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LEADERSHIP TARGETING AS A COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Shisha kemaida shod, tiztarmisha
Broken Glass Becomes Sharper
—Hazara Proverb

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the killing of Osama bin Laden, the founder and leader of al-Qaeda, the *New York Times* quoted an elated President Obama addressing the American public:

Today at my direction, the United States launched a targeted operation against that compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.... After a firefight, they killed Osama bin Laden and took custody of his body. The death of Bin Laden marks the most significant achievement to date in our nation's effort to defeat al-Qaeda.¹

Similarly, the killing of Mohammed Yusuf, the leader of the group generally known as Boko Haram—loosely translated as “Western education is sinful”—was received and announced with a sense of victory by the federal government of Nigeria.² In a statement signed by then minister of information

and national orientation Dora Akunyili, the Nigerian government enthused that “the security agencies should be commended... the death of Mohammed Yusuf, a leader in the mode of Osama Bin Laden, was positive for Nigeria.”³

The extent of the destruction wrought by Boko Haram proves the seriousness of the threat it poses to local and global interests. Since the killing of Mohammed Yusuf by the Nigerian police on July 30/31, 2009, the debate between Ade Adefuye and Jean Herskovits on whether Boko Haram is a threat is now laid to rest especially with the designation of Boko Haram as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the United States on November 4, 2013.⁴ The elation that greeted the announcement of the two deaths raises new questions in the debate between the proponents and critics of “decapitation,” the targeted killing of leaders or prominent figures of terrorist or insurgent organizations. While proponents claim that these killings lead to the structural collapse of terrorist groups, critics insist that they harden their resolve.⁵ Events since the killing of Osama bin Laden and Mohammed Yusuf further fuel the debate, as the two organizations have become more vicious than they were during the lifetime of their respective leaders.

Despite the resolve of the international community to defeat terrorism, the long-term safety and efficacy of many counterterrorism tactics are still debatable.⁶ On one side of the argument are proponents of a full-fledged military confrontation with terrorists, which stems from the conviction that negotiating with terrorists is pointless. It is from this viewpoint that Audrey Kurth Cronin emphasizes the need to crush terrorists because all they want is to destroy what we are.⁷ Also in favor of full-blown military action, Max Boot advocates for collaboration between state and local forces to fight terrorism by recalling the success of the coalition of Sunni tribal fighters and armed forces in pushing al-Qaeda out of Sunni-dominated northwestern Iraq.⁸ However, Karl Vick discourages military confrontation with Islamist terrorists, citing the backlash that trailed the initial success of the US military in their occupation of Afghanistan in 2001, which has left the war on terror with no end in sight.⁹

Counterterrorism measures by the US have included the targeted killing of leaders and prominent members of terrorist organizations, intelligence gathering, and attacking countries allegedly harboring such groups. In responding to the atrocities committed by Boko Haram, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan’s administration initiated a military assault—while

not foreclosing negotiation. However, the administration was inconsistent in its pursuit of both responses. Since assuming office on May 29, 2015, unprecedented progress has been recorded in the fight against Boko Haram by President Muhammadu Buhari's administration.¹⁰ However, the group cannot be described as annihilated given that it still carries out raids and sacks communities.¹¹

This paper examines the implications of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism tactic using as case studies, the killings of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden by the US and Boko Haram leader Mohammed Yusuf by Nigeria. It is based on Alex S. Wilner's method of comparing the number of attacks a group successfully carried out before and after the removal of its leader as a means of ascertaining its weakness, demise, or renewed ferocity due to the death of its leader.¹² This study gives an account of the unprecedented increase in the number of Boko Haram attacks and the high level of fear and attention—both local and international—due to the high-level targets chosen by the group after the killing of Mohammed Yusuf. This is complemented by primary data gathered through semi-structured interviews with selected security operatives who had contact with Yusuf and his successor Abubakar Shekau. For al-Qaeda, data was collected from secondary sources only.

This study begins by summarizing the origin and agenda of violent Islamism, followed by arguments for and against leadership decapitation. Next, it considers accounts of the evolution of al-Qaeda and Boko Haram, their experience of leadership decapitation, and the ferocity of both groups in the aftermath of leadership decapitation. Finally, it examines the overall implications of leadership decapitation for counterterrorism efforts in light of the post-decapitation recovery and increase in reach of both al-Qaeda and Boko Haram. The two cases of leadership decapitation examined in this article are telling cases that invite closer attention to the implications of counterterrorism strategies.¹³

ISLAMISM

Whereas Islam is a faith, Islamism is a politico-religious concept aimed at establishing a just political order based on Sharia, or Islamic law. Among Muslim scholars, some hold that establishing a just political order is "God's command," while others feel it is just a product of reason.¹⁴ A just political order in this context is "one in which Islam is the established religion; the

ruler is a Muslim, and consults with recognized Islamic authorities ... where groups committed to other religions could live safely (as minorities) because they are 'protected' by the Islamic establishment."¹⁵

The seed of Islamism was planted by Hassan al-Banna (1906–49), who established *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn* (Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt in 1928 to project Islamic political ideals in opposition to Western or liberal democracy. Its creed leaves no doubt about its vision: "Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our Leader. The Koran is our constitution. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."¹⁶ A few years after the publication of his ideological doctrine in a pamphlet titled *Toward the Light*, he was assassinated in circumstances that had traces of an action ordered by the Egyptian king. His works electrified a new generation of Islamists in the 1960s and 1970s who were committed to the realization of his vision by all means, that is, "Hakimiyyat Allah" (the global sovereignty of God).¹⁷

Islamism exists within the Sunni and Shiite divisions in Islam. Within Sunni Islamism, there are political Islamists, Islamist missionaries, and Islamist jihadis.¹⁸ The political Islamists desire political reforms through non-violent means, using procedures comparable to liberal democratic concepts. Islamist missionaries are devoted to strengthening *al-Iman* (the faith). Finally, Islamist jihadis can be divided into two main categories: "Jihadi Salafiya" and "Qutbist," named after Sayyid al-Qutb. Qutbism, Wahabbism, Salafism, and Deobandi are all puritan in intent. They are committed to ensuring that Muslims adhere to the literal interpretation of the Koran and the Hadith, and discourage Muslims from accepting the interpretations of the *Ulama* (learned Islamic scholars). Thomas Hegghammer groups the jihadi-salafists into four categories based on their motivations, which could be state-oriented, ummah-oriented, morality-oriented, or sectarian, all of which can be broadly divided into violent and non-violent.¹⁹ Islamism in Nigeria, which has been largely associated with the purification of the religion, began with Sheikh Mahmoud Gumi (d. 1992) and the Izalla movement established in Jos in 1978.

The Violent Islamists

Violent Islamists reason that armed combat, struggle, or war is required to bring about a just political order. This just political order will exist only in the *dar al-salam* (abode of peace), therefore, fighting to ensure people's submission and incorporation into the *dar al-salam* is legitimate.²⁰ The

conviction of violent Islamists is rooted in the argument that verses of the Koran revealed in Medina nullified the ones earlier revealed in Mecca. The superior status conferred on the verses revealed in Medina, also known as “sword verses,” reveals the fundamental source of divergence between the violent and non-violent Islamist philosophy and conviction. Bassam Tibi explains the distinction between the two by pointing out that no Meccan verses used jihad to mean military action; rather it was used to explain efforts made to convert non-Muslims.²¹ But the use of *qital* (war) in describing jihad began after the establishment of the Islamic state in Medina. Therefore, many Muslims, especially social agents with political agendas, rely on the Medinan interpretation of jihad qualified as *qital* for mobilizing people globally.

This has been used to create a narrative that the “West is engaged in a... battle against Islam and Muslims must defend themselves” and that “Islam is under attack and Muslims have an obligation to rise to its defense.”²² Specifically, the violent Islamists, according to David Bertz, believe that:

Islam is under general unjust attack by the Western crusaders led by the United States. Jihadists, whom the West refers to as “terrorists” are defending against the attack. The actions they take in defense of Islam are proportionally just and religiously sanctified. It is the duty of good Muslims to support these actions.²³

The perceived need to “defend” Islam and create “abodes of peace” continues to produce actors such as bin Laden and Yusuf who use these sword verses, along with other texts, to radicalize others.

RATIONALIZING LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION

The assumption that without their leaders, terrorist organizations would become rudderless and fall into disarray leading to their quick extinction continues to produce mixed outcomes, thereby sustaining the debate between proponents and critics of the tactic.

Although there is no consensus, a number of countries still consider leadership decapitation an effective counterterrorism tactic. In addition to charisma, which John Bahnsen describes as the “warrior’s authority,” leaders of terrorist organizations turn their followers into dependents by creating secrecy, coupled with financial and spiritual dependence. Furthermore, as reasoned by Bryan C. Price, terrorist organizations are

hidden and violent, often creating a mythical image of their leaders which makes the replacement of these individuals after their demise very difficult and/or causes the group to splinter. Based on this, Price argues that decapitation tactics are meant to interrupt the terrorist group's operational routine and deter other members from aspiring to a leadership position based on the assumption that they will also fear being killed.²⁴ The fall of a group like the Shining Path in Peru illustrates Steve R. David's argument that hitting at the leadership of an organization reduces its operational capacity and compels it to divert resources and attention to self-protection rather than focusing on attacking.²⁵ Decapitation is also attractive because leaders of terrorist organizations are often directly in charge of monitoring, auditing, and compensating middlemen; punishing members for shirking their duties; and overseeing intra- and inter-group communications. In their absence, proponents of decapitation are further convinced that terrorist organizations will be significantly weakened.²⁶

Apart from leaders of terrorist organizations, individuals crucial to the operations of the group are sometimes targeted. Irrespective of size and ideology, groups that have experienced decapitation have a higher likelihood of withering. Timing is another factor in considering the removal of the leader of a terrorist organization as evidence has shown that groups that experience decapitation at their inception are defeated faster than those that experience it later.²⁷ Furthermore, as a targeted attack, leadership removal does not always require a military invasion or occupation and civilian casualties can be minimal, particularly when the group is located in a remote area.²⁸ Finally, decapitation can substantially deplete a group's skilled personnel in areas such as bomb making, recruitment, indoctrination, and training.²⁹

The US and Israel have both utilized leadership decapitation as a major part of their counterterrorism strategy. Following the killing of Osama bin Laden, the US's actions were viewed by many in the West as justifiable.³⁰ Despite questions about the legality and moral legitimacy of targeted assassinations, the US has expanded its targeted terrorist group decapitation actions since Barack Obama became president. In early 2010, the US government even authorized the lethal targeting of al-Awlaki, a US citizen associated with al-Qaeda.

Former CIA director and counterterrorism advisor to President Obama John Brennan clarifies the country's position thus, "...our unqualified

preference is to only undertake lethal force when we believe that capturing the individual is not feasible.”³¹ Although no governmental official would admit it, “killing is more convenient than capture for both the United States and foreign countries where the strikes occur.”³² The killing of Qutb in Egypt could be interpreted as decapitation, given his status and the assumption that it would weaken the Muslim Brotherhood. In Nigeria, the two instances of leadership decapitation of Islamist terrorist groups were those of Mohammed Marwa and Mohammed Yusuf.

Critics of Decapitation

Critics of decapitation as a counterterrorism tactic cite moral and ethical arguments against killing under any guise. They also argue that it can generate sympathy and serve to increase the attractiveness of terrorist organizations.³³ Irrespective of the forms adopted (assassination, capture, or capture and killing), Aaron Mannes observes that such actions may lead to “greater radicalization of the targeted terrorist group, elimination of possible negotiation partners, and the triggering of retaliatory attacks on soft and hard targets. Decapitation is also abominable because it relies on getting intelligence through treachery.”³⁴

Brian Michael Jenkins warns that in a war of “assassinations, clearly we would be at a disadvantage.”³⁵ Cronin has opined that leadership decapitation might be the opportunity that some members of the group had been waiting for to prove their mettle, which would not have happened without government intervention leading to the death of erstwhile leaders.³⁶ Jenna Jordan’s study of the impact of decapitation on 298 terrorist groups from 1945 to 2004 reveals that it rarely extinguishes religiously-inspired terrorism, which led her to argue that “decapitation is actually counterproductive, particularly for a larger, older, religious or separatist organization” owing to their spiritually-based motivations.³⁷ This stance finds validation in the continued existence of groups such as al-Qaeda and Boko Haram that have lost leaders whose deaths were assumed to be a death-knell for their organizations.³⁸

EMERGENCE AND PERSISTENCE OF AL-QAEDA

The influx of Muslims to Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight the “Communist infidels...become a hero(es)...and die as a martyr” and secure “a desirable afterlife in paradise” led to the formation of an organization named the *Maktab Al-Khadamat* (MAK) in 1984 in the Pakistan-Afghan border city of

Peshawar.³⁹ Members included volunteers welcomed by Dr. Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian religious cleric from Silat Al-Hartia in the Jenin area in the northern West Bank. He left his well-paying job as a university professor at the International Islamic University in Islamabad, where he taught from 1981 to 1986, for Afghanistan, based on the conviction that only violent jihad can bring about a global Ummah of Muslims.⁴⁰ Among the volunteers at Peshawar was Osama bin Laden, a wealthy man from Saudi Arabia interested in fighting as a soldier in the field.⁴¹ Initially, Azzam and bin Laden worked together, with much of the financing coming from bin Laden, until a dispute over resources and strategic direction tore them apart, leading to the establishment of *Al Qaeda al Sulbah* (The Solid Base) on August 11, 1988. Osama bin Laden emerged as its undisputed founder and remained its leader until he was killed.⁴²

From 1988 to 1992, al-Qaeda's immediate concern was the destruction of forces they considered unbelievers and heretics, especially the US and its allies, which they viewed as oppressive, corrupt, and tyrannical. What angered bin Laden most was what he viewed as the "occupation" of two holy places in Saudi Arabia by US troops. He also believed the US was trying to destroy Islam and was aiding Jews in their effort to govern the Arabian Peninsula. He used this to solicit support from the larger Muslim world and to portray the US as an enemy of Muslims.⁴³

With an earlier intent of globalizing the mujahideen (jihadi fighters), which began by tapping into the guerrilla experiences of veterans of the Afghanistan war, al-Qaeda has become a fluid and global network that feeds into existing conflicts in some places and catalyzing anti-American sentiments in others. Its ability to raise funds through seed money and its effective use of information and communication technology made it attractive to young people.⁴⁴ One way in which al-Qaeda uses communication technology to its advantage is by having its own media outlets to propagate its ideology. For example, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) publishes *Inspire* in English and *Sada al-Mulahim* in Arabic.⁴⁵

Prior to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, al-Qaeda operated as a hub in which various nodes of the organization were independently linked to a central headquarters.⁴⁶ Perhaps strategically envisaging the implications of decapitation, al-Qaeda changed to an "all channel" network approach, which allowed for a completely decentralized relationship that hid any central command in the communication process. This kind of decentralized

approach enabled each affiliate to carry out attacks independently.

While bin Laden's hatred for the US was consistent, references to Saudi Arabia declined over time between 1992 and 1998, and al-Qaeda became a full-fledged transnational organization with the formation of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders in 1998.⁴⁷ The focus shifted toward inciting the global Muslim community by citing a verse of the Koran that enjoined fighting unbelievers everywhere, which was a veiled attack on the US and its interests globally. It declared that to "kill the Americans and their allies, both civil and military, is an individual duty for every Muslim who is able, in any country where this is possible." In a statement after 9/11, bin Laden defined al-Qaeda as the representative of Islam and depicted America as crusaders bent on religious war.⁴⁸

Though al-Qaeda's current form might be debatable, its grievances against the US persist. According to Peter Bergen, Bruce Hoffman, and Katherine Tiedemann, "Al Qaeda leaders have said since 9/11 that the United States is owed millions of deaths because of its supposed crimes against Islam."⁴⁹ Now a diversified threat, al-Qaeda and its franchises presently constitute a global source of insecurity. Al-Qaeda's strengths are its ideological influence, especially on other jihadist groups; its ability to provide direction to affiliates across the world; and its apparent preparedness for the exit of bin Laden, with Ayman al-Zawahiri easily stepping in as his successor, enabling continuity in the group's overall direction and the ability to maintain its presence in the media.⁵⁰

However, decapitation cannot be said to have failed entirely in combating al-Qaeda since, for example, it has made the terrorist group aware of the effectiveness of drone attacks against it. The recent death of the Taliban leader Mullah Umar, a strong ally of al-Qaeda, has been touted by some as negatively affecting the group because of the strategic role he played in its attempt to make ISIS subservient to al-Qaeda within the global Pan-Islamist platform.⁵¹ Other issues that might weaken al-Qaeda in the near future include the continued killing of fellow Muslims, which is condemned by the Koran, and the lack of a genuine political ideology beyond the rhetoric of restoring the caliphate.⁵²

Bin Laden: The Mega-Actor of Al-Qaeda

Bin Laden adopted an operational and organizational approach that differed

from that of his predecessors. While the Muslim Brotherhood was badly shaken by the deaths of al-Banna and even Qutb, bin Laden had structured al-Qaeda as a network of franchises. The first training camp in the Jaji area of Afghanistan, for example, was headed by two Egyptian mujahideen, Abu Ubaydah al-Panshiri and Abu Hafis al-Masui, reflecting bin Laden's desire not to be the operational center.⁵³

While he clearly identified the US as the enemy of Muslims and Islam in countries such as Iraq, among others, in a message in 2003, bin Laden listed Nigeria in his category of countries ruled by "unjust and infidel regimes like Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen" and called on Muslims to "break free from the slavery of those regimes who are slaves of America."⁵⁴ At that time, none of these countries he listed was involved in anything like what was occurring in Afghanistan, but each had substantial populations that expressed anti-American sentiments and most were weak, failing, and failed states. As Ulrich Schneckener explains, bin Laden sought countries "whose statehood is severely challenged, but which do not expect a full breakdown of state structures in the medium term."⁵⁵ Nigeria falls into this category given the preponderance of insurgent groups across the geo-political zones of the country.

Just as bin Laden initially provided funds for schools and clinics in Afghanistan, which endeared him to fighters and the local population, his affiliates did similar things. Annette Idler and James Forest have referred to these behavioral patterns as "complementary governance."⁵⁶ While such practices are destructive over time, they initially go a long way toward endearing terrorists to the local population, especially when they provide needed goods and services that the state cannot provide. In addition to pseudo-complimentary governance, bin Laden acquired charisma and respect through his ascetic lifestyle (despite his wealth) as well as his philanthropy and organizational acumen in portraying al-Qaeda as Pan-Islamist. From an organization that had merely 200 core members, a brigade of 122 martyrs, and 700 graduates of its training in late 2001, bin Laden grew al-Qaeda into a global brand through which he became a mega-actor whose menace can be felt and feared everywhere.⁵⁷

Since bin Laden's death, Roman Kalina describes al-Qaeda as now having three elements: a core administrative unit woven around al-Zawahiri, which is responsible for representing and spreading the group's core message; affiliates such as AQIP that use the al-Qaeda brand to pursue local political

goals, such as al-Qaeda's insistence in Iraq that US troops leave the country; and the maintenance of the appearance of a "leaderless jihad," which is what constitutes the most lethal threat to the West.⁵⁸ Al-Qaeda and its affiliates have carried out a number of terrorist actions since 9/11, including the 2004 attack in Madrid and the London bombings of 2005 by British citizens who were funded by credit cards and loans from al-Qaeda. This is not to mention the various other attacks undertaken by individual sympathizers in different parts of the world. Therefore, if al-Qaeda's aim was to become a global franchise, it can be described as successful despite the killing of bin Laden.

Ayman al-Zawahiri: The Able Successor

Akin to a soul mate of bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri's involvement in Islamist struggles dates back to al-Jihad (later known as Egyptian Islamic Jihad), the group responsible for the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981. Before that, he was among those imprisoned for the plot to overthrow Nasser.⁵⁹ A physician and ideologically similar to bin Laden, he became the leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad after being released from prison. By 1983, he had become the international spokesman for the imprisoned Islamist activists in Egypt.⁶⁰ In 1985 he met bin Laden who had a great influence on him.⁶¹ Their joining together also meant a fusion of Muhammad abd al-Salam Faraj's ideology, as understood by Zawahiri, and bin Laden's. Faraj defined jihad as having three layers: "jihad of the nafs (against one's self), jihad against the shaytan (against the devil), and jihad against the disbelievers and hypocrites."⁶² Zawahiri was with bin Laden in Sudan in the early 1990s and grew to become the top operational planner for al-Qaeda. He was also linked to the 1995 bombing of the Egyptian embassy in Pakistan.

Unlike profit-oriented clandestine groups, value-based clandestine groups such as al-Qaeda are generally believed to be susceptible to disorganization in the event of the death of a leader because they usually lack institutionalized codes of succession and are often over-reliant on their leader, who often relies on charisma which cannot be transferred.⁶³ Despite possessing some of these characteristics, al-Qaeda appeared to have a succession plan, seeing the ease with which Ayman al-Zawahiri took over and has continued to manage the organization. Al-Zawahiri has essentially continued where bin Laden left off, and under his watch the group appears to be making gains in places such as North Africa, Nigeria, and Mali, among others.

BOKO HARAM: EMERGENCE AND TRAJECTORY

The history and intervening variables that gave birth to the militant Islamist group Boko Haram—and its transnational dimensions—have been the subject of academic scrutiny.⁶⁴ According to one of my respondents, Boko Haram started around 2000 and initially was led by Abu Umar and Mohammed Ali before Yusuf Ali took over. At various times, they were known as the Nigerian Taliban and later Yusufiyya, or followers of Mohammed Yusuf. Another respondent, in his sixties and from Maiduguri, traced what later metamorphosed into Boko Haram to groups then called Talibans in parts of Borno and Yobe States. Some of the known areas where they were found include Machina, Yusufari, Yunusari, Bade, Nguru, and Geidam communities along Nigeria's border with Niger (all in Yobe), and Abadam Local Government Area in Borno State.

The group also attracted many followers after Daru-Salam, an emergent Islamist commune on the fringes of Niger State, was destroyed by the government in 2010–11. Just as MAK in Afghanistan attracted young educated men such as bin Laden, the members of the Nigerian Talibans were both educated and uneducated young men who wanted to create a community governed by strict adherence to Sharia—away from the rest of society—at their operational base where they planned and initiated attacks. After they were dislodged from their base, they sneaked into Maiduguri—from where they were again expelled—and finally settled in Gwoza on the border between Nigeria and Cameroon.

A Telling Performance

One interviewee, based on an eye-witness account, narrated how a public performance of the name Boko Haram was done to register the group's rejection of Western education:

One day, in the course of his (Mohammed Yusuf's) preaching, which was largely anti-government, he told them that there was no need for Western education, as most youths who obtained degrees, diplomas and certificates, are without jobs...of what use, then, are the certificates, if they could, not fetch them any gainful employment. It was at that point that the youths, on their own, started bringing out their degrees, diplomas, and certificates and began to destroy them by tearing them.

The respondent further recalled that after emerging as a commune, Boko Haram members began constructing their own mosque and underground

bunkers, which people in the neighborhood did not know about, and even attempted constructing an underground tunnel to the Maimalari barracks along Monguno Road—a distance of over five kilometers—to get access to weapons and other armaments. Whenever they ran out of food and money, the leaders sent out *almajiri* (children at Islamic schools in northern Nigeria) to beg. Elderly members were given automatic weapons, especially AK 47s, to rob civilians, which they called *Aikin Allah* (God's work or robbery to further God's work). Based on this finding, the notion that a criminal Boko Haram only emerged after the killing of Mohammed Yusuf ignores the fact that criminality funds insurgency.⁶⁵

Mohammed Yusuf: A Profile

A native of Jakusko in Yobe State, Mohammed Yusuf (1970–2009) entered the world of Salafism in 2002 as a student of Sheikh Jaafar Adam. At the time of his death, he resided in Maiduguri with four wives and twelve children. There is much speculation about other elements of Yusuf's life. According to one source, Yusuf was connected at some point to Ibrahim El Zakzaky's movement. He was said to have joined Abubakar Mujahid, an aide of El Zakzaky, with whom he left for Kano to start Jama'atul Tajdidi Islam (JTI) in the 1990s, and he was later made the *amir* (leader) of the group in Borno State. According to another source, Yusuf and many of those with whom he formed Boko Haram had a prior relationship with a group known as Ahlus Sunna, which was formed by graduates of the University of Medina to spread Wahabism in Nigeria. The group was said to have received encouragement from Sheikh Mahmud Gumi and the Izala movement for the aim of reforming Islam in northern Nigeria.

One informant revealed that Yusuf drew his intellectual inspiration partly from Sheikh Abdullah el-Faisal, formerly known as Trevor William Forrest, who was based in London. Another account holds that Yusuf's philosophy on religion was largely shaped by the work of Wahhabi scholar Bakr bin Abdullah Abu Zayd, who wrote extensively and critically on academic questions, jurisprudence, and religious institutions in Saudi Arabia. Yusuf was reported to have quoted richly from the book *Al-Madaris Al-Alamiyya Al-Ajnabiyya al-istima'riyyawamakhatiruha* (Global, Foreign, and Colonial Schools: Their History and Danger). Another interviewee revealed that Yusuf might have also been influenced by Algerian jihadists who supplied him and his followers with military and ideological training which informed the group's disposition to the government and western education.

From 2003–2009, Boko Haram consolidated and gained local legitimacy and support from the rich, the influential, and the poor, largely owing to Yusuf’s dynamic preaching and his criticism of the federal government and Western education. Yusuf’s rapid rise to prominence continued as he became the Imam of the Muhammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maduguri, where Ja’afar Adam conducted annual public lectures during Ramadan. Owing to his expressed preference for a militant form of Islamism and an aversion for Western ideas, the mosque committee excommunicated him. However, by then, he had gained a reputation as a fiery and daring preacher with whom many of the marginalized in society identified. He relocated to Daggash Mosque where he was also quickly expelled. By this time, conflict between him and Ja’afar was already obvious due to their clashing views on jihad and Western education, which they both expressed in recorded sermons. Amid the conflict between the two of them, disciples of Yusuf carried out two failed assassination attempts on Ja’afar before he was eventually assassinated.⁶⁶ In similar fashion, in September 2004, Yusuf got a dose of his own medicine when a faction separated from his followers around Kanamma in Yobe State, alleging that he was becoming too soft. In 2005, he reached out to them, after which reconciliation was brokered. This was a time when Yusuf’s preaching was gaining unprecedented popularity, and he was hailed everywhere he went due to his criticism of the government.⁶⁷

On June 11, 2009, seventeen members of Boko Haram died during clashes with the police over their refusal to wear helmets while riding motorcycles during a procession to bury one of their members.⁶⁸ In reprisal, the Boko Haram members attacked the Dutsen Tanshi police station in Bauchi on July 26, 2009, where they freed over 800 inmates, most whom were believed to be Boko Haram members. This triggered a wave of violent clashes with security agents across the north and culminated in the arrest and extrajudicial execution of Yusuf and many of the arrested members of the group in police custody in Maiduguri on July 30/31, 2009, making him a martyr and prompting further radicalization of the sect.⁶⁹ Given his hasty execution while he was estranged from then Borno State governor, Ali Modu Sherif, coupled with earlier allegations by Yusuf that a police source informed him of plans to exterminate him on the order of Sherif, members of Boko Haram hold the view that the death of their leader was ordered by Sherif.⁷⁰

The killing of Yusuf marked a turning point in the organization’s tenor, style,

and targets. The increase in the number of deadly attacks carried out by the group is another example that calls into question the validity of the leadership targeting approach. Since then, Boko Haram has gained global attention for attacks on both hard and soft targets of local, national, and international significance.

Boko Haram under Shekau

Following Yusuf's death, Boko Haram became more active, especially with regard to criminal activities and indiscriminate attacks. It could be argued that these events might not have occurred were he still alive. A security operative who I interviewed and who knew the two men (Shekau and Yusuf) during the group's early days bemoaned the killing of Mohammed Yusuf on the grounds that "he was a generous and amiable man who was already coming to lodge complaints and seek clarifications and permission anytime his group (Boko Haram) was going to have a public rally." The respondent recounted a friendly visit paid to Yusuf and how Shekau maintained a stern look throughout the meeting, even refusing to exchange pleasantries with him.

From July 2009 to December 2013, the organization's attacks resulted in large numbers of fatalities and injuries, such as the bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria's federal capital. In addition to these large-scale attacks, the group has also taken responsibility for the killing of a photojournalist and employee of the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), Mr. Zakari Isa, in Maiduguri on October 22, 2011, not to mention other attacks on media outlets and threats to a number of journalists. According to Ibrahim Ishaya, the organization stated that:

We killed him because he was spying on us for Nigerian security authorities. The killing was carefully planned and executed. We have ample evidence...that he was giving vital information to security agencies on our mode of operation that led to the arrest of many of our members. We killed him not because he was a journalist but for his personal misconduct.⁷¹

The non-discriminatory nature of attacks carried out by Boko Haram and the global notoriety it achieved under the leadership of Shekau after the killing of Mohammed Yusuf provides an incentive to re-examine the effectiveness of decapitation.

Membership under Yusuf and Shekau

Under Mohammed Yusuf, my respondents noted that recruitment was largely generated through his preaching, which attracted many artisans and college graduates. During this time, Kaduna State was reportedly a place for weekend relaxation and a safe haven used by the top echelon of the group to plan attacks. Kano State was reportedly a leading spot for recruitment and radicalization. Also, during this period, funds were generated by payments for protection by many wealthy Nigerians who feared attacks and raids. Most individuals who joined Boko Haram under Yusuf were said not to be killers, unlike those brought in by Shekau.

With Shekau in power, becoming a member of Boko Haram has become more competitive. One interviewee revealed that to become an *amir* or to hold a high rank, an individual must have killed his mother, which is equivalent to sixty people, or his father, which is equal to thirty people, or his best friend, which is equal to one hundred people. Some members have recently tried to flee, but they were tracked down and killed as deserters. Also, the group has lost the legitimacy and sympathy it had in Maiduguri when Yusuf was alive.

Life in the Camps under shekau

Violent crime and brutality have defined life in the camp since Shekau took over. According to a woman who escaped after being serially raped while being held hostage, “Boko Haram members perform their own kind of *salat* (prayers) before raping the women held hostage so that the women will conceive a male child who will continue the struggle.” According to the woman, who facilitated the arrest of Boko Haram members at a commercial bank in Maiduguri, “Immediately I saw him in the bank, I quickly went to report and I told the security agents to strip him naked and look for a scar around his genitals for them to know that I was not lying—and they found it, after which four other members were arrested through him.”

Another interviewee revealed what happened in Bama, a village in Borno State where the group perpetrated one of its worst attacks. According to the respondent, “the moment other members heard that soldiers were coming to Bama, they called their “wives” (abducted girls they forcefully married) to them and slaughtered them so as to have someone to welcome them when they arrived in heaven.” Comparatively, Boko Haram acquired

more territories, killed more people and gained more global notoriety under Shekau, which underscores the questionable effectiveness of killing Yusuf.

WHY DECAPITATION HAS NOT ERADICATED BOKO HARAM AND AL-QAEDA

Even though decapitation might work as a counterinsurgency tactic in other instances, Boko Haram and al-Qaeda are exposing the limits of this approach. One reason for this is the transcendental promise of radical Islamism, which partly explains the upsurge in the number of Boko Haram suicide bombers after Yusuf died. Other reasons include the larger ethno-religious and political setting within which these insurgencies have taken place and the sense of alienation from government felt by religious groups at a critical point when they could have been instrumental in denying sympathy to terrorist organizations.

Also, leadership decapitation was relatively easy for non-democratic regimes, but it has come with a host of implications for democracies such as Nigeria and the US. Examples have shown that fear of losing face in the human rights community often constrains democracies from taking decisive actions against terrorist groups and their leaders in their early days. However, by the time decisive actions such as the elimination of their leaders are enacted, such groups have already become embedded in communities, with local and international alliances and sympathizers. For instance, Human Rights Watch and many other human rights groups condemned the killing of Yusuf, among others.

The jubilation of the federal government over the killing of Yusuf ignored the fact that over 800 people were ruthlessly killed by the police with no apologies given afterward. An apology or explanation by President Yar'Adua's administration would have reduced sympathy for Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. The appearance, on YouTube, of the video showing Yusuf's interrogation, torture, and killing, along with others, generated local and international condemnation of the federal government of Nigeria.

Even after Goodluck Jonathan was sworn-in as acting president, getting the unconditional support of the political and religious classes—which could have enabled control of the marketplace of ideas in northern Nigeria—was difficult for Jonathan because his presidency was seen as, “net political loss for the northern Nigerian Hausa–Fulani power bloc.”⁷² The mismanaged

arrest and killing of leaders of terrorist organizations can have adverse repercussions if the government loses influence in shaping public opinion and the perception of its actions in the marketplace of ideas and among the religious, political, and ethnic elites, depending on the slant of the terrorism being confronted. At different times during the administration of former President Jonathan, there were acts of omission and commission by the administration which widened the gulf between the federal government and the political and religious establishment in northern Nigeria. Some felt it was President Jonathan trying to punish the population of the north for not voting for him in the 2011 election. Also, given his close relationship with the Christian community, Muslims across the country felt the government was happy that Muslims were being killed.

At another time, the president said publicly that even in his cabinet there were Boko Haram members. Also, a onetime National Security Adviser was dismissed and died in a helicopter crash shortly after he accused members of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) of being the brains behind Boko Haram. His death was interpreted as punishment for accusing the party despite holding such a highly sensitive position. On several occasions, the Borno Elders Forum accused the president and the then Joint Task Force (JTF) of deliberately killing those they considered "innocent people" under the guise of fighting terrorism.

While all of this went on (2009–2015), Boko Haram under Shekau grew stronger, using frequent references to the killing of Mohammed Yusuf and sharing of the video of his torture and killing to create sympathy for the group. This also alienated the government from residents of the terrorized spaces, some of whom also lost relations (not all of whom were members of Boko Haram).

Therefore, instead of weakening or eradicating Boko Haram, the killing of Mohammed Yusuf has proven to be a medicine worse than the ailment it was intended to cure. Also, despite the death of bin Laden, al-Qaeda grew stronger, serving as franchise for violent extremists across the world. As much as decapitation may at times weaken extremist groups, it sometimes allows for the emergence of more radical individuals, such as Al-Zawahiri and Shekau, who can be even more difficult to control after they have gained years of experience. As predicted by Benjamin Orbach, "If bin Laden was arrested or killed...al-Qa'ida, its distinct terrorist groups, and its cells would not disappear entirely."⁷³ The same could also be said of the killing of

Mohammed Yusuf.

The aftermath of the killing of bin Laden and Yusuf has shown that beyond focusing on the military aspect of counterterrorism and the use of leadership decapitation, it is important for the government to enlist the support of vital segments of the local religious community and the international community. Conscious efforts must also be made to ensure that it is not a knee-jerk response but rather a part of a grand counterterrorism strategy.

In countering terrorism, the military, socio-political, and religious constituencies must be engaged as participants in order to deny terrorists sympathy, safe havens, and legitimacy. This is because irrespective of how regimes choose to carry out counterterrorism, it cannot be a purely military affair. By constantly being in touch with its citizens, the state can make sure its intentions and actions are intelligible when carrying out any counterterrorism measures, regardless of the opposing narratives advanced by terrorist groups.

In addition, informed profiling, scenario building, and sound intelligence regarding likely successors to leaders of terrorist organizations must be taken into consideration before taking out the leaders of such groups. This would help ensure that the intended removal does not become a medicine worse than the ailment it was meant to cure. This has been the case with al-Qaeda and Boko Haram since they suffered decapitation through the targeted removal of their leaders.

NOTES

1. Myers, Steven Lee, and Elisabeth Bumiller, "Obama Calls World 'Safer' after Pakistan Raid," *New York Times*, May 2, 2011.
2. Although the term Boko Haram is used in common parlance, the full name of the terrorist organization is JamaatuAhlil Sunna Lidawatiwal Jihad, which roughly translates to "people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and jihad."
3. Andrew Walker, "Brutal Reality of Nigeria Killing," *BBC News*, July 31, 2009.
4. See Ade Adefuye, "Boko-Haram, a Threat; Fuel Subsidy Removal, a Necessity," *Vanguard*, January 8, 2012; Jean Herskovits, "Boko-Haram Is Not the Problem," *New York Times*, January 2, 2012.
5. Edward Kaplan et al., "What Happened to Suicide Bombings in Israel? Insights from a Terror Stock Model," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 3 (2005): 225-35.
6. Efficacy here entails the capacity of these counterterrorism measures to actually deal a decisive blow.
7. Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security* 31, no. 1. (Summer 2006): 7-48.
8. Max Boot, "Uproot the Enemy: The US Should Send Troops to Uproot ISIS," *Time Magazine*, February 26, 2015.
9. Karl Vick, "No. Don't Take the Bait," *Time Magazine*, February 2015.
10. The progress came as a result of a reorganized counterterrorism architecture and relocation of the command center to the theater of operation. These successes informed the decision to declare the "technical defeat" of Boko Haram on December 23, 2015 by Buhari.
11. Gbemisola Animasawun, "Portents of a Fractured Boko Haram for Nigeria's Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Tactics" in *Understanding Boko Haram: Terrorism and Insurgency in Africa*, eds. James Hentz and Hussein Solomon (New York: Routledge, 2017), 173-187.
12. Alex S. Wilner, "Targeted Killings in Afghanistan: Measuring Coercion and Deterrence in Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no.4 (2010): 307-29.
13. Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New York:

- Cambridge University Press, 2005); Annette Idler and James Forest, "Behavioral Patterns among (Violent) Non-State Actors: A Study of Complementary Governance," *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 4, no. 1 (2015).
14. John Kelsay, "The New Jihad and Islamic Tradition," *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 7, no. 2 (2009): 43.
 15. Kelsay, "The New Jihad and Islamic Tradition," 44–45.
 16. Husain Haqqani and Hillel Fradkin, "Going Back to the Origins," *Journal of Democracy* 19, no.3 (2008):14.
 17. Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History*, (London: Penguin Books, 2009).
 18. International Crisis Group, "Understanding Islamism," Middle-East/North Africa Report No. 37, March 2, 2011.
 19. Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islam," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 244–66.
 20. The abode of peace is a state wherein governance is based on the laws of Allah (Sharia'ah).
 21. Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 56; this was partly because the Muslim population was in the minority, so it would have been unwise to initiate a war. Such Koranic verses as "You have your religion and I have mine" (109:6) were revealed in Mecca, but in Medina after the establishment of the Islamic state, the Koran began explaining instances when jihad can take the form of qital (fighting/ war) but moderated it by stating "You shall not kill—for that is forbidden—except for a just cause" (6:151).
 22. Leuprecht et al., "Winning the Battle but Losing the War? Narrative and Counter-Narratives Strategy," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (2009): 25–35.
 23. David Bertz, "The Virtual Dimension of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no.4 (2008): 520.
 24. Bryan C. Price, "Leadership Decapitation and the End of Terrorist Groups," Policy Brief, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, May 2012.
 25. Jenna Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation," *Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (2009): 719–55; Robert Pape, "When Duty Calls: A Pragmatic Standard of Humanitarian Intervention," *International Security*

- 37, no. 1 (2012): 41–80; Steve R. David, “Fatal Choices: Israel’s Policy of Targeted Killings,” *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* 51, September 2002.
26. Rohan Gunaratna and Aviv Oreg, “Al-Qaeda’s Organizational Structure and Its Evolution,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 12 (2010): 1043–78.
 27. Price, “Leadership Decapitation and the End of Terrorist Groups.”
 28. Morton Boas and Kevin C. Dunn, eds., *African Guerrillas: Raging Against the Machine* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2007).
 29. Daniel Byman, “Do Targeted Killings Work?” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2006.
 30. Alan Dershowitz, “Targeted Killing Vindicated,” *Huffington Post*, May 2, 2011.
 31. Scott Shane, “Targeted Killing Comes to Define War on Terror,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2013.
 32. Shane, “Targeted Killing Comes to Define War on Terror.”
 33. Paul Staniland, “Defeating Transnational Insurgencies: The Best Offense Is a Good Fence,” *Washington Quarterly* 29, no.1 (2006): 21–40.
 34. Aaron Mannes, “Testing the Snake Head Strategy: Does Killing or Capturing Its Leaders Reduce a Terrorist Group’s Activity?” *The Journal of International Policy Solutions* 9 (2008): 40; Michael L. Gross, “Fighting by Other Means in the Mideast: A Critical Analysis of Israel’s Assassination Policy,” *Political Studies* 51, no. 2 (2003): 350–68.
 35. Brian Michael Jenkins, “Should Our Arsenal against Terrorism Include Assassination?” Rand Corporation Paper P-7303, January 1987: 8.
 36. Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
 37. Price, “Leadership Decapitation and the End of Terrorist Groups”; Jordan, “When Heads Roll,” 273; Cronin, “How al-Qaeda Ends.”
 38. From 2006 to 2010, al-Qaeda lost four Chiefs of External Forces, in addition to over a dozen regional generals and its Amir and founder in 2011.
 39. Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns, and Votes Democracy in Dangerous Places* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 139; Benjamin Orbach, “Usama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda: Origins and Doctrines,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5, no. 4 (2001): 56; Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries?”

40. Roman Kalina, "The Future of Al-Qaeda after the Death of Bin Laden: Fighting Terrorism," Master's thesis, Central European University, 2012.
41. Gunaratna and Oreg, "Al-Qaeda's Organizational Structure and Its Evolution."
42. Gunaratna and Oreg, "Al-Qaeda's Organizational Structure and Its Evolution."
43. Orbach, "Usama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda."
44. Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no.1 (2015): 1–22.
45. Zachary Smith, "Caught up in the Local: Al-Qaeda and Transnational Resistance," 2013.
46. Brad McAllister, "Al Qaeda and the Innovative Firm: Demythologizing the Network," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 4 (2004): 302.
47. Shaul Mishal and Maoz Rosenthal, "Al-Qaeda as a Dune Organization: Toward a Typology of Islamic Terrorist Organizations," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 4 (2005): 275–93.
48. Orbach, "Usama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda," 60.
49. Peter Bergen, Bruce Hoffman, and Katherine Tiedemann, "Assessing the Jihadist Terrorist Threat to America and American Interests." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 2 (2011): 67.
50. Bergen, Hoffman, and Tiedemann, "Assessing the Jihadist Terrorist Threat."
51. Barak Mendelsohn, "Al-Qaeda after Omar: Why His Death Could Hurt the Terrorist Group and Empower ISIS," *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, 2015.
52. Smith, "Caught up in the Local"; Bergen, Hoffman, and Tiedemann, "Assessing the Jihadist Terrorist Threat."
53. Kalina, "The Future of Al-Qaeda after the Death of Bin Laden."
54. John Campbell, *Nigeria Dancing on the Brink* (Lanham: Roman and Littlefield, 2011), 42.
55. Ulrich Schneckener, "How Transnational Terrorists Profit from Fragile States," SWP Research Paper No. 51, May 18, 2004: 30.
56. Idler and Forest, "Behavioral Patterns among (Violent) Non-State Actors."

57. Kalina, "The Future of Al-Qaeda after the Death of Bin Laden."
58. Kalina, "The Future of Al-Qaeda after the Death of Bin Laden," 18.
59. Rogan, *The Arabs*.
60. CNN Wire Staff, "Al-Zawahiri has a long history with Osama bin Laden, terror," *CNN.com*, June 16, 2011.
61. Orbach, "Usama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda."
62. Kalina, "The Future of Al-Qaeda after the Death of Bin Laden," 6.
63. Price, "Leadership Decapitation and the End of Terrorist Groups."
64. Gbemisola Animasawun and Luqman Saka, "Causal Analysis of Radical Islamism in Northern Nigeria's Fourth Republic," *African Security Review* 22, no.4 (2013): 216–31.
65. Idler and Forest argue that criminal activities by violent non-state groups serve two functions: they provide funding to sustain such groups and help to entice criminal elements within society into the fold.
66. Olusegun Adeniyi, *Power, Politics and Death: A Front-Row Account of Nigeria under the Late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua* (Lagos: Prestige and THISDAY Books, 2011).
67. Adeniyi, *Power, Politics and Death*.
68. The battle between security agents and Boko Haram drew sympathy for the group from many in Borno who felt that wearing a helmet on top of a turban symbolized placing Western civilization on top of Islam.
69. On the orders of former President Yar'adua, an army operation led by Col. Ben Ahanoto captured Yusuf alive with a bandaged arm—as shown in snapshots taken with camera phones by soldiers—before he was handed over alive to the police in Maiduguri. Things went haywire when pictures of Yusuf riddled with bullets were shown to journalists by the police accompanied by a different narrative by Borno Police Chief Christopher Dega who said that "Yusuf was in a hideout and the forces went there...and there was an exchange of fire....he later couldn't make it."
70. Ali-Modu Sherif, governor of Borno state, 2003–2011 (previously a senator in the botched Third Republic), had a clientelistic relationship with members of the Boko Haram which became strained after he won his second gubernatorial bid.
71. Ibrahim Ishaya, "Boko-Haram Kills Again," *Newswatch*, July 28, 2011.

72. Ebenezer Obadare, "Goodluck the Performer," *Performance Matters* 3, no. 1 (2017): 104.
73. Orbach, "Usama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda," 65.

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