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## Correspondence

### A Response to Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram and al-Qa'ida

by Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, and Alex Thurston

#### Editorial Note

The Editorial Board believes that the competing narratives in the research on Boko Haram (predominantly local vs. strongly influenced from abroad) can and should be debated in a healthy manner. However, upon reflection, the Editors acknowledge that this correspondence criticizing Jacob Zenn's article (from the December 2017 issue of our journal) also contains some allegations regarding Mr. Zenn as a person, detracting from the level of scholarly discourse we strive for in *Perspectives on Terrorism*. In the [June 2018](#) issue of the journal, we provide Mr. Zenn with an opportunity to respond to his critics, focused specifically on how the evidence he has collected supports his analysis. We invite readers to have a look at his evidence and the evidence of his critics and judge for themselves their respective merits.

A recent special issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*, published in December 2017 (Volume 11, Number 6, pp. 174-190), included an article by Jacob Zenn entitled "Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria: Cases from Boko Haram's Founding, Launch of Jihad and Suicide Bombings." (URL: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/666/1326>) The article makes problematic claims that we - as specialists who have done research on *Boko Haram* - believe merit a response.

For us, it is important to respond because we believe crucial perspectives are lost when analysts treat Boko Haram as a mere extension of the global jihadist movement. In particular, analysts may overlook or even downplay local political factors, security force abuses, and the internal logics of insurgencies. Moreover, the narrative that Boko Haram was a close collaborator of *al-Qa'ida* has dangerous implications for policymaking. The policies that have been devised for responding to *al-Qa'ida* are not suitable for responding to Boko Haram, and treating Boko Haram largely through the lens of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency could hurt many more innocent people and exacerbate a grievous humanitarian emergency.

In the debate over Boko Haram's transnational jihadist connections, Zenn has been a key voice with substantial influence. Yet he is not, in our view, completely credible, and so any response to his work should not only respond to the substance of his arguments but should also point out some of the patterns in his writing. "Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria" reflects a broad flaw in Zenn's work, namely a pattern of misusing primary data and distorting other scholars' arguments. Since 2012, Zenn has put forth a one-dimensional narrative about *Boko Haram*. Zenn exaggerates *Boko Haram's* interactions with *al-Qa'ida* and *al-Qa'ida* affiliates while excluding most other dimensions in his analysis. In his body of work,[1] his methods are problematic. He cherry-picks and decontextualizes quotations and data points.[2] He ignores contradictions between sources. [3] Meanwhile, he fails to transparently report the positions and biases of the sources he prefers (sources that are, frequently, either anonymous quotations from Nigerian and foreign intelligence services, or selectively cited jihadist primary sources). Finally, he sometimes fills gaps in the evidence by resorting to speculation. The crucial pivot in much of Zenn's work has been the *Boko Haram* splinter group *Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan*, better known as *Ansaru*, and it is with *Ansaru* that Zenn's work is at its most speculative. In his *Perspectives on Terrorism* article as elsewhere, Zenn attributes sweeping powers to *Ansaru* and its leaders. He positions those figures at the heart of nearly every central event involving *Boko Haram*. But Zenn's claims about *Ansaru* - particularly his repeated assertion that *Ansaru* was reintegrated into *Boko Haram* around 2013 - rests on weak evidence and is not substantiated by the jihadist primary sources he prefers.

Given Zenn's problematic use of evidence, we regard the debate between us and Zenn not simply as an

intellectual disagreement, but as a contest between scholarship and partisanship. As is normal and healthy in an academic sub-field, we have major disagreements with one another over how to interpret evidence related to *Boko Haram*. These disagreements, however, pale in comparison to our objections to Zenn's methods.

We have reason to question Zenn's sincerity and integrity as an analyst. It is not an *ad hominem* attack to point out that a writer exhibits striking and chronic bias. For several of us, the turning point in our understanding of Zenn's aims was his 2014 paper "Exposing and Defeating Boko Haram: Why the West Must Unite to Help Nigeria Defeat Terrorism," published for the conservative British think tank, the Bow Group.[4] The most charitable reading of that paper would regard it as full of poor predictions,[5] paired with ignorant and weakly substantiated allegations. Zenn sought to establish guilt by association for a range of actors, including Hillary Clinton, David Axelrod, current Emir of Kano Muhammadu Sanusi II (Sanusi Lamido Sanusi), and then-candidate and now-President of Nigeria Muhammadu Buhari. A less charitable reading of the paper, and one that seems more convincing to us, would view the paper as an unofficial campaign document for then-President Goodluck Jonathan [6] - which would make the paper, by extension, a blatant display of partisanship if not analysis-for-hire by Zenn. Even if some of Zenn's publications have had more thorough scholarly trappings than the Bow Group paper, we are concerned by ways that Zenn's arguments align with powerful interests in Nigeria (particularly the Nigerian intelligence services' repeated bid to paint *Boko Haram* as a global threat) and in the United States (particularly the Republican Party's effort to demonize and undercut the State Department).

This kind of debate has wider ramifications for the field of security studies. The proportion of non-scholars who publish in security studies journals and teach in security studies programs is higher than in many other academic fields. Non-scholars can bring vital perspectives to academic inquiry, but they can also bring dangerous forms of bias that can have unfortunate policy effects. We hope that this response will encourage reflection on the part of security studies scholars about whose work they consider rigorous and whose they do not.

### ***Rebuttal of Zenn's Central Argument***

We start by responding to Zenn's central argument in his article for *Perspectives on Terrorism*. Zenn "finds Boko Haram to be primarily the result of the individual decisions of militants who sought to engage in a jihad in Nigeria and were empowered to do so because of al-Qaida's and particularly al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) and al-Shabab's funding, training and advice" (p.174). Responding to the work of several authors of this response, Zenn dismisses the idea that *Boko Haram* is a "product of 'multi-dimensional' factors" (p. 174). We reply that Zenn's framing of causality makes a mockery not only of the complexity of *Boko Haram*, but also of the social scientific enterprise in general: since the time of at least Durkheim and Weber, there has been widespread agreement among scholars in many disciplines that every social phenomenon has causes that cannot be reduced to individuals' decisions. Scholarly work on jihadism should take a similarly multi-faceted approach.

Zenn's framing implies that it is only militants who have real agency. And yet when we examine the careers of *Boko Haram* militants in detail, we find that the opportunities they encountered and the obstacles they faced were consistently shaped by other actors' decisions. These include decisions taken by government officials, politicians, security personnel, and non-jihadist Muslim leaders. To give examples: *Boko Haram*'s founder Muhammad Yusuf preached, early in his career, at the Muhammadu Indimi mosque in Maiduguri (built by Muhammadu Indimi, an oil tycoon); at that time, Yusuf was a protégé of a prominent Salafi preacher, Ja'far Mahmud Adam. In 2001, Yusuf was selected to serve on a government-sponsored committee for the implementation of shari'a law in Borno state - this committee reported to the state's then-governor, Mala Kachalla. In 2003, multiple sources have reported that Yusuf struck an explicit or tacit agreement with the challenger in, and eventual winner of, that year's gubernatorial election, Ali Modu Sheriff.[7] All of these figures facilitated Yusuf's early rise. It is absurd to suggest that it was only militants who made consequential decisions amid *Boko Haram*'s emergence.

It is also well documented that the leadership's theological commitments and the interests of their international

supporters are not the only - or even the most important - factors shaping its behavior. The group has often responded pragmatically to Nigerian military and security initiatives by changing its own strategy and tactics to capitalize on new opportunities and alleviate risk. In this context, it is revealing to note that Zenn does not cite past articles in *Perspectives on Terrorism* that argue that *Boko Haram's* focus is primarily local. For example, Zenn does not cite Benjamin Eveslage's 2013 article "Clarifying Boko Haram's Transnational Intentions, Using Content Analysis of Public Statements in 2012" (Volume 7, Issue 5), which demonstrates that in 2012 - one of the high points, according to Zenn, of coordination between Nigerian jihadists and AQIM - "Boko Haram [tended] to express itself in an intrinsically domestic orientation, and as such, transnationalization is unlikely."

If assessing elites' agency and intentions is complicated, Zenn's perspective barely scratches the surface of understanding ordinary *Boko Haram* members' choices. Zenn is silent on such questions, but his framing of militants "empowered because of al-Qaida's...funding, training and advice" strongly implies a top-down model where well-funded Nigerian militants could recruit freely. But in most scholars' field research in northeastern Nigeria, al-Qa'ida, AQIM, and al-Shabab are almost never mentioned. Moreover, the emerging literature on *Boko Haram* defectors and former participants finds that ideological and theological motivations often play a secondary role in the process of "joining" the group and participating in violence. Meanwhile, local concerns (experiences with state violence, insecurity, coercion, and economic incentives) are highly important for motivating ordinary fighters.[8] In interviews with over sixty suspected sect members from 2010 to 2017, one of us (Pérouse de Montclos) found that no interviewee referred to al-Qaeda or any foreign terrorist group as a reason for joining the insurgents. So did a small clique of militants with shadowy alliances dupe and bribe thousands of young men (and dozens, if not hundreds, of women) into joining a Janus-faced movement, as Zenn implies? Or are other explanations needed?

In our own research, we have pointed to structural and multi-dimensional factors to explain how Yusuf could attract a mass following up through his death in 2009, and how the insurgency has endured and grown since then. There is compelling evidence that structural factors such as urbanization helped create the conditions wherein Yusuf could recruit. Zenn dismisses the idea that *Boko Haram* was ever a "mass religious movement," but video evidence of Yusuf's preaching in Maiduguri (whose population grew from an estimated 10,000 in 1910 to over 1,000,000 by the time Yusuf rose to prominence) shows hundreds of young men gathering to listen to him discuss religious questions. We need to think about broad social trends in order to understand how Yusuf's constituency formed.

Moreover, there is compelling evidence that entrenched patterns such as collective punishment have exacerbated and prolonged the insurgency. Zenn has shied away from grappling with the damning and persistent allegations that human rights abuses by the Nigerian security forces (and, increasingly, by the security forces of neighboring countries) have made the crisis worse.[9] These are not abstract factors - they play into specific decisions by the group. When *Boko Haram* attacked the notorious Giwa Barracks detention facility in March 2014 - was this at the direction of *al-Qa'ida*, or was it to avenge and free the hundreds of locals tortured and detained there?

Meanwhile, any explanation of *Boko Haram* must fail if it does not deal with Nigeria's legacy of endemic corruption. Corruption enabled *Boko Haram's* initial rise, by hollowing out popular confidence in the state. Corruption has also detracted from the fight against *Boko Haram*. As much as \$15 billion was stolen from the defense and security budget under the administration of Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2015),[10] and corruption continues to plague counter-*Boko Haram* efforts under the Buhari administration.

Finally, it is worth making a comparison with more careful scholarship that focuses on other jihadist groups with much more clearly documented international affiliations and support than *Boko Haram* (*al-Shabab*, for instance). Such scholarship typically acknowledges the importance of local and regional political, social, and military dynamics in shaping these groups' actions, patterns of recruitment, and strategic goals.[11] Zenn's complete rejection of these factors in the face of documented evidence, comparable cases, and common sense suggests a fundamental lack of intellectual honesty.

### *Zenn's Key Omissions*

In addition to challenging Zenn's central argument, we take issue with how he has framed his article. By adopting "case studies," rather than giving the full chronology of *Boko Haram's* interactions with *al-Qa'ida* and *al-Qa'ida* affiliates, Zenn is able to skip over key episodes that undermine his argument. Most glaringly, Zenn has little to say here - or in the other main writings of his that we could find - about the most important turning point in *Boko Haram's* history, its mass uprising in July 2009 against authorities in northeastern Nigeria.

Here is what Zenn writes in "Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria":

Boko Haram carried out few attacks in Nigeria from 2004 to 2009. However, there was another government crackdown on Boko Haram after Muhammed Yusuf announced in June 2009 that he would soon launch a jihad and a "Chadian extremist with limited ties to al-Qaida" reportedly entered Nigeria to launch an attack on "high profile targets" with Boko Haram. This crackdown in July 2009 killed around 800 Boko Haram members including Yusuf (p. 178).

This framing is inaccurate - or perhaps intentionally misleading. As has been well documented, a series of incidents in 2008-2009 increased tensions between Yusuf and the Nigerian authorities. These included Yusuf's arrest by the State Security Service in November 2008, a clash between a *Boko Haram* funeral procession and the Borno State anti-banditry unit Operation Flush II in June 2009, Yusuf's incendiary sermon "Open Letter to the Federal Government of Nigeria" in June 2009, and *Boko Haram's* mass uprising in July.[12] A dialectic of mutual provocations between *Boko Haram* and Nigerian authorities, at the national and state level, led to the uprising of 2009.

In discussing the background to the 2009 uprising, Zenn gives an extremely distorted version of these events. Zenn implies that Yusuf simply "announced...he would soon launch a jihad" and then suggests that authorities cracked down preemptively (which is wrong). Tellingly, the only source Zenn cites in this paragraph (endnote 37) is an article from an outlet called *African Herald Express*. The link that Zenn provides (<http://www.afran.info/modules/news/article.php?storyid=5884>) is not only dead, it does not even appear in the Internet Archive's cache. Are no other, better sources available? Zenn cites neither Yusuf's sermon, which is available on YouTube, nor any of the numerous credible articles and reports that describe the events of summer 2009 in detail. Such sources demonstrate definitively that these events shaped the choices made by Yusuf and his supporters to launch their uprising. Nor does Zenn even cite the Wikileaks cables referred to in the *African Herald Express* article he links (we cite one such cable below, in footnote 14). If it is one of Zenn's central contentions that "analysis of primary source documents from Boko Haram and al-Qaida also paints a different story about al-Qaida's relationship with Boko Haram at the time of the group's founding than is presented in most of the literature" (p. 175), then why does he fail to cite any primary sources when describing the most pivotal event in *Boko Haram's* history?

The reason, it seems to us, is simple: if Zenn were to argue that *al-Qa'ida* and *AQIM* were uninvolved or only marginally involved in planning or launching the uprising, it would largely discredit his argument that *al-Qa'ida* and *AQIM* definitively shaped *Boko Haram's* actions. And indeed, the bulk of the evidence indicates that there was no involvement by *al-Qa'ida* or *AQIM* in the planning, timing, or execution of the July 2009 uprising. Despite the presence on Yusuf's "Shura Council" of several Nigerians who had international jihadist connections,[13] local Nigerian authorities believed that *al-Qa'ida* had deemed Yusuf "unreliable" well before 2009.[14] Moreover, *AQIM's* reaction to the uprising - expressing condolences, but never mentioning involvement, and showing real ignorance of *Boko Haram's* history, identity, structure, and goals[15] - strongly suggests that *AQIM* was not involved.

If, however, Zenn were to argue that despite this evidence, *al-Qa'ida* and *AQIM* were involved, he would discredit his own arguments in another way - in this instance, he would be indicating that *AQIM* and *al-Qa'ida* were not masterful actors, but rather that they had contributed to Yusuf's bungling of the uprising. Here it is worth noting that not only was the uprising likely sped up by several weeks due to early errors by its plotters, but, more importantly, it resulted in the deaths of Yusuf and many other *Boko Haram* members. From a military

perspective, the uprising was a disaster for the movement.

### **Rebuttal of Zenn's "Cases"**

The question of AQIM and *al-Qa'ida's* impact on *Boko Haram* and of AQIM's strategic sophistication leads us now into the actual "cases" that Zenn presents. In his article, as throughout his work, Zenn has presented failures as successes in order to paint the most distressing possible picture of *al-Qa'ida* and AQIM. Consider the first case – Zenn builds much of his analysis around the figure of Ibrahim Harun - but what did Harun accomplish? Harun was arrested before he could perpetrate any of the terrorist attacks that Zenn describes him plotting. Told from one angle, the story of Harun is the story of Nigeria's close call with a master terrorist. But viewed from another angle, Harun's impact was negligible: a few plots, a few trips, minimal contact with the most influential *Boko Haram* leaders on the ground in northern Nigeria, and then a flight to Libya where he was soon caught.

Zenn's treatment of the early *Boko Haram* also raises questions about his use of evidence - again, not just in this article, but in his broader body of work on *Boko Haram* and *al-Qa'ida's* affiliates. As elsewhere, Zenn tweaks sources so that they fit into a neat argument. Consider this sentence by Zenn: "Al-Qaida in its *al-Risalah* magazine in January 2017 also recognized Muhammed Ali as the Boko Haram founder and said his initial funding came from 'members of al-Qaida residing in the Arabian Peninsula'"(p.176) But here is the full passage:

"Then Allah guided a small number of Mujahidin from among the tribes, whose [sic] who would fight in the Path of Allah against those who disbelieve in Allah without fearing the blame of the blamers. This despite their small numbers and meager equipment and weaponry, their great weakness, inability and incapacity, as well as the lack of support (for them) from the scholars, doctors, and others from among those of whom our blessed Jihad is in need. Thus, they continued on their path under the leadership of the Mujahid brother Abu Abdir-Rahman Muhammad Ali al-Barnawi (ra), after his Shaykh and mentor Abu al-Bara al-Dourawi resigned from performing Jihad and reclined to the Dunya. This was in spite of his striving and exerting much effort to establish a strong (and solid) foundation for Jihad, and reviving the concept thereof in the hearts of our Muslim youth here (in Nigeria) with help and funding from members of al-Qa'idah residing in the Arabian Peninsula (May Allah reward them with good). This is after the traces of Jihad had been wiped out (from Nigeria) for more than two hundred years; however, it is extremely regrettable that such financial support fell into the hands of people who were opposed to Mujahidin." [16]

*Al-Risalah*, then, neither recognizes Ali as *Boko Haram's* founder nor says that the money from al-Qa'ida members ever reached him. It is true that *al-Risalah's* account contradicts other narrations of these events – but this is the point. Evidence about *Boko Haram's* early history is mixed and contradictory, and it is not easy, as Zenn implies, to reconstruct that history on the basis of "document analysis." Revealingly, Zenn must draw selectively from jihadist documents - themselves produced long after the events in question, and which were written in the context of an internal power struggle between *Boko Haram* factions and offshoots in which *al-Risalah's* backers had taken sides - in order to tell the story he wishes to tell. Here we would stress that in security studies circles, jihadist primary sources are often mistakenly credited with a reliability and a coherence that few other fields attribute to their own primary sources. No serious historian of Nazi Germany, for example, would hold up Nazi sources as the sole key to understanding pre-war and war-time developments.

If the issue of funding transfers from *al-Qa'ida* to one individual, Muhammad Ali, is murky, then the issue of what occurred in Yobe State in 2003 is exponentially murkier. Zenn's one-sided account ignores a large mass of evidence that is inconsistent with, or contradicts, his own preferred interpretation. Who were the group of *Boko Haram*-linked individuals at Kanamma, Yobe, who rose up against authorities in December 2003? For Zenn, these individuals - the "Nigerian Taliban" - constituted an *al-Qa'ida* training camp. Yet contemporaneous journalism, leaked cables from the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria, and the present authors' own field research suggests

that the individuals at Kanamma were a heterogeneous group who engaged in activities as diverse as fishing, providing wage labor on nearby farms, and meeting with local authorities. Local informants interviewed by several authors of this response tell a complicated story. To them, the nucleus of the “Nigerian Taliban” were radical students from the University of Maiduguri who had dropped out of school. Some were children of wealthy traders and powerful politicians, but most were of peasant backgrounds from Borno and Yobe states, and even from far away Kogi state. Others associated with the group later were conscripts. For example, Adam Higazi interviewed a villager from the Gwoza area who had been captured by the “Nigerian Taliban” while they were on the run in the Gwoza Hills. He and others were held hostage and made to carry weapons and ammunition and act as guides. The interviewee was rescued by the Nigerian army after a shoot-out in the Gwoza Hills in which several of the “Talibans” were killed.[17] The full picture of what happened at Kanamma will likely never be known, but to depict the Kanamma group as a one-dimensional “jihadist training camp” is simplistic. Here, we would remind the reader that the real question is whether *al-Qa’ida’s* involvement was the decisive factor in making *Boko Haram* and its antecedents lethal - and in this connection, we would remind the reader that the Kanamma uprising was a hasty, poorly planned maneuver that resulted in swift defeat, with leading militants killed in the aftermath and Muhammad Yusuf scurrying off to Saudi Arabia in an effort to save and later rehabilitate himself. Again, either *al-Qa’ida* was peripheral or its involvement was disastrous.

Turning to Zenn’s next “case,” the 2009-2010 period, Zenn draws selectively from the recovered correspondence between *Boko Haram’s* Shekau, AQIM’s ‘Abd al-Malik Droukdel and ‘Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd, and *al-Qa’ida* central. This correspondence has established that AQIM offered training and funds to Boko Haram, but additional context should temper Zenn’s claim that “al-Qaida had a significant impact on Boko Haram...in assisting the group to launch a jihad in Nigeria after Abubakr Shekau became Boko Haram leader in 2009” (p.177).

First, it is worth emphasizing what Zenn only briefly mentions – that whereas Shekau was eager for AQIM’s material assistance, he rejected Droukdel’s advice on strategy. Droukdel explicitly advised Shekau not to declare a jihad, which Shekau did anyway.[18] Second, there is no hard evidence linking *Boko Haram’s* September 2010 attack on a Bauchi prison to the training and the 200,000 Euro transfer (and indeed, no concrete evidence about how and when that money was used) from AQIM to *Boko Haram*, much less to AQIM’s orders. Third, *Boko Haram’s* attacks in 2010 (both before and after the Bauchi incident) included many assassinations in the northeast, micro-incidents that relied on local members’ hyper-local knowledge of where their targets lived and worked. These assassinations concentrated on local politicians, local Muslim leaders, and members of the security services. If AQIM was playing a supporting role, it was not in a position of command and control over *Boko Haram*.

Zenn’s third “case,” on suicide bombings in the Middle Belt, contains inaccuracies and his data would need to be carefully checked. Zenn has not published his data set (see endnote 64) and he does not mention the source of this data or the methods through which he compiled it. Is it from Nigerian media reports? The only suicide bombings he discusses here are the two well-known bombings from summer 2011 in Nigeria’s capital Abuja and a bombing at a church in Madalla on Christmas Day 2011. When it comes to the bombings beyond Abuja and Madalla, can Zenn provide compelling evidence that all of these were suicide bombings? In the city of Jos (Plateau State), for example, there were several suicide bombings from 2012, but more of the bombings (starting on 24 December 2010) were not suicide attacks but involved car bombs or devices left in public places. Can we be sure Zenn has correctly catalogued the bombings in the Middle Belt, discerning which were suicide attacks and which were not? Moreover, some of these attacks were claimed by *Boko Haram*, but can Zenn prove that every attack was carried out by *Boko Haram* or *Ansaru*?

The Middle Belt is a zone that has long experienced periods of inter-communal conflict, and in 2011-2012 the *Boko Haram* insurgency added a new level of uncertainty and mutual suspicion to an already volatile mix of violence and tension. Zenn’s knowledge of this region is highly superficial, as shown by his definition of the Middle Belt (footnote 63): “Nigeria’s ‘Middle Belt,’ which includes Kaduna, Jos (Plateau State), and areas around Abuja, is a region of central Nigeria populated by diverse ethnic groups. It is where majority Muslim

northern Nigeria and majority Christian southern Nigeria meet and where religious clashes have taken place.” Which states does Zenn include in the dataset he claims to have on suicide bombings in the Middle Belt?

There are several problems with Zenn’s understanding of the Middle Belt. First, the geographical coverage of the “Middle Belt” is ambiguous and the term itself is politically contested, so it is important to specify which states or areas of states one is including in the definition. Zenn does not do this. Usually, the Middle Belt includes not only north-central Nigeria, but also parts of the north-west and north-east. The political ideology of the Middle Belt originates from the late 1940s and has a broadly Christian orientation, defined by ethnic minority groups who inhabited the administrative boundaries of the old Northern Region of Nigeria. Contrary to what Zenn claims, it is inaccurate to define the Middle Belt as the meeting point of “majority Muslim northern Nigeria and majority Christian southern Nigeria.” Some Middle Belt leaders sought to break away from the old Northern Region in the 1950s and form a separate region. At different points in time, there have been alliances between minorities in different states of northern Nigeria, including parts of southern Borno, Adamawa, southern Gombe, southern Bauchi, Plateau, southern Kaduna etc. Many considered themselves to be part of the Middle Belt movement. It is misleading to cut out Muslim-Christian relations in the north-east from the wider Middle Belt and to emphasize attacks in the center over those in other parts of northern Nigeria, as Zenn does:

“It was the suicide bombings in the Middle Belt that made Boko Haram a major threat to international targets and to Nigeria’s unity. Nearly half of the suicide bombings in the Middle Belt targeted churches, especially on holidays such as Easter and Christmas, which escalated Muslim-Christian tensions because the Middle Belt is a fault line between Nigeria’s majority Muslim population in the north and majority Christian population in the south” (p.180).

To be accurate, it was *Boko Haram’s* attacks on the federal capital of Abuja that increased the threat level for the international community, especially after the bombing of the UN building in August 2011. If Zenn included the bombings in Abuja as taking place in the Middle Belt that would also be misleading, because it is Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and officially outside any geopolitical zone. The other international targets were not generally in the Middle Belt. Non-Nigerian citizens whom *Boko Haram* or *Ansaru* possibly kidnapped and/or killed, tended to be in areas of the north-west and north-east that would usually be considered outside the Middle Belt. Even with terrible bombings in Jos, Kaduna, FCT, Kano, Bauchi and elsewhere, it was Muslims and Christians in the north-eastern states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa who were by far the worst affected by *Boko Haram* attacks, in terms of the number of fatalities and the number of mosques and churches destroyed.

Contrary to what Zenn implies, bombings in Jos, Kaduna, Bauchi, Yola, Gombe and other towns in northern or central Nigeria - including the Middle Belt - did not threaten Nigerian unity for reasons of there being a metaphorical ‘fault line’ between north and south, but because adherents from different parts of the country were affected in the attacks. The most serious tension was internal between Muslims and Christians in the north, because such conflicts have a history and because *Boko Haram* never successfully attacked the south. What Zenn also omits to mention is the bombings of public spaces such as motor parks and markets, where Muslims and Christians were killed indiscriminately. This happened in Abuja and in different parts of the north, not only in the Middle Belt. In the case of the polarized city of Jos, as well as there being several bombings of churches and other targets in mainly Christian areas, there were subsequently attacks on a mosque and other targets in mainly Muslim areas, in addition to neutral spaces which were mixed. The identity of the attackers was hardly ever revealed and attribution for attacks was not always claimed by *Boko Haram*. However, research in Jos suggests the population on both sides of the communal divide were strongly against *Boko Haram*, which became a common enemy. As elsewhere, Zenn’s analysis is not based on fieldwork or academic knowledge of the places he is writing about, or even good documentary evidence. He relies too heavily on press sources and anonymous quotations from Nigerian intelligence and security officials.

Zenn’s contention that these bombings were primarily the work of *Ansaru* also appears highly speculative. As

discussed above, Zenn has built much of his career around the idea that *Ansaru* was a formidable, elite group of AQIM-linked terrorists. But his writing here and elsewhere inflates the profile of *Ansaru*, a group that only carried out a handful of publicly known attacks before largely fading from view in 2013. Zenn has consistently argued, as he does here, that *Ansaru* reintegrated into *Boko Haram* after the French intervention in Mali in 2013. One of us has dealt critically, elsewhere, with the claims of *Boko Haram* and *Ansaru* training and fighting in Mali.[19] But in any case, Zenn's contention about *Ansaru*'s reintegration into *Boko Haram* is undermined by some of the jihadist sources he cites - the above-mentioned *al-Risalah* essay, for example, makes no mention of any reintegration. That essay evinces a bitterness toward Shekau that had not dimmed by the time of the essay's publication in January 2017. Here is the author of that essay, discussing Shekau:

“He even began killing the best of the Mujahidin from those who had memorized the Qur'an in its entirety, and who were preservers of the Prophetic Ahadith. Brothers such as Shaykh Muhammad I (ra), and before that the brother Khalid al-Barnawy (may Allah free him and all Muslim prisoners) upon whom they opened fire while he was in his car; however, Allah saved him from their plot. Indeed, numerous brothers from among the Mujahidin were remorselessly killed, dozens of whom were accused of being “transgressors”. Many of the Mujahid youth were killed for no reason other than not pledging allegiance to “the Imam”, and which Imam is that? Numerous Mujahidin were separated from their wives for “leaving the Jama'ah”, and which Jama'ah? By the Lord of the Ka'ba, that is what we have seen and witnessed without the slightest exaggeration. Rather, they have committed more than what we have mentioned, that which the mind would find impossible to attribute to a Muslim who fears his Lord, let alone a Mujahid, and that is exactly what happened. We had previously found acceptance between the general masses before they began committing these horrifying actions, like killing the Muslims, plundering their wealth, displacing them and capturing their women in the name of *sabaya* (female prisoners of war).[20]

Could it have been so easy to forgive? Why should Zenn's argument that *Ansaru* reintegrated into *Boko Haram* be accepted, when *Ansaru*'s own leaders never mention such a reintegration and continue to voice hatred for Shekau?

At this juncture it is worth asking how much of a priority *Boko Haram* really was for *al-Qa'ida* or AQIM. Although one could argue that Nigeria represented an alluring prize, one could equally argue that AQIM never cared much for *Boko Haram*. As we have discussed above, *al-Qa'ida*'s and AQIM's support for the early *Boko Haram* was intermittent at best, and AQIM appears to have played no role in *Boko Haram*'s uprising. Moreover, amid its leaders' own arguments with each other in 2012, AQIM never bragged in its internal correspondence about any successes it believed it had achieved vis-à-vis Nigeria. Zenn, attempting to rebut this argument, seems to deliberately obfuscate the relevant chronology: whereas we note the absence of mentions of *Boko Haram* in AQIM's internal correspondence from 2012, as well as the lack of any visible trips by AQIM leaders to northeastern Nigeria after early 2013, Zenn says, “Such ‘developments’ did not ‘enthuse’ AQIM because when *Boko Haram* occupied territory in Nigeria in 2013 some of the group's tactics, such as ‘enslaving’ the kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls, using girls in suicide bombings and burning boys in their school dormitories, were not to the liking of either AQIM or *Ansaru* members who did not rejoin *Boko Haram*” (p.182). It should be borne in mind here that *Boko Haram*'s major attacks on boarding schools began in 2013, and the Chibok kidnapping did not come until April 2014. How can these events explain the lack of mention of *Boko Haram* in AQIM's internal debates - debates about its own effectiveness - in 2012? And why would AQIM leaders not have gravitated toward Nigeria in early 2013, after the fall of their emirate in northern Mali, if they had cared so much about Nigeria? Zenn knows the chronology well, and so to us his explanation here comes across as a deliberate attempt to mislead the non-specialist reader.

Finally, we would note that after years of speculation by Zenn about AQIM-*Boko Haram* connections, all that the primary sources have conclusively shown about the post-2009 period is that some training occurred (the numbers are not yet known), and 200,000 euros may have been transferred. For those analysts, like Zenn, who want to hold up AQIM as the dominant factor in explaining *Boko Haram*'s rise and behavior, the question of why AQIM did not do more for *Boko Haram* should be answered.

We close by noting that Zenn has misrepresented our own scholarship. This, to us, is the least important part of the debate - we are more concerned about Zenn's use of primary sources and evidence. But if we have established here that Zenn manipulates the evidence, then the reader should also beware of how Zenn discusses the secondary literature, and how he distorts chronology to imply that scholars neglected to mention evidence that only became available after their publications appeared. Can it be that the area studies community who has worked on northern Nigeria for years is naïve, while Zenn has found the key to understanding *Boko Haram* through a handful of jihadist documents and a smattering of anonymous quotations in the press? Zenn has been keen to point out instances where we revised some of our early skepticism about *Boko Haram's* interactions with AQIM. But is it not normal scholarly practice to update one's understanding as new evidence emerges? Zenn, in contrast, has had to overlook profound gaps, contradictions, and challenges to his own assertions in order to argue the same thing in 2017 that he argued in 2013. And, to top it off, if the reader remains unconvinced about the problems with Zenn's analysis, we challenge the reader to assess Zenn's record of predictions about *Boko Haram* and Nigeria. None of us claims to have a crystal ball, but neither have we been so egregiously wrong as Zenn - whether it comes to *predicting Boko Haram's* imminent rapprochement with *al-Qa'ida* and the potential for the Malian jihadist leader Hamadou Kouffa to lead a Nigerian-Malian alliance of ethnically Fulani jihadists (a forecast Zenn and a co-author made in 2016),[21] or to Zenn's above-mentioned fear-mongering about the potential for Islamist, "pro-sharia law" administration in Nigeria under Muhammadu Buhari. A consistent predilection to cherry-pick evidence and to make alarmist predictions is the mark not of a scholar, but of a partisan propagandist.

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#### **Notes**

[1] See, for example, “Boko Haram’s International Connections,” *CTC Sentinel* 6:1 (January 2013); URL: <https://ctc.usma.edu/boko-harams-international-connections/>; “Cooperation or Competition: Boko Haram and Ansaru After the Mali Intervention,” *CTC Sentinel* 6:3 (March 2013); “Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria,” *CTC Sentinel* 7:2 (February 2014); “Nigerian Al-Qaedaism,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 11 May 2014; URL: <https://www.hudson.org/research/10172-nigerian-al-qaedaism->; “Boko Haram’s al-Qaeda Affiliation: A Response to ‘Five Myths About Boko Haram,’” *Lawfare*, 1 February 2018; URL: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/boko-harams-al-qaeda-affiliation-response-five-myths-about-boko-haram>; and “Boko Haram’s Conquest for the Caliphate: How Al Qaeda Helped Islamic State Acquire Territory,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35:5, published online 13 March 2018; URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1442141>.

[2] One example comes from “Nigerian Al-Qaedaism,” where Zenn cherry-picks an off-handed reference to Algeria in one of Yusuf’s lectures (which itself mostly concerned supererogatory night prayer) in order to argue that “the influence of Algerian Islamism on Yusuf’s thinking cannot be understated.” If this was so, why did Yusuf not write at length about Algeria in his 2009 manifesto *Hadhihi ‘Aqidatuna wa-Manhaj Da’watina*? Revealingly, Zenn has rarely cited that source, because it would provide almost no support for his argument that Yusuf was tightly linked with al-Qa’ida and its affiliates.

[3] As discussed below, the account by Abu Usamatul Ansary in his “Message from Nigeria” says that money from the Gulf meant for the early Boko Haram never reached the group. But Zenn ignores this contradiction with other sources.

[4] Available at URL: <https://www.bowgroup.org/sites/bowgroup.uat.pleasetest.co.uk/files/Jacob%20Zenn%20Bow%20Group%20Report%20for%2022.7.14.pdf>.

[5] One of Zenn’s predictions, for example (Op. cit., p. 3), was that then-candidate Muhammadu Buhari would run a “pro-Sharia law ‘Muslim-Muslim ticket,’” and would pick former Lagos Governor Bola Tinubu (who is a Muslim by background, but could not be considered an Islamist by any honest and informed observer of Nigerian politics) as his running mate. What actually happened was that Buhari picked a Christian lawyer and part-time Pentecostal pastor, Yemi Osinbajo, as his running mate, and focused his campaign on security and anti-corruption.

[6] Indeed, Zenn approvingly quotes Femi-Fani Kayode, a prominent pro-Jonathan media personality in 2014-2015, to argue that the All Progressives’ Congress (Buhari’s party) was an Islamist party with sympathies for Boko Haram. See Zenn, op.cit., pp. 11-12.

[7] See, for example, International Crisis Group, “Curbing Violence in the Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency,” 3 April 2014, pp. 11-12; URL: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/curbing-violence-in-nigeria-II-the-boko-haram-insurgency.pdf>.

[8] See Mercy Corps, “‘Motivations and Empty Promises’: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth,” April 2016; URL: [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Motivations%20and%20Empty%20Promises\\_Mercy%20Corps\\_Full%20Report.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Motivations%20and%20Empty%20Promises_Mercy%20Corps_Full%20Report.pdf); and United Nations Development Program, “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment,” 2017; URL: <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>.

[9] See, for example, Amnesty International “Stars on Their Shoulders, Blood on Their Hands: War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military,” 2015; URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR4416572015ENGLISH.PDF>.

[10] Eva Anderson and Matthew Page, “Weaponising Transparency: Defence Procurement Reform as a Counterterrorism Strategy in Nigeria,” *Transparency International*, May 2017; URL: [http://ti-defence.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Weaponising\\_Transparency\\_Web.pdf](http://ti-defence.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Weaponising_Transparency_Web.pdf). See also: “Nigeria’s Vice President Says \$15 Billion Stolen in Arms Procurement Fraud,” *Reuters*, 2 May 2016; URL: <https://in.reuters.com/article/nigeria-corruption/nigerias-vice-president-says-15-billion-stolen-in-arms-procurement-fraud-idINKCN0XT1UK>.

[11] See Stig Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013).

[12] All of these incidents are discussed at length in our own work, including the very publications that Zenn cites in his article.

[13] Letter from Abu Muhammad al-Hawsawi et al. to Abu al-Hasan al-Rashid al-Bulaydi, 2011, reproduced in *Nasa’ih wa-Tawjihat Shar’iyya min al-Shaykh Abi al-Hasan Rashid li-Mujahidi Nayjiriya*, edited by Abu al-Nu’man Qutayba al-Shinqiti (Mu’assasat al-Andalus, April 2017), 15;

URL: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/04>

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[14] U.S. Embassy Abuja, leaked cable 09ABUJA2014, “Nigeria: Borno State Residents Not Yet Recovered from Boko Haram Violence,” 4 November 2009; URL: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ABUJA2014\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ABUJA2014_a.html).

[15] Letter from Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd to Abd al-Malik Droukdel, 24 August 2009, recovered at Usama bin Ladin’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and released by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence on 19 January 2017; URL: <https://>

[www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/arabic/Letter%20from%20Abdallah%20Abu%20Zayd%20%E2%80%98Abd-al-Hamid%20to%20Abu%20Mus%E2%80%99ab%20%E2%80%98Abd-al-Wadud%20\(Arabic\).pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/arabic/Letter%20from%20Abdallah%20Abu%20Zayd%20%E2%80%98Abd-al-Hamid%20to%20Abu%20Mus%E2%80%99ab%20%E2%80%98Abd-al-Wadud%20(Arabic).pdf). A somewhat flawed English translation is available at URL: <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20from%20Abdallah%20Abu%20Zayd%20Abd-al-Hamid%20to%20Abu%20Mus%20ab%20Abd-al-Wadud.pdf>.

[16] Abu Usamatul Ansary, "A Message from Nigeria," *Al Risalah* 4 (January 2017):

18–21; URL: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/al-risacc84lah-magazine-4.pdf>.

[17] Interview in Gwoza town, 9 September 2012.

[18] Letter from 'Abd al-Malik Droukdel to Boko Haram, September 2009, reproduced in *Nasa'ih wa-Tawjih*

*Shar'iyah min al-Shaykh Abi al-Hasan Rashid li-Mujahidi Nayjiriya*, 4.

[19] Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine, « Du Nigeria au Maghreb : le chaînon manquant entre Boko Haram et Al-Qaïda », *Maghreb-Machrek* n°222, 2015, pp.111-122.

[20] Ansary, "Message from Nigeria", 21.

[21] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Buyer's Remorse," *Foreign Policy*, 20 June 2016; URL: <http://foreign-policy.com/2016/06/20/boko-harams-buyers-remorse/>.