [Islamic] scholars?" Notwithstanding such dismissal of Boko Haram's worldview, its establishment of a binary creates an avenue for further framing approaches.

Commencing with a diagnostic perspective, this binary marks a line between believers and non-believers and also allows for a simple and, therefore, easily communicable framing of the problem, with a clear identification of the problematic "other". This notion of a bifurcated world is one of the critical diagnostic frames communicated by Abu Shekau during his tenure as Boko Haram leader. However, with such "othering" applied to other practising Muslims due to Shekau's indiscriminate use of *takfir* (declaration of apostasy), it came under criticism even by those meant to be in the "in group".

As Mamman Nur, a Boko Haram veteran, would later accuse Shekau, "whoever is not with him are unbelievers and shedding their blood is permissible. We do not agree with such an interpretation and never have we understood Islam in that way" (M. Nur 2018, 450).

Nevertheless, this binary framing within Boko Haram's ideology meant that a clear division exists between true Muslims aligned with Boko Haram and its ideology *in toto*, and everyone else outside of this narrow in-group, including anyone with reservations regarding the group's doctrine, its Qur'anic exegesis and its practice. This is part of the group's worldview that "neither the Jews nor the Christians will be pleased with you until you follow their religion, if you do not follow their religion there will be enmity between the both of you, and their hope will be to kill you or separate you from the world" (M. Nur 2018, 45).

The repetition of this theme makes the dichotomy appear common sense, reinforcing suspicion and distrust of the perceived "other." Moreover, this "binary mode" has long been employed by deviant Islamic sects who emphasise "othering" in Islamic thought (Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeh 2015). When encouraged amongst adherents, it provides

an important diagnostic foundation and guideline for applying violent *jihād* as a call to action (Westphal 2018, 28).

### Prognostic framing

Identification of a problem, in and of itself, is not quite the same as formulating a plan of action to redress it. For Boko Haram adherents and potential recruits to shift from the metaphorical “balcony to the barricades”, there had to be a prognostic shift in framing. That is, movement leaders had to clarify how the diagnostically framed problem could be fixed by the “in-group”. Such prognostic framing is no less critical to achieving SMO objectives than its diagnostic predecessor. As Benford and Snow write regarding this second of the three core framing tasks, prognostic framing entails articulating “a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan. In short, it addresses the Leninist question of what is to be done, as well as the problems of consensus and action mobilisation” (Benford and Snow 2000, 616).

Along these lines, Boko Haram’s othering rhetoric of *takfir* depicts outsiders as unbelievers who are not only a distinguishable “other” but pose an existential threat to the *ummah*, comprised of true believers. Thus, those who reject Boko Haram’s exhortations, even if they are Muslim and practising, are diagnostically framed as the source of the problem. Adherents are then encouraged to act against this “out-group”, with a forecast of what collective action against this group should resemble carefully framed by movement leaders, who also denounce inaction (insofar as the problem has already been diagnosed).

A case in point is when, in March 2009, before Boko Haram turned violent in July of that year, Muhammad Yusuf, who at the time led the movement, admonished its followers for continued indifference to police injustice and brutality. In his lecture dated 18 March 2009, Yusuf suggested that whatever ills were inflicted on the faithful were deserved due to their failure to act decisively and that failure to act in the face of such injustice was tantamount to tacit complicity (M. M. Nur and Yusuf 2018). In Yusuf’s own words,

But since you denied the truth, after understanding it. Is it not compulsory that the tribulations should be inflicted upon you? I hope it is understood. By Allah, we should follow Allah. [. . .] It is evil for a person who is in a town and can admonish, to keep quiet. You have a person who is just like a donkey, a Muslim who declared the *shahada* [declaration of faith] in the land of Muslims, and an unbeliever [policeman] who will pick up his shoes and use them [to beat him]. A Muslim would stand by saying [instead of intervening]: “Look at the beating they took!” (M. M. Nur and Yusuf 2018, 161)

Although many denounced Yusuf’s ideas, he attracted several others via such framing. In the group’s early years, adherents to such ideas being espoused by Boko Haram adopted a name: *Yusufiyya* — followers of Yusuf — after Muhammad Yusuf, Boko Haram’s firebrand lead preacher. Hailing from the Kanamma area of Yobe State in Nigeria’s north-east Umar (2012, 127), Yusuf was one of an emerging breed of radical clerics who, shortly after the turn of the century, looked to establish themselves within a new generation of Salafi thought in the profoundly religious society of northern Nigeria.

Yusuf, along these lines, “was a product of the mainline Salafi Nigerian group, *Jamā’at Izālat al-Bid’a wa-Iqāmat al-Sunna* (Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Reestablishment of the Sunna), abbreviated as *Izala* (Cook 2018b, 1). Moreover, the political nature of Yusuf’s proselyting at the head of Boko Haram is linked to his previous history of activism within the Islamist movement known as *Jamā’at Tajdīd al-Islām* (JTI). The JTI was an Islamist protest movement active in the 1990s, especially c. 1993 to 1999. The word “Islamist” and its verb form, Islamism, is intentional within a broad political category that could be viewed as “modern political Islam” (Brigaglia 2015a). James Piscatori (2000, 2) refers to Islamists as Muslims who “are committed to political action to implement what they regard as an Islamic agenda”. Andrea Brigaglia similarly contends that,

Islamist activism [...] is inherently political but is not necessarily associated with political violence. Islamists are actors who use a variety of strategies in order to achieve a variety of goals, including the recognition by the state of the right to form Islamic political parties, the implementation of *Shari’a*-inspired legal reforms and, in some cases, overthrowing the government to establish an elusively defined “Islamic state” (Brigaglia 2015b, 180)

This description of Islamist activism, up to and beyond ingress into the violent spectrum of such activism, applies to Yusuf’s exhortations and objectives and to Boko Haram. Thus, instead of overembellishing the economic motivations of Boko Haram – which so far are difficult to identify – what is far more critical, and what can be more identifiable in an interrogation of the group’s origins, is that Boko Haram is a Salafi-*jihādi* group.

There appears to be some contradiction here, as Boko Haram’s extreme methods exist outside the context of the primarily Sufi or mainstream Salafi strands of Islam in northern Nigeria. However, this is not to say that Boko Haram exists without precedent or that there are no ideological justifications for its actions, even violent ones. On the contrary, “every action taken by Boko Haram thus far can be justified in terms of the Salafi-*jihādi* ideology” (Cook 2018b, 4).

Some features stand out regarding this new generation of Salafi thought, to which Yusuf subscribed. To begin with, this ideology was stricter and less accommodating of modernisation and syncretic doctrines. Added to this was Boko Haram’s binary view of Westernisation and Western education. Both were unacceptable to the sect and the problem – the source of many ills within Nigeria’s Northern Muslim society. Thus, all three core framing tasks – diagnostic, prognostic and motivational – were conducted towards this narrative. Boko Haram’s discourse reflects this, such as when Mamman Nur, a senior figure within the movement, preached how Muslims had originally fought against Westernization when the Europeans first arrived in Nigeria. As Nur and Yusuf put it,

When they [the Muslim forefathers] heard they [the British] had brought Western education, they said, “By Allah we will not accept it!” They waged *jihād* against this. They waged *jihād* against this Western education yet today you are forcibly contolling your son into Western education?! And seeing it as the epitome of civilizaton? And saying that your heart is in good condition so you attend Western education? Our forefathers waged *jihād* against Western education—against the Europeans. It is because of democracy that they killed them. It is because of democracy that they [Europeans] killed [Sultan Muhammad] Attahiru I and all of them were fought and killed. I hope this discussion is well understood (M. M. Nur and Yusuf 2018, 153)



Aside from its outright rejection of Westernization and Western education, with Boko Haram as an extreme manifestation of that rejectionist school, the new generation of Salafi thought was particularly critical of the Islamic establishment (typified by the Sufi Brotherhoods), who were accused of *bid'ah* (innovation in religious matters), dilution of the issues concerning fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law, and syncretism. Put simply, for this movement pejoratively known as “Boko Haram”, the Islamic establishment was in tacit collusion with the Nigerian government because it had diluted its stance on *Shari'a* to such a degree that Muslims were now allowed to co-exist with *kuffār* (the non-believers, and polytheists) within a secular and democratic dispensation. The emergent discourse thus goes from merely diagnostic (identifying the problem for adherents) to being prognostic (outlining a straightforward course of action to redress the identified issue). For instance, for Muhammad Yusuf (2009), Muslims had to actively and openly dissociate from secular institutions. Moreover, he also provided examples of what such overt disavowal should look like for Muslims who lived under the Nigerian constitution,

You must openly say this system is false; Islamic law is the only truth; that this constitution is false and it is disbelief (*kaafirci* in Hausa); those who are employed under the government are working for falsehood and disbelief; the military system is false and it is disbelief; the police system is false and it is disbelief; working as a judge in this country under the constitution is false and it is disbelief. If you openly say these and everyone knows you with these [views], then you can live in the country. Otherwise, you must emigrate. [...] (Yusuf 2009)

Similar prognostic framing, where a firm call for action is made to adherents and potential recruits, is employed by Abubakar Shekau during his tenure as Boko Haram's leader. Specifically, in describing Boko Haram's quarrel against unbelievers, Shekau's “othering” emphasises the distinction between genuine Muslims who follow Salafi tenets and those who do not. In this “othering”, Shekau characterises some Western leaders as enemies and encourages adherents to eliminate them, citing this conflict as a battle against Westernization and Christianity. Shekau extremist rhetoric, which goes against the values of peace and tolerance central to Islam, is built up within a binary perspective that divides the world into two. On the one hand are those who follow Salafi canon (Thurston 2016, 31–63). On the other hand, are those who align themselves with Western leaders. This worldview leaves no room for those who do not fall into either category,

In every nation, in every region, [they] now have a decision to make. Either you are with us, I mean, we are real Muslims who are following Salaf footsteps or you're with Obama, Françoise Hollande, George Bush. Bush! Clinton. I forget not Abraham Lincoln. Ban Ki-moon and his people generally, and any unbeliever . . . kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill! This war is against Christians, I mean Christians generally (New York Times 2014)

A further contention evident in Boko Haram's discourse is that Westernisation, despite being fraught and un-Islamic, was being supported by the Islamic establishment due to the latter's close association with the Nigerian government. This framing has been employed, by Boko Haram, in “othering” the Sufi Brotherhoods as Nigeria's established Islamic order, along with the emirs that lead that order. The contention also has a rich back story worth touching upon.

## Motivational framing

Just because SMO leaders have “diagnosed” a problem and further developed a course of action – a prognosis, so to speak – to redress the identified problem does not mean movement adherents will be galvanised, without persuasion, to relocate “from the balcony to the barricades” (Benford and Snow 2000, 615). To enable this shift, the final core framing task, motivational framing, provides a “call to arms” that rationalises, using a thought process familiar to the “in-group”, the need to engage “in ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive” (Benford and Snow 2000, 617).

For Boko Haram, insofar as its prognostic frames encouraged wholesale murder, including of fellow Muslims, its motivational framing thus had to dig deep into northern Nigerian religious and political history to evoke legitimacy. To accomplish this, Boko Haram’s motivational framing espoused a form of “socio-revolutionary Islamism” in northern Nigeria that can be traced to the 19th-century *jihād* of Shaykh Usman Dan Fodio. Essentially, for Boko Haram, much like for many Islamic activist groups in northern Nigeria, including the Sufi *tariqas* and radical Salafis alike, “[Shehu Uthman] Dan Fodio’s *jihād* provides a rallying point of political and religious legitimisation” (Nwankpa 2015, 8).

Such motivational frames that draw from northern Nigerian religious and political history are evident in Boko Haram’s use of Dan Fodio’s *jihād* as a yardstick of violent action required against the current trend of Westernization and Western education. As Mamman Nur once pointed out along these lines [citing Q8:53],

Shehu” Uthman Dan Fodio waged the *jihād* to establish a state of the Qur’an. Is this not so? They waged *jihād* and established the state of the Qur’an—then what happened? Allah did not change it for them [Muslim forefathers] until a time when they told the Europeans to bring what they brought [Westernisation and Western education]; they received it, and *then* Allah took away peace and stability. [...] “that is because Allah never changes a favour he confers on a people until they change what is in their hearts” [citing Q8:53]. I hope it is well understood (M. M. Nur and Yusuf 2018, 153)

Whereas the preceding rhetoric is largely prognostic and motivational, diagnostic elements are evident within such framing. This is consistent with Benford and Snow’s position around an overlap between the core framing tasks (Benford and Snow 2000, 615–617). For instance, the identification of a “problem” to be redressed exists within the view that Muslims’ acceptance of Westernization and Western education precipitated the decline of Northern Nigerian society. Thus, the invocation of the spirit of Dan Fodio constructs “a social reality or vision that claims conformity to fundamental Islamic principles. Boko Haram, as such, represents a phase in the historical trend of Islamic reforms in northern Nigeria (Nwankpa 2015, 8). The Dan Fodio era reference also reflects that Nigeria, as far as Boko Haram is concerned, “is a colonial construct, lacking Islamic legitimacy and destined to lead society in a downward spiral of Western immorality” (Pieri and Zenn 2016).

Such framing, however, appears ironic. Boko Haram’s simultaneous disavowal of the Islamic establishment and rejection of the authority of the Sultan of Sokoto as the spiritual head of that establishment (Nwankpa 2015, 8) contrasts the group’s positive references to Usman Dan Fodio, whose *jihād* set up the Islamic establishment in Nigeria and who is an ancestor to the current Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Sa’ad Abubakar.

Such irony aside, so far as the prevalent discourses of Sufism and Salafism in northern Nigeria go, the reference to Dan Fodio holds an established presence amongst radical and even mainstream movements. Indeed, it is neither new nor even controversial when employed within particular contexts of exhortation. On the contrary, part of this established thought, shared by other fundamentalist and anti-syncretic movements in Northern Nigeria for decades Loimeier (1997), holds that Muslim society exists in a state of religious disrepair today compared to centuries past when strict *Shari'a* was enforced, and the Europeans had not yet arrived (Pieri and Zenn 2016). When viewed in isolation, such millenarian perspectives hardly seem problematic. Yet, in Boko Haram's use of such frames, especially combined with the previous two core framing tasks, the dangers of Boko Haram's ideology, communicated via framed language and discourse, become manifest.

## Conclusion

In summary, Boko Haram's discourse suggests a diagnostic appeal around shared grievances around Western influence on Muslim society in northern Nigeria. Such diagnosed blame seeks to unite adherents in a collective struggle and foster emotional ties of solidarity that secure movement cohesion and facilitate collective action (Francesca and Jasper 2001). This analysis is consistent with findings by Rogers and Neumann (2007) that radical Islamist movements exploit perceived injustices to recruit and mobilise. However, in Boko Haram's case, it is not just the ills of co-existing with Westernised society but also Western materialism and education, which the movement prohibits for the "in-group".

Insights from expectancy-value theory (Feather 1982) suggest that, on a social-psychological level, by framing Northern Muslims' place in Nigeria as vulnerable, Boko Haram triggers a cost-benefit analysis scenario whereby followers align with the group's ideology, which promises to alleviate this vulnerability. Studies by Ingram (2016), Kinnvall (2004), Silke (2003), and Dawson and Amarasingam (2017) also demonstrate how such diagnostic framing can be built upon, as movements prognostically frame how such perceived injustices can be redressed as a next step.

However, in Boko Haram's case, specifically when Abu Shekau led the group, such framing is based on a faulty Qur'anic interpretation: that *jihad* was the solution, and even Muslims could be targeted. As Mamman Nur would write, problematising Shekau's worldview, "he [Shekau] is interpreting the Qur'anic verses with his own opinion", and even when told "his interpretation is contrary to the [standard] exegesis, yet he [Shekau] refused to withdraw his interpretation" (M. Nur 2018, 450).

Notwithstanding this shift away from standard Qur'anic exegesis, such framing, which in the case of Boko Haram seeks to intentionally deceive (Omeni 2022), can nevertheless be an effective recruitment and mobilisation tool for marginalised communities against unpopular regimes. After all, in Nigeria, accusations of injustice by authorities, especially by the state's coercive institutions – such as the police and the military – are valid, decades-old and unresolved. Thus, successful "othering", diagnostic "framing" of the state and the Islamic establishment as the problematic "other", a binary approach to prognostic framing that draws a red line between Muslim believers and unbelievers, and motivational framing that suggests rewards for participation and costs for non-participation, can all serve as powerful mobilising tools for *jihadist* militant groups like Boko Haram.

## Notes

1. Henceforth, 9/11.
2. As of December 2023, the movement referred to as Boko Haram had split over the years into at least three organisations: *Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna lid Da'wati wa al-Jihād* (JAS), led by Abu Shekau who was killed in May 2021; *Ansaru al-Musulmina fi Bilad al-Sudan* (Ansaru), which splintered from the main group around 2012 and was mostly affiliated to senior Boko Haram figure, Mamman Nur; and the Islamic State–West Africa Province (ISWAP), which is currently the strongest faction and emerged in 2016 after in-fighting, “as a declared affiliate (wilayat) of the ISIS ‘caliphate’ movement” (Bukarti 2020).
3. *Jihād*, the struggle to overcome evil, is perceived as a religious and moral duty for Muslims, viewed as either the “Greater *Jihād*” (the spiritual war against evil in oneself), or the “Lesser *Jihād*” (a war against unbelievers) (Yapp 2004). For Boko Haram, this is viewed in terms of violent action against non-believers, framed as the only way to implement change within the Nigerian state as *dar al-kufr* (abode of unbelief).
4. Emphasis preserved from the original.
5. See Omeni (2022, 177–178) for a discussion of Boko Haram as a product of its environment. Bukarti (2020) also covers the opposing camps within this local vs. global debate.
6. Body of Muslim scholars, theologians and legalists.
7. In the instance of the Islamic State (Daesh), the idea of *Hijrah* is even more specific, and connotes the relocation to *al Sham* (the Greater Syria region, where the so-called Islamic Caliphate held much territory c. 2014–2016) (Forest 2012).
8. *Sunnah*: The social traditions, jurisprudence and longstanding practices of the *ummah* (Islamic community).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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