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Nigerien soldiers patrol in Bosso, near the Nigerian border, where the army had been battling Boko Haram militants since February. (May 25, 2015 - ISSOUF SANOGO/Getty Images)

The Origins of Boko Haram—And Why It Matters

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Nigeria's population of an estimated 200 million people is plagued by an alarming level of violence, which is driven by a toxic mix of brutal extremist groups, criminal gangs and a cropland crisis. These feed into one another, and each is little understood. A key player in the present carnage is Boko Haram, a notorious organization which claims to fight in defense of Islam.

Over the last decade from 2009-2019, Boko Haram has waged a campaign of mass violence and wrought havoc in Africa's Lake Chad region, which comprises northern Nigeria, southeastern Niger, far-northern Cameroon and western Chad. The Boko Haram movement has killed a conservative estimate of 18,000 people,¹ displaced millions, and caused a large-scale humanitarian crisis.² In 2014, it was recorded as the world's deadliest terror group, killing 6,600 in that year alone.³ Boko Haram is particularly notorious for its violence against children. Indeed, the movement was first catapulted into the attention of western media in April 2014 by its kidnapping of 276 girls from their school dormitory in Chibok village, north-eastern Nigeria. It uses girls as sexual and domestic slaves and as human bombs, targeting civilian locations including markets, hospitals, IDP camps and places of worship. It has also conscripted thousands of boys into its army and forces them to kill in order to keep

themselves alive.⁴ Boko Haram has established itself as a formidable force and, judging from security force fatalities of 750 in 2019 which is the highest since the violence began, it now appears to be stronger than ever.⁵

Boko Haram originally formed in 2003, and today the movement is split into three different factions. These include *Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna lid Da'wati wa al-Jihad* (JAS), which is popularly called Boko Haram, and which is led by Abubakar Shekau. Shekau has been the group's sole leader from 2009 until its first split in 2012 when members disgruntled by Shekau's indiscriminate killing of civilians formed *Ansaru al-Musulmina fi Bilad al-Sudan* (Ansaru). Then, in August 2016, after Shekau defied ISIS's announcement of his deposition,⁶ yet another rift emerged resulting in the Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWAP) as a declared affiliate (*wilayat*) of the ISIS "caliphate" movement. JAS and ISWAP, with a combined estimated 5,000-7,000 fighters, are active in the Lake Chad region where they continue to attack military formations, kill civilians, raid and torch villages, and engage in abductions.⁷ Ansaru is based in northwestern Nigeria and has not claimed any attack since 2013, although it still releases messages intended to recruit and radicalize the public. It was recently reported that JAS and ISWAP fighters are defecting to Ansaru due to military pressure in the Lake Chad region. This raises the threat of renewed violence from Ansaru.⁸

By its own account, Boko Haram and its rise since 2003 has been inspired by ideologues, events and groups across the world including by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. And yet, despite several books and over 500 reports and articles written about it since its emergence, very little is known including by Nigerians themselves about the group's origins. That is so because existing literature regarding the group is primarily based on unverified media reports, penned by researchers who spent very minimal time in the field, and by a narrow selection of interviewees whose reports have sometimes been tainted by bias.

While Boko Haram continues to wreak bloody havoc, debates over its genesis and links to other so-called jihadi groups continue. These have divided scholars into two broad camps. First, scholars such as Alex Thurston, Adam Hijazi and Kyari Mohammed see Boko Haram as a "home-grown" group, one that was birthed by systemic and structural local factors while treating the role and influence of al-Qaeda and international jihadism on the group as "marginal" or secondary.⁹

Second, other researchers led by Andrea Brigaglia and Jacob Zenn de-emphasize the importance of local factors and promote the role of international jihadi organizations, principally al-Qaeda, to the rise and evolution of Boko Haram.¹⁰ At the heart of this debate, which has recently fallen into *ad hominem* attacks,¹¹ is a violent episode that occurred during 2003-4 in Kanamma, a desert village in north-eastern Nigeria. This episode concerned a commune that formed part of the nucleus that would become Boko Haram.

Over the years, that episode has become a landmark in Boko Haram's history. Virtually every author writing about the genesis of the group has dedicated some time to it.¹² However, the scholarly and journalistic analysis of this event is replete with contradictions, confusion and exaggerations. Scholars dispute each other's statements, sometimes inadvertently. Accounts of what happened are profoundly different, indicating a general lack of

clarity and knowledge about the incident. This is because virtually all writers rely on second-hand information—mostly unverified media reports which have, in turn, relied on more second-hand information without critically assessing the sources' reliability. It is thus a classic case of “little evidence, much confusion.”

What can be said without controversy is that at some point in 2003, a group of mostly young people from Maiduguri and elsewhere in northern Nigeria went to a northern part of Yobe state in the northeast, near the border with Niger. There, in the remote desert, they established a puritanical separatist community which defined itself in opposition to the “corrupting influence of city life.” Toward the end of 2003, the group clashed with police, looting vehicles and weapons. The commune was subsequently dismantled by the military, with some members killed and others arrested. The commune members that remained contained part of the seeds of Boko Haram.

Given the ongoing debate and misunderstandings surrounding this episode, it is important to understand this event not only for its academic and historical value, but also because it contributes to an understanding of how Boko Haram began, which has practical policy implications today. Among other things, understanding how Boko Haram began remains vital for the sake of successfully defeating the movement. It is essential, also, for the sake of noting early warning signs among similar groups—and preventing them from becoming as established and capable as Boko Haram is today.

Drawing on primary data, including extensive fieldwork in northeastern Nigeria and primary internal documents in Hausa, Kanuri and Arabic, this paper re-examines the Kanamma episode with a view to setting the record straight. It finds that the Kanamma commune was not an al-Qaeda training center, as some have speculated, nor was it a pacific religious community, as suggested by others. While this paper contends that there was no operational linkage between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in 2003 when the Nigerian group was founded, there is evidence of ideological connection between the duo from the very beginning. Understanding this is important for properly analyzing the Boko Haram phenomenon and helping policymakers design effective strategies to deal with the group and the crisis in Nigeria.

Little Evidence, Big Claims

A survey of the scholarly literature about Boko Haram reveals a great deal of confusion over almost every single detail of the 2003-2004 Kanamma episode. The fact that it happened in the first place and the time period in which it transpired are perhaps the only exceptions. Authors disagree with one another regarding not only the interpretation of events but on specific facts and figures: what was the population of the commune, for example. While Manuel Reinert, Andrew Walker and others claim it comprised some 200, David Cook estimated the “Kanamma Group” at between 800-1000. Other details are similarly contradictory, such as the number of casualties in the clash, who directed it, what led to the violence, among other things. The reader is left with the difficult task of sorting through a deluge of irreconcilable narratives.¹³

When the Kanamma commune grabbed its first headlines in early 2004, it was labelled the “Nigerian Taleban” (*sic*) implying it was somehow related to the Afghan Taliban. The portrayal of the commune in the predominantly Christian-run media of southern Nigeria was particularly instrumental to this branding, and this was later adopted by Western media.¹⁴ The label could merely have been a device to relate what was going on in Nigeria with the then-current “global war on terror,” or simply something to sell newspapers. But it might also have been deployed for mischievous or stereotypical motives. Nigerian media is not immune to the religious polarization and divisiveness that has characterized the country and its politics since its independence in 1960. Southern Nigerian media has consistently sought to portray the North as an Islamist population that cannot coexist with others. Perhaps that is why when Boko Haram appeared in its current iteration in 2009, its leader was called “The Leader of Nigerian Taliban” before the current nomenclature was adopted.¹⁵

As a result of this newspaper reporting, serious attempts to link the Kanamma commune with the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan began to appear. David Cook, for instance, suggests that there may have been members of Boko Haram in Afghanistan during the Kanamma episode, even though he also questions that same possibility in the next sentence.¹⁶ Citing news media published years after the episode, Freedom Onuoha takes this theory further. He states that the Kanamma commune occupied public buildings for several days, “hoisting the flag of Afghanistan’s Taliban movement over the camps,” and that the group inscribed “Taliban” on their vehicles and called their camp “Afghanistan.”¹⁷

Building on this, some academics began to speculate that in actuality Boko Haram began as an al-Qaeda project.¹⁸ They misinterpreted the Kanamma episode as a clash between the Nigerian police and an al-Qaeda training camp established in northern Nigeria with funding from Osama Bin Laden. Thus, they concluded that al-Qaeda played a significant role in the founding of Boko Haram.¹⁹

What Actually Happened

During extensive fieldwork, I interviewed multiple local sources in Kanamma as to what actually happened.²⁰ Their account reveals a pattern with only slight variations. The following narrative is based on these accounts.

In the evening of Sunday, December 21, 2003, a group of some seventy persons (about fifty men and twenty women and children) arrived at the southern outskirts of Kanamma. The group cleared a forested site between two bodies of water next to Bakurna Barde’s farm and spent the night there. The following day, around eleven of them (eight men, three women) went to the village market to purchase provisions. Before they returned to their camp, they went around to youth haunts, calling on residents to abandon their “dirty temporal life” and join the group in the practice of true Islam and the establishment of an Islamic state that would enforce the sharia legal system. Female members entered houses and made the same invitation to women in *pardah*.

That same night, some members of the commune attacked the Kanamma police outpost with machetes, bows and arrows, and catapults, as well as one pistol.²¹ They killed a police officer named Liman Umar, from Sokoto

state, and seized his rifle. From there, they raided the house of Alhaji Komfasa, the chairman of the local government, who escaped by scaling a fence. The commune members fled by stealing a four-wheel drive car. They proceeded to Geidam, about thirty-five kilometers away, and looted the local government secretariat and the police station there.

On December 25, police officers were mobilized to the site of the commune but returned without any casualties on either side. It appears that there was, in fact, no violence at all that day; the police could not access the camp due to its defensive position between two bodies of water, and its only entrance was barricaded with sandbags and a trench in anticipation of a counterattack.

On December 31, soldiers and tanks were deployed from 241 Recce Battalion in Nguru (about two hundred ten kilometers away). The troops entered the camp in the early hours of January 1, 2004, and at sunrise passed through Kanamma in a truck carrying about twenty bodies, including that of Baalai, said to be the leader of the commune, as well as women and children. Dispersed fighters were later spotted by villagers, walking either west or southward. Some of them went through Kanamma where they received treatment for minor wounds (largely incurred in the bush) before leaving. Several respondents stated that the commune, now being theorized as an “al-Qaeda training camp,” actually only lasted in Kanamma for about ten days from December 21, 2003 to January 1, 2004. Meanwhile, the actual fighting was over within hours.²² This signals that this incident is hugely exaggerated, and also sharply contradicts the suggestion made by Brigalia that Kanamma existed for years.²³

Residents stated that they were later informed that the same group had previously established a commune on the outskirts of another village called Tarmowa, about sixty-three kilometers from Kanamma. The local government chairman, Alhaji Komfasa—whose house they had raided on December 21, 2003—had asked them to vacate their encampment in that town. However, Boko Haram scholars appear to be unaware of Tarmowa. They only refer to Kanamma, where the violent clash occurred. This is because virtually all of them rely on Nigerian journalistic accounts which, in turn, rely on anonymous unverified sources. It may be that the activities of the commune in Tarmowa are confused with what transpired in Kanamma.²⁴

Inside the Tarmowa Commune

By 2003, there appeared an ideological crack in the ranks of the group that would later become Boko Haram. This crack formed into two main camps, one led by Muhammad Ali and the other by Muhammad Yusuf. The break was over two related issues. The first was whether a Muslim is permitted to live in Nigeria, which is viewed by the group as *dar al-kufr* (abode of unbelief). The second issue concerned timing for the launching of a jihad.

On the first issue, Ali believed it was not permitted for a Muslim to live in Nigeria. He argued the country was *dar al-kufr*, as the government does not rule by sharia law (*hukm bi gyari ma anzal Llah*) by permitting adultery, gambling, alcohol, etcetera. Therefore, the only option left to the group’s members was to do *hijrah* to a “pure” place—in the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad—and prepare for *jihad*.

On the other hand, Yusuf contended that it is permissible for Muslims to live in the land of disbelief provided they do not obey man-made laws and institutions, and that they disassociate from the country's secular system (*al wala wa al-bara*). In addition, they must publicly announce their dissociation (*izhar al-din*). Articulating this position, Yusuf argued,

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...*²⁵ (emphasis added by author).

Yusuf went on to say that it was, in practical terms, more beneficial for members to stay in cities, so that they could recruit and radicalize. He argued it was necessary for the group to oppose and harden themselves against Muslim scholars, politicians and public servants, mainly police and the military, who defended the “un-Islamic system.” In keeping with some traditional jurists, Yusuf held that it was necessary to first “establish proof”—i.e., to preach against “un-Islamic” society and to attempt to call it back to Islam—before initiating jihad against them (*iqamatul hujjah*). Ali disagreed.

Thus, the second issue was over the appropriate time to declare a jihad in Nigeria. Ali contended that Nigeria was ripe for a jihad and that all pre-conditions were fulfilled in 2003. To Ali, their group had done enough preaching to convince people to repent and implement the Sharia, and that anyone that did not repent should just be fought. Yusuf argued otherwise. He thought there was need for more time to recruit members, to mobilize more grassroots support and to procure weapons.

All of this culminated in the split of Boko Haram into the Ali and Yusuf camps.²⁶ The Ali camp migrated to Tarmowa, a desert village about five kilometers from Geidam in northern Yobe state. Members mostly arrived in cars at Geidam around mid-2003, then boated to the outskirts of Tarmowa village. The new compound started with two people (apparently an advance team sent to find a suitable place) and gradually swelled to around seventy, including women and children. They erected huts and a *jumu'at* mosque from tree branches and leaves, and they dug a well.²⁷ Families slept in huts while single men slept inside the mosque. When I visited the site in the company of several of my sources in February 2019, I saw the well which, to this day, contains water. I also identified the spot where the mosque stood.

On Fridays, some locals joined the commune for prayers. Commune members went on preaching tours to surrounding villages such as Zaji-Biriri, Zai and Bestur, and as a result, about a dozen youths joined them.²⁸ They condemned western-style education, democracy, as well as the traditional emirate system (which was deemed un-Islamic), and called on traditional rulers to relinquish their positions and submit to Islamic government.²⁹ A couple of months after their arrival, they started fishing in a nearby river, and engaged in paid labor and petty trading to earn a living. Some worked on farms for a fee while others traded in neighboring

village markets such as Geidam, Bayamari and Dapchi. Women and children were in charge of cooking and domestic chores.

According to Abu Harun, a member of the commune who went there with his wife and four children (one of whom died in the attack on the camp in Kanamma), the commune did not name itself “Taliban” or “Afghanistan” but was called *Dar al-Hijrah* (the abode of fleeing); members called themselves “_muhajirun_”—i.e., the emigrants. The tag “_muhajirun_” is, of course, a homage to the early Muslims who migrated from their home in Mecca where they were persecuted for their faith, to Medina. It is also another indication of the religious/ideological undertones of the group and an attempt by them to play the victim and attribute their movement to early Islam.

Abu Harun claims that they did not have arms nor conduct military training. They only engaged in physical exercise such as boxing and martial arts. Residents whom I spoke with, who passed around the site including at night, stated that they did not notice any military training, nor did they ever hear gunshots. Members got armed with machetes, catapults and so forth after they received an eviction notice from the local authorities.

Except for one dispute, which led to a fight with one Kachallah Ngubdo, there was never an incident between the commune and the local communities.³⁰ Members accused Ngubdo (a hunter) of invading their privacy because he passed near their site at night when hunting. The dispute was settled by the traditional ruler of Besbur, who directed the commune to return Ngubdo’s hunting weapon and amulets to him, with which they complied. Contrary to multiple published accounts,³¹ residents said there was no dispute between them and the commune over fishing rights. “There never was any dispute over fishing in this area. The river is free for everyone because it is a gift from God for all of us” said Lawan Amadu, the traditional ruler of Zai village.

Around October 2003, efforts to evict the commune began, not because of a dispute with villagers, but because of the local authorities’ apprehension about the commune’s intentions.³² Local authorities saw the commune as an attempt to create a separatist community—effectively “a state within a state.”

The site was under the administration of the defunct Bukarti Development Area, which inaugurated an *ad hoc* committee to persuade the group to vacate the site. The committee paid several visits, with a view to convincing the commune to leave. The group, however, insisted on staying and explained that the land belonged to God, and they did not constitute a threat to anyone. They explained to the committee that they were fleeing from urban life because it distracted them from reciting the Quran, praying and fasting.³³

When the committee’s attempts to encourage the commune to leave failed, the matter was reported to the Yobe state government, which got the police involved. Around the second week of December 2003, the Yobe state police command gave the commune a seven-day ultimatum to vacate. On the expiration of the ultimatum, the group packed up and left the site on trucks. Before they left, they announced to villagers and distributed pamphlets stating that they had been denied the right to practice their faith, and thus were going to fight. They

claimed that were launching a jihad and invited residents to join them. From Tarmowa, the group left for Kanamma.

Setting the Record Straight

As we've seen, Boko Haram was inspired by ideologues, events and groups across the world including Bin Laden and al-Qaeda. In fact, Yusuf's sons recollect that their fathers' tipping point for founding Boko Haram was the success of the 9/11 attack, which occurred while Yusuf was on pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia.³⁴

Furthermore, when Boko Haram decided to unleash full-blown violence in 2009, after about two hundred members of the group were killed during July of that year, the group requested technical and financial support from al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghrib (AQIM), which acquiesced. Shekau later thanked AQIM for training and financial support.³⁵ This is an indication that post-2009, al-Qaeda and Boko Haram have developed operational linkages. However, there is no credible evidence that operational connections between the two existed before 2009 and particularly during 2003—that is, at the time of Boko Haram's founding, when claims about its links to transnational jihadism were first being made.

For now, let us proceed to examine the two major premises upon which the theory linking Kanamma to al-Qaeda was built; the involvement of Ali, who reportedly received a grant from Bin Laden to start a cell in Nigeria, and reports that the commune's residents kept "the Nigerian security busy in a fire exchange that lasted over several days."³⁶

On the first premise, Abu Harun confirms that Ali was involved in the camp and was the head of the splinter group. But he did not stay at Tarmowa or Kanamma. He lived in Gashua, about a hundred and forty-seven kilometers away, and only occasionally visited the commune. Ali was not on site when the camp was attacked by the military, nor was he among those killed there. He later joined some dispersed members after escaping from a police attempt to arrest him in Gashua, which took place immediately after the camp was dislodged. He then headed to the Mandara Mountains in Borno state, but was killed along the road.³⁷

The account linking Ali to Bin Laden and al-Qaeda is not supported with credible evidence. Ali's alleged meeting with Osama Bin Laden in Sudan, his training in Afghanistan and receipt of a \$3 million grant from him in 2000 to start an al-Qaeda cell in Nigeria, was first reported by the International Crisis Group in 2014 (ten years after Kanamma).³⁸ This claim is based on a single interview with an anonymous Boko Haram member. It is not clear where and how that purported member got his information: Was he with Ali in Sudan or was he informed? Was he a party to the transfer of funds or did he hear about it from Ali, Bin Laden or a third party? Was he a member in Kanamma or did he remain with Yusuf after the split? Or did he join Boko Haram later?

The report does not answer any of these germane questions, nor does it even indicate whether its source ever met Ali at all. Little wonder then that the report itself qualifies its claims about Ali and his connections with al-Qaeda:

with “reportedly” and “allegedly.” In fact, these terms were used fifty-one and twenty-one times respectively in the report, indicating that the information should be taken with a pinch of salt. Curiously, however, instead of this claim being treated with the caution that it rightly deserves, it gradually started being presented by others as established fact. The caveats (“reportedly” and “allegedly”) were surreptitiously edited out or tweaked by scholars passionate about the theory.³⁹

On the second premise, as can be seen above in the eye-witness account of what transpired in Kanamma, the commune did not hold its own against security forces for days as claimed by some Boko Haram scholars. Soldier from Nguru invaded the camp in the early hours of January 1, 2004 and, by sunrise the same day, they were back in Kanamma with bodies of those killed and prisoners. Thus, the attack on the group lasted hours, not days, much less weeks.

As explained above, an attempt to evict them on December 25, 2003 ended without an encounter because the police could not access the commune. Similarly, there are no reports of weapons other than *armes blanches* seized from the camp. If rifles and other assault weapons were recovered, one might expect Yobe State Government’s press release on the incident to have indicated so.⁴⁰ On the contrary, the government stated that the group was not a training camp.

On the other hand, unlike separatist religious communes like *Darul Salam*,⁴¹ (a revivalist group of about 3,000-4,000 who lived in Mokwa, north-central Nigeria until they were dislodged by police in 2009 without violence) Kanamma was not the pacifist commune as presented by some writers. Boko Haram has made clear from the get-go that its ultimate aim was to launch a jihad to rid its area of secular systems and governments, and to replace them with a puritanical Islamic government. For instance, in Yusuf’s “History of Muslims” —an important lecture that Kassim says should be regarded as Yusuf’s “political and religious testament”⁴² —Yusuf explained,

The only thing that will stop them [that is Nigerian government and Christians] from insulting the prophet or killing Muslim is jihad . . . [but] we must first and foremost embark upon preaching towards Islamic reform. Then, we will have to be patient until we acquire power. This is the foundation of this preaching towards Islamic reform [*da’wa*]. It was founded for the sake of jihad and we did not hide this objective from anyone...

As highlighted above, members of the Kanamma commune subscribed to this ideology. In fact, it was their zealotry to implement it that led to their break away from Yusuf and their subsequent migration. They went to Tarmowa to fulfill one of the pre-conditions of jihad and to prepare for it. They lived in peace with local communities, and did not target them when they raided government buildings and police outposts in Kanamma and neighboring villages,⁴³ not only because they were a secondary target, but also because they saw them as a “recruitment pool.” If anything, efforts to eject them only drew them into a fight they were not prepared for. Nevertheless, the fact remains that they were the ones who instigated the violence, which points to their ultimately violent intentions.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, there is no credible evidence of any operational link between the Kanamma commune and al-Qaeda, and theories linking the two are, at best, speculative. And Kanamma is just one example of the contradictions and occasional confusion regarding landmark events in the existing Boko Haram literature. This is partly due to the fact that very few field studies have been conducted on the group, and those few have been limited in scope. Scholars mostly rely on unverified secondary accounts. While this can be forgiven in 2012 to 2015, when the areas where Boko Haram originally emerged were extremely dangerous for researchers, the situation has improved since 2016. This presents a real opportunity for scholars and journalists to do a better job at understanding the sources of Boko Haram.










Furthermore, as our sojourn to better understand this phenomenon continues, scholars who study Boko Haram should allow the facts and evidence on the ground to direct them, rather than seeking evidence that supports their preconceptions. Holding on to previous positions, while tweaking sources or ignoring reliable evidence to defend them will only exacerbate disagreements, some of which have recently degenerated into *ad hominem* attacks among Boko Haram scholars. Worse still, while the fight against Boko Haram is ongoing, such controversies detract from the effort to supply policy makers with the knowledge and context they require to design effective strategies for countering the violence.

Understanding early Boko Haram—an aspect of which was treated in this paper—has practical policy implications. First, it will give policymakers a fair idea of the conditions and circumstances that led to the rise and evolution of Boko Haram and thus make them better placed to confront them. Second, appreciating the origins and early links of Boko Haram—or lack of them—and similarly-inspired groups will help governments to choose the best approach to dealing with the group. For instance, if Boko Haram started as a domestic group with local grievances and agenda, policy solutions to the group, developed by the Nigerian government and other concerned parties, will markedly differ from decisions made if Boko Haram started as an al-Qaeda-linked representative in Nigeria. Third, and last, comprehending the real story of Boko Haram's emergence and increasingly dangerous operations can help to expose early warning signs about similar groups in the future. This is essential if policymakers are to have any chance of preventing marginal groups possessed of local grievances but inspired by transnational jihadist ideas from transforming into large-scale armies that terrorize and threaten to undo entire nations.

¹ John Campbell, "Nigeria Security Tracker," Africa Program and Nigeria on the Brink, June 1, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483> (accessed August 28, 2019). ↗

² Claire Felter, "Nigeria's Battle with Boko Haram," Council on Foreign Relations, August 8, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/nigerias-battle-boko-haram> (accessed August 29, 2019). ↗

³ Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2015," Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015, <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-Global-Terrorism-Index-Report.pdf> (accessed June 29, 2019). ↗

- ⁴ Audu Bulama Bukarti, "Nigeria's Child Veterans Are Still Living a Nightmare," *Foreign Policy*, August 25, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/15/children-boko-haram-nigeria-borno-cjtf/> (accessed 09/17/2019). 
- ⁵ Nathaniel Allen, "How Boko Haram has Regained the Initiative and what Nigeria Should do to Stop It" (War on the Rocks, 24 December 2019) <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/how-boko-haram-has-regained-the-initiative-and-what-nigeria-should-do-to-stop-it/> (accessed January 9, 2020) 
- ⁶ Rachel Bryson & Audu Bulama Bukarti "Boko Haram's Split on Women in Combat" (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, September 17 2018) <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/boko-harams-split-women-combat> (accessed December 12, 2019). 
- ⁷ International Crisis Group, "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," (International Crisis Group, May 16, 2019) p. 2, <https://d2071andvipowj.cloudfront.net/273-facing-the-challenge.pdf> (accessed August 2, 2019). 
- ⁸ Ahmad Salkida and Yusuf Anka "Insecurity: Why peace efforts in Northwest Nigeria are not sustainable," International Center for Investigative Reporting, Oct 16. 2019, <https://www.icirnigeria.org/insecurity-why-peace-efforts-in-northwest-nigeria-is-not-sustainable/> (accessed 12/17/2019). 
- ⁹ See Adam Higazi *et al* (2018), "A Response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida," *Perspective on Terrorism*, Volume 12, Issue 2. 
- ¹⁰ See Jacob Zenn (2014), "Nigerian al-Qaedaism," (Washington DC: Hudson Institute) available on <https://www.hudson.org/research/10172-nigerian-al-qaedaism-> accessed 09/014/2019; Jacob Zenn (2014), "Exposing and Defeating Boko Haram: Why the West must unite to help Nigeria defeat terrorism," the BOW Group. <https://www.bowgroup.org/sites/bowgroup.uat.pleasetest.co.uk/files/Jacob%20Zenn%20Bow%20Group%20Report%20for%2022.7.14.pdf> accessed on 12/08/2019; Jacob Zenn (2017); "Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria: Cases from Boko Haram's Founding, Launch of Jihad and Suicide Bombings," *Perspective on Terrorism*, Vol. 11, Issue 6. 
- ¹¹ See Adam Higazi *et al*, "A Response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida" and Jacob Zenn Responds to his Critiques... 
- ¹² See for instance Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton University Press 2018), pp. 92-9; John Azumah, "Boko Haram in Retrospect" (2015) *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 26:1, 33, 43; Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (C. Hurst & Co. [Publishers] Ltd 2017), pp. 46-49; Mike Smith; *Boko Haram: Inside Nigeria's Unholy War* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co 2015), 77-8; Andrew Walker. *Eat the Heart of the Infidel: The Harrowing of Nigeria and the Rise of Boko Haram* (London: C. Hurst (Publishers 2016) Ltd.) 151-153. 
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David Cook, an associate professor of religion at Rice University, was one of the first scholars to write on the Kanamma episode. He states that the commune, located about a mile from Kanamma, consisted of about sixty persons. On December 29, 2003, in their effort to obtain weapons, they raided government installations, including police stations, and killed 30 people in the process. David Cook, "Boko Haram: A Prognosis," The James Baker III Institute of Public Policy, December 16, 2011, p. 10, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/Research/535dcd14/REL-pub-CookBokoHaram-121611.pdf> (accessed 09/14/2019).

This culminated in a Nigerian army crackdown on their camp which ended up killing or capturing all but seven of them, *Ibid*, p. 9.

Anna Borzello, a BBC journalist who visited Kanamma and interviewed locals, confirms Cook's details but reports that only one person, a police officer, was killed by the commune. In the same vein, Kyari Mohammed echoes Cook but writes that the group also wreaked havoc in five different local government areas between December 21, 2003 and January 1, 2004. He does not provide casualty figures, nor does he cite the population of the commune, simply saying it was "a tiny group of people." See Kyari Muhammad, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram," in Montclos Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (African Studies Centre 2014) 9, p. 10.

Andrew Walker, the author of a book about Boko Haram titled *Eat the Heart of the Infidel*, mentions the group's attacks on police stations and government buildings, but reports that the group overpowered a squad of police officers and took their weapons after a dispute over

fishing rights. See Andrew Walker, “What Is Boko Haram?” (United States Institute for Peace, June 2010), p. 3, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/SR308.pdf> (accessed 9/15/2019). He further states that the group consisted of about two hundred members, seventy of whom were killed at Kanamma.

Statements by Manuel Reinert, a researcher at the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA-Nigeria) and Lou Garçon, an anthropologist, fall somewhere between Cook and Walker. Like Walker, they assert that the population of the camp was 200 and that conflict originally erupted over fishing rights. But, like Cook, they state that the group attacked police stations and government buildings. Furthermore, they put the number of the militants killed in the uprising at “several,” thereby contradicting both Cook and Walker.

Rafael Serrano, a research analyst at University of South Florida, and Zacharias Pieri, a political sociologist, agree with Walker on seventy casualties from the militants’ side, but contradict him on the commune’s total population. They assert that the figure, “amounted to the majority of the sect members in Kanama,” thus implying a total population under a hundred and forty.

Confusing matters still further, Cook estimated the total population of the Kanamma Group—a name which he uses synonymously with Boko Haram – at “around 800-1000 members,” although he has suggested elsewhere that number should be taken seriously. [Cook, “Boko Haram: A Prognosis,” p. 10].

Virginia Comolli states that there were members of the commune from Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Virginia Comolli (2015). *Boko Haram: Nigeria’s Islamist Insurgency* (UK: C. Hurst & Co., Ltd), p. 47.

She cites Walker for this assertion, but Walker did not make such a claim in the article cited by Comolli, and no other account even remotely supports her claim. [She cited Andrew Walker, “What Is Boko Haram?” (United States Institute for Peace, June 2010), <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/SR308.pdf>.].

In several accounts of Boko Haram’s early days, questions of leadership are also contradictory. Various authors have mentioned at least three different people as the leader of the commune. Cook states that the commune was led by Muhammad Yusuf, who would become Bok Haram’s founder and first leader. Even though Kyari Mohammed quotes Cook repeatedly, he also contradicts him by reporting that Yusuf “was neither an active physical participant nor a prominent figure” and that it was one Muhammad Ali who led the commune [*Ibid*, p. 12].

John Azumah, an ordained Ghanaian minister and scholar of Christianity and Islam, confirms Ali as the leader and asserts he was killed i Kanamma. [Azumah, “Boko Haram in Retrospect” p. 40] Jacob Zenn agrees that Ali died in Kanamma but states that he was considered a “co-leader” along with Yusuf. International Crisis Group (ICG) claims Ali was a key player in the commune, but that it was led by Shekau (JAS’s current leader). [Jacob Zenn (2019), “Where will Boko Haram go next after ten years of moving around?”, African Arguments, July 23, 2019, <https://africanarguments.org/2019/07/23/where-will-boko-haram-go-next-after-ten-years-of-moving-around/> (accessed on 09/13/2019)].

ICG alleges that Shekau and Aminu Tashen-Ilimi broke from Yusuf, whom they accused of “being too soft,” to establish the commune. [International Crisis Group, “Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province,” p. 9].

Yusuf’s sons, meanwhile, do not mention Shekau as leader of the commune. See Aymann Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Cutting out the tumour from the Khawarij of Shekau by the allegiance pledge of the people of nobility by the two brothers, the sons of Sheikh Abu Yusuf al-Barnawi, ma God protect them,” (Trans., Aymann Jawad Al-Tamimi, August 5, 2018), <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21467/the-islamic-state-west-africa-province-vs-abu> (accessed May 2, 2019).

Mohammed, Adagba Okpagat *al*, (2012), “Activities of Boko Haram and insecurity question in Nigeria,” *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review (OMAN Chapter)* 1: 77-99. DOI: 10.12816/0002163; Lecturers at University of Benin, Nigeria and Morten Bøås, see Morten Bøås (2012) “Violent Islamic uprising in Northern Nigeria: From the ‘Taleban’ to Boko Haram II.”; NOREF Norwegian Peacebuilding Research Centre. internalpdf://boas.Boko.Haram16760_50945/boas.Boko.Haram.pdf, Research Director at Institute for Applied International Studies, suggests that Yusuf operated in Maiduguri, not Kanamma, during the period in question and was thus not a participant in Kanamma.

As with the other issues highlighted above, existing literature presents a confusing picture of the origins and links of the Kanamma Commune. Three different groups are particularly mentioned: the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the group that would become Boko Haram.

Bøås presented the Kanamma commune, which he terms the “Taliban groups (*sic*),” as a different group from Boko Haram, while Mohammed notes that the two shared the same ideology and that the remainder of the Kanamma militants joined Boko Haram. Abdulbasit Kassim, a PhD candidate at Rice University on intellectual history of Islam in Africa, on his part, suggests that the Kanamma militants splintered from the group that would become Boko Haram. [Abdulbasit Kassim, (2018) “Boko Haram’s Internal Civil War: Stealt Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism,” in Jacob Zenn (ed.) *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency*, *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines_Chapter-6.pdf accessed on 12/29/2018, 9- 32, p.11, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines.pdf> (accessed 09/15/2019)].

All these three prepositions continue to appear in Boko Haram literature. We shall look closely at two of them now.

This conjecture about the Kanamma commune’s link to al-Qaeda began in 2015 (thirteen years after the fact) by Andrea Brigaglia, who challenged earlier suggestions that the commune was “extremely puritanical, but substantially pacific community.” [*Ibid*, 194].

He speculated that it was an al-Qaeda training camp with “international connections” established as an “appendix” of mainstream Salafis (read, *Ahl as-Sunnah*) to train fighters for deployment to Afghanistan and Iraq. Relying on reports that clashes between the commune and Nigerian troops lasted several days, he argued that members were both trained to use firearms and were armed. Otherwise, they would not have been able to engage security forces for days.

This claim contradicts both the Yobe State Government’s conclusion that “the site was not a training camp but a separatist commune,” and the U.S. Embassy’s determination that it was not tied to al-Qaeda. [Thurston, “*Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*,” p. 93; “Nigerian Taliban most likely not tied to Taliban nor al-Qaeda,” WikiLeaks, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o4ABUJA183_a.html accessed 23/09/2019; Walker, “Eat the Heart of the Infidel,” p. 151.]

Even though Brigaglia was compelled by watertight primary evidence to recant the foundation of his hypothesis in a recent article, Andrea Brigaglia (2018), *Slicing Off the Tumour: The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as Narrated by the Islamic State*, *Politics and Religion Journal*, (S.I.), v. 12, n. 2, p. 19-224, Nov. 2018. ISSN 1820-659X, 207, <https://www.politicsandreligionjournal.com/index.php/prj/article/view/320>, 207 (accessed 01/01/2019), he appeared adamant to both have his cake and eat it. He retorts “although the embryonic Jihadi community led by Ali had not been able to establish a training camp at Kanamma as I had previously hypothesised, this was obviously their intention, which was averted thanks to the collaboration of the top leadership of the Salafi community with the security.” [*Ibid*.].

Brigaglia further claimed that the history of Boko Haram—written by Yusuf’s sons and published by ISIS—supports his claim that the Kanamma commune was “loosely or organically” linked to al-Qaeda, even though nothing in the text even remotely suggests that. In fact, the authors dismissed allegations that Boko Haram was linked to al-Qaeda in its early period as “spurious distorted accusations with no truth to them.”

In yet another article, Brigaglia triples down on this theory even as he backtracks from another premise upon which it was built. He submitted that Ali had “allegedly received a promise of funding from Osama Bin Laden....” However, the money never arrived and “so training in the camp never started.” [Andrea Brigaglia, “The ‘Popular Discourses of Salafi Counter-Radicalism in Nigeria’ Revisited: A Response to Abdullahi Lamido’s Review of Alexander Thurston, Boko Haram,” Center for Contemporary Islam, The CCI Occasional Papers, No. 2, March 2019, p. 12, http://www.cci.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/146/Debating%20Boko%20Haram.pdf (accessed 15/09/2019)].

Yet he also claimed, rather puzzlingly, that his hypothesis that the Kanamma commune *was meant* to be a training camp for al-Qaeda, “stands stronger” in 2019 than when he formulated it in 2015. [*Ibid.*]

Despite Brigaglia’s twists and turns on this issue, he has been frequently cited as an authority on the Kanamma episode. Kassim praised Brigaglia’s first article linking the commune to al-Qaeda as, “The best treatment of the Kanamma episode” and his argument “brilliant.” See Kassim, “Boko Haram’s Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism,” footnote 75, p. 10.

Zenn also adopted and advanced Brigaglia’s hypothesis. In his bid to demonstrate “that al-Qaida had a significant impact in Boko Haram’s founding in 2002.” See Jacob Zenn (2017), *Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria: Cases from Boko Haram’s Founding, Launch of Jihad and Suicide Bombings*, *Perspective on Terrorism*, Vol. 11, Issue 6, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/666/1326> (accessed 09/15/2019).

Zenn copiously cited Brigaglia with approval and concluded that “other documentary sources” are “increasingly corroborating Brigaglia’s hypothesis,” [*Ibid.*, 177.] which Brigaglia himself has almost completely recanted. Zenn tweaked, perhaps inadvertently, Brigaglia’s “several days” to “several weeks” as the duration it took Nigerian troops to dismantle the camp, even as he paraphrased him. See five academics who condemned his theory on al-Qa’ida’s link with Boko Haram and his treatment of sources in Jacob Zenn, “A Primer on Boko Haram Sources and Three Heuristics on al Qaida and Boko Haram in Response to Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, and Alex Thurston,” *Perspective on Terrorism*, Vol. 12, Issue 3, <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2018/issue-3/06---special-correspondence-a-primer-on-boko-haram-sources-and-three-heuristics-on-al-qaida-and-boko-haram-in-response-to-.pdf> (accessed 08/15/2019).

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¹⁴ Anna Borzello, “Tracking down Nigeria’s ‘Taliban’ sect,” *BBC News*, 14 January 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3393963.stm> (accessed 09/14/2019); “Nigeria arrests ‘Taliban-style’ rebels,” *Aljazeera*, January 6, 2004, <https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2004/01/2008410135853209750.html> (accessed 09/15/2019). ~


¹⁵ “Leader of ‘Nigerian Taliban’ Killed In Police Custody,” *Radio Free Europe*, July 31, 2009, https://www.rferl.org/a/Leader_of_Nigerian_Taliban_Killed_In_Police_Custody/1789800.html (accessed 09/15/2019); Robin Dixon, “A Nigeria ‘Taliban’ leader tells of a desire to fight the U.S.,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 2010, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-apr-01-la-fg-nigeria-taliban1-2010apr01-story.html> (accessed 15/09/2019); “White House condemns ‘Nigerian Taliban’ bombings,” *CBS News*, December 26, 2011, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/white-house-condemns-nigerian-taliban-bombings/> (accessed 09/15/2019). ~


¹⁶ Cook, “Boko Haram: A Prognosis,” p.9. It should be noted that Cook cited one Muhammad Iysa of Lagos State university for the sentence in which he questioned the possibility of some members being with the Afghan Taliban. This could have been a mistake on his part. But even if we assume Cook wanted to cite Iysa for the claim itself, he does not clarify the position of his source, his source’s relationship with Boko Haram or where he claimed to have got that information from and reduces the weight of his informant’s allegation to mere speculation. ~

¹⁷ Freedom Onuoha, “Boko Haram and the Evolving Salafi Jihadist Threat in Nigeria,” in Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2014) (ed.). *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Nigeria: African Studies Centre), pp. 15-191, p. 168. ~

- ¹⁸ Andrea Brigaglia (2015). *The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram*, *Diritto e Questioni Pubbliche*, 15(2), pp. 174-201. [↗](#)
- ¹⁹ See for example Jacob Zenn (2017), *Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria: Cases from Boko Haram's Founding, Launch of Jihad and Suicide Bombings*, *Perspective on Terrorism*, Vol. 11, Issue 6, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/666/1326> (accessed 09/15/2019). [↗](#)
- ²⁰ Interviewees in Kanamma include Alhaji Umar Goni (Traditional ruler and Chief Imam) Bakurna Barde (a farmer), Bintumi Kanamma (civil servant). Focused group discussion was conducted with Alhaji Goni Ibrahim (civil servant), Goni Kulu (farmer), Alhaji Mayami (trader) Amadu Tanja (farmer) and Kyari Huwu (trader). Interview conducted February 3, 2019. [↗](#)
- ²¹ Alhaji Umar Goni, February 3, 2019. [↗](#)
- ²² Brigaglia, "The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram," p. 198. All participants of the focussed group discussion agree that in the commune was dismantled in a few hours. [↗](#)
- ²³ Brigaglia, "The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram," p. 198. [↗](#)
- ²⁴ Kassim mentions Zaji Biriri, one of the villages close to Tarmowa but says same is in Tarmuwa Local Government Area. See Kassim, "Boko Haram's Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism," p. 10. It appears that Kassim or his source conflated Tarmowa village which was in Bukarti Development Area (now Yunusari Local Government Area) with Tarmuwa Local Government. [↗](#)
- ²⁵ Audio explanation of Hadhihi, 'AqeedatunawaManhajDa'watina,(Maktabah al-Ghuraba)2ndEdn., 1430 AH) entitled "LittafinHaazihiAqeedatuna available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWfWa2rfsKw> accessed on 06/2/2019. [↗](#)
- ²⁶ The second point has been brilliantly and extensively discussed by Kassim. See Kassim, "Boko Haram's Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism", pp.9-13. [↗](#)
- ²⁷ Interview with Modu Lawan, village head of Zaji-Biriri, about 2 miles from the site, who was member of the local committee that paid two visits to the site to persuade members to leave the site. [↗](#)
- ²⁸ Separate interviews with Kachallah Ngubdo and Lawan Amadu Zai, the traditional ruler of Zai village, Bukarti, February 3, 2019. [↗](#)
- ²⁹ Interview with Lawan Amadu. [↗](#)
- ³⁰ Interview with Kachallah Ngubdo, Bukarti, 02/3/2019. [↗](#)
- ³¹ See International Crisis Group, "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province;" Andrew Walker, *Eat the Heart of the Infidel: The Harrowing of Nigeria and the Rise of Boko Haram* (London: C. Hurst Ltd.) 2016; Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (UK: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd) 2015.
- [↗](#)
- ³² Interview with Kachallah Ngubdo, Bukarti, 02/03/2019 [↗](#)
- ³³ Telephonic interview with the chairman of the ad hoc committee, Alhaji Ibrahim Toshiya, 10/2/2019. [↗](#)
- ³⁴ Al-Tamimi, "Cutting out the tumour from the Khawarij of Shekau..." [↗](#)
- ³⁵ Correspondences between Boko Haram and AQIM released by Nigeria security services show that Boko Haram has received at least two hundred thousand euros from AQIM. See David Cook (trans), "Documents from Advice and Shari'i Instruction by Shaykh Abu al-Hassan Rashid al-Bulaydi to the Fighters in Nigeria," in Abdulbasit Kassim & Michael Nwankpa (ed.), *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*, (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd.) 2018, pp. 209-213. [↗](#)
- ³⁶ Andrea Brigaglia, "The Volatility of Salafi Political Theology, the War on Terror and the Genesis of Boko Haram," p. 198. [↗](#)
- ³⁷ Interview with Abu Harun, Kano, 02/10/2019. [↗](#)
- ³⁸ International Crisis Group, "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," p. 9-23. [↗](#)
- ³⁹ See, for instance Zenn, "Where will Boko Haram go next after ten years of moving around?" *Ibid.* [↗](#)

⁴⁰ “Nigeria arrests ‘Taliban-style’ rebels,” *Aljazeera*, January 6, 2004, <https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2004/01/2008410135853209750.htm> (accessed 09/15/2019). 

⁴¹ For explanation on Darul Islam, see Abdul Raufu Mustapha and Mukhtar U. Bunza “Contemporary Islamic Sects & Groups in Northern Nigeria,” in Abdul Raufu Mustapha (ed.) *Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria* (Rochester, NY, James Currey) 2014, pp. 54-97, p. 77. 

⁴² Abdulbasit Kassim, “History of the Muslims,” in Abdulbasit Kassim & Michael Nwankpa (2018) (ed.). *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*. (C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd. pp. 85-102,) p. 85. 

⁴³ Borzello, “Tracking down Nigeria’s ‘Taleban’ sect.” 

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