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Boko Haram and “Sahelistan” Terrorism Narratives

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Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos

The narratives of “Sahelistan” terrorism reveal a degree of historical myopia. In the case of Boko Haram, a jihadist sect in northeastern Nigeria, these narratives ignore ancient rivalries between the Borno Empire and the Sokoto Caliphate. Furthermore, narratives of modern terrorism tend to place ancient episodes of rebellion under the banner of radical Islam. Such narratives situate contemporary jihad within a global perspective while ignoring the insurgents’ local context. In response, this article deconstructs representation of the ancien peril of Mahdism or the contemporary terrorism using Rabih Fadlallah and Sheikh Hayat as examples. The author analyzes repetitions and differences between insurgencies to explore Islam’s profound changes in Borno State.

Keywords: Nigeria – Boko Haram – Jihad – Terrorism – Mahdism – Sahelistan – Borno State

In recent years, militarized and globalized representations have characterized the Sahel. For example, in 2014, the French Army launched Operation Barkhane; the name itself comes from a dune shaped like an elongated crescent and implicitly refers to the “terror crescent” and “arc of crisis.” Even though Operation Barkhane covers only five Francophone countries in the region, it contributes to building a narrative of jihadism in “Sahelistan,” the name given to the area that runs from Mauritania through Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea to Somalia (Laurent, 2013). Government officials are not the only ones guilty of contributing to this narrative. Some in the media, afflicted with historical myopia, present current regional threats without a historical context, which implies that violent insurgencies only recently developed under the banner of radical Islam with rebels running rampant all over the Sahel and their leaders holding territory through the use of great force. When reporting in the heat of the battle, journalists and soldiers may understandably show no interest in past conflicts. However, the problem lies in their haste to conflate disparate issues: this leads to analytical errors and even self-fulfilling prophecies about the internationalization of

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Islamic protest. Many strategists, in an effort to justify their focus on the terrorist threat, ignore long-standing local conflicts. Instead, observers systematically situate these conflicts within the perspective of a global jihad linked to Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Mali.

The case of Boko Haram ("Western education is a sin") clearly illustrates this approach. The sect, currently the target of a coalition of troops hailing from Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, was founded in Maiduguri by Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau assumed leadership in 2009. Boko Haram, also known by its true name, *Jama'atu Ahl is-Sunnah Lida'awati Wal Jihad* ("People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for the Propagation of Islam and Jihad"), has deep roots in Kanuri territory in northeastern Nigeria's Borno State. Unlike al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram has not extended its influence to an overseas diaspora (Pérouse de Montclos, 2014a; 2014b), nor has the group creating operational ties to al-Qaeda and ISIS networks, despite dramatic gestures and thundering pronouncements. Thus, Boko Haram's origin and evolution suggests that we need to use a historical lens to understand why the insurgency failed to expand to northwestern Nigeria and why it could not bridge the divide between the former Borno Empire and the Sokoto Caliphate.[1] In practice, the group's followers have followed a path through historic rebel hideouts and strongholds. Dikwa, for instance, the capital of the notorious warlord Rabih Fadlallah from 1893, was taken and lost by Shekau's men several times, and the Mandara mountains on Cameroon's borders, whose inhabitants resisted Fulani jihadists from Adamawa in the 1820s, have also provided refuge (Barkindo, 1989; Njeuma, 2012).

Jihad in the Sahel: a history of many sects

Historically, Africa's Sahel region has seen many insurgencies irrupt under the banner of Islam, even before colonization. Examples include Usman dan Fodio's jihad in Nigeria, begun in 1804; Muhammad Ahmad's Mahdist revolt in Sudan, begun in 1881; the rebellion of Mohammed Abdullah Hassan (whom the British called the "Mad Mullah") in British Somaliland in 1920; and the Tuareg uprising of 1917, which had links to the holy war of Libya's Senussiyya. No country in the region was spared; insurgencies broke out from the Red Sea to the Atlantic shores of West Sahara, where around 1898, Sheikh Ma al-Aynayn issued a call to jihad from his Smara *ribat* (encampment) against colonizers. The Koran has often provided the banner and moral foundation for rebellions against corrupt and impious rulers: tribal authorities and colonizers in the past: and post-independence governments today.

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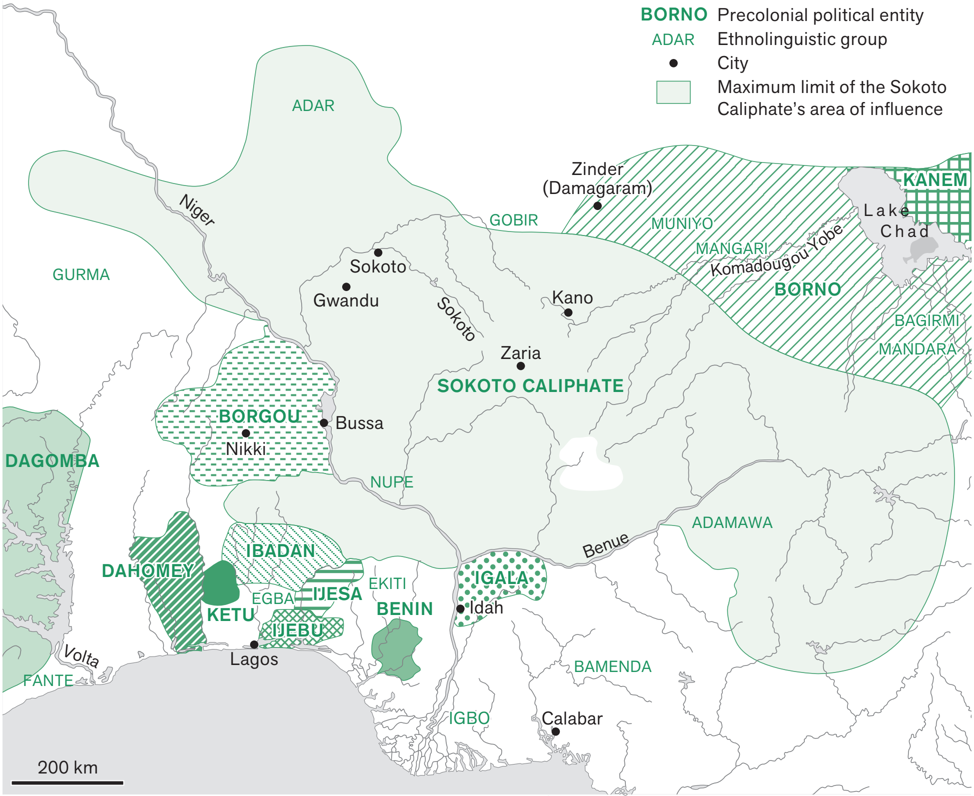
[1] This article does not intend to study the sect's genesis in detail. For that, please refer to my other works, based on fieldwork conducted in northern Nigeria since 1988 and focused on Boko Haram since 2005 (Pérouse de Montclos, 2012; 2015a).

The Kanem-Borno Empire and the Sokoto Caliphate in the 19th century

Two competing Islamic theocracies


BORNO Precolonial political entity
ADAR Ethnolinguistic group
● City
Maximum limit of the Sokoto Caliphate's area of influence
ADAR
Niger
GURMA
GOBIR
Zinder (Damagaram)
MUNIYO
MANGARI
Komadougou-Yobe
KANEM
Lake Chad
BORNO
BAGIRMI
MANDARA
Sokoto
Gwandu
Sokoto
Kano
Zaria
SOKOTO CALIPHATE
BORGOU
Nikki
Bussa
DAGOMBA
NUPE
ADAMAWA
Benue
IBADAN
DAHOMEY
KETU
EGBA
IJESA
EKITI
BENIN
IGALA
Idah
IJEBU
Lagos
Volta
FANTE
BAMENDA
IGBO
Calabar
200 km

Sources : Lovejoy (2013); Hérodote (2015, p. 80) ; Géopolitique du Nigéria (2015): Édigraphie (2016).

At the beginning of the 19th century, the sultan of Borno refused to join the jihad of Usman Dan Fodio, a Fulani who founded his caliphate's capital at Sokoto in Hausaland. Thus, today Boko Haram's Kanuri rebels prefer to refer to his Islamic state, yet they operate in Borno State. Rabih Fadlallah, a jihadist killed by the French in 1900, finally brought down Borno's "decadent" monarchy.

Édigraphie, 01/2016.

Islam spread throughout the Sahel rather by trade and preaching, than by war and territorial conquest. It often accommodated pre-existing authorities, as seen, for example, in Mali and Guinea towards the 13th century, with Hajj Salim Suware's quietist tradition (Sanneh, 1976). Sufi hermits and theologians who favored the separation of religion and state even decided to withdraw from public life, criticizing those *imans* (Muslim preachers), *qadi* (Koranic judges), and *wazirs* (viziers) willing to meddle in urban affairs. According to Nehemia Levtzion (1978, p. 334), these clerics avoided participating in wars; thus, they benefited from a form of immunity that, in conjunction with their divine aura and magical protections, allowed them to travel with caravans and cross the front lines without problems.

However, Islam also drove political and military reform movements via *mujaddid* (reformists), such as the Qadiri theologian, Abd al-Karim al-Maghili;

his manual of good governance served as a model constitution in Kano and in Katsina in the 15th century (Batrān, 1973; Hiskett, 1962; Hodgkin, 1976). Al-Maghili, an intransigent fanatic, perfectly embodied the radical Islamist whom we would now label a "terrorist." Born into a Berber family in northwestern Algeria, al-Maghili called for his followers to kill all infidels, Christians and especially Jews: he had the Jews of Tuat massacred around 1492.

As colorful as Shekau when he mocked France's President François Hollande as a homosexual, Abd al-Karim al-Maghili chastised the sultan of Fez, comparing his palace to latrines because the sultan was too accommodating to *dhimmi* (non-Muslims). Just like the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in the early 2000s, al-Maghili was chased out of Algeria and found refuge in the Sahel in Niger's Air Mountains. Expelled from there, al-Maghili went to Kano, Katsina, and Gao, where he was nicknamed "al-Baghdadi," just like the self-proclaimed caliphate of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) today.

At times, precolonial revolutionary Islam actually governed proto-states, such as the Sokoto Caliphate in Nigeria and the Kingdom of El Hadj Umar Tall in Senegal. In this regard, we must differentiate jihadist revolts according to their ideological ambition, political influence, and geographical scope. Strictly speaking, any succession war in a Muslim country could be carried out in the name of Islam. Many jihadist revolts left no trace and did not survive their leaders' execution, including that of Mallam Maizannah in the Nupe area in 1902, and Saybu dan Makafo "Isa" in Satiru near Sokoto in 1906. Anthropologist Murray Last (1974, p. 3) argues for prioritizing the study of reform movements that aimed at the entire polity and from there, that aimed to build religious states, such as the Sokoto Caliphate. Paradoxically, although highly mobile pastoral groups established this caliphate, they were among the least likely to settle within sedentary power structures.

This shows that some past Islamist rebellions had much larger geographical scope and deeper social roots than do contemporary uprisings. Around 1830, the Sokoto Caliphate, built on Fulani networks, extended as far as the Massina Empire in Mopti State under Seku Amadu. It lasted until British colonization began in 1903. The caliphate's Fulani leaders did not end social injustice, élite corruption, and Muslim populace subservience. However, they proved they could govern by unifying laws and federating very different groups under the aegis of Islam. From a base in Fouta Djalon, the El Hadj Umar Tall caliphate, the Toucouleur Empire's Tijani founder initiated the formation of professional jihadist armies; he attacked and seized non-contiguous territories, the Bambara kingdoms of Kaarta near Kayes in 1856, and Ségou in 1861. By comparison, the rebellions of al-Shabaab in Somalia, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali, and Boko Haram in Nigeria appear much more geographically and temporally limited. These groups have controlled territories for short periods and never succeeded in developing true state-like entities with lasting administrations. For example, Boko Haram divided the *ummah* (believer community) and restricted Muslim religious practices by encouraging the authorities to increase surveillance of sermons and prohibiting women from wearing veils; both measures were aimed at preventing suicide attacks.

New levels of violence. Beyond these geographical and temporal considerations, "Sahelistan" terrorism narratives rest on the dramatization of violence that supposedly has reached unprecedented levels. In July 2013 in Bamako, during Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's inauguration, President François Hollande justified France's military incursion in Mali by claiming falsely that Islamists who controlled the north in 2012 had massacred women and children.[2] Since the 2001 World Trade Center attack in New York, jihadist terrorism has claimed relatively few victims, compared with wars, everyday crime, and especially accidents. Africa has far more serious health security problems than terrorism; available data, however debatable, counts fewer than 4,000 worldwide deaths from terrorist attacks in 2013; three quarters of victims and targets were local.[3] Clearly, we should keep deadly terrorist attacks in perspective. Ulrich Beck argues that the real global threat dates to 1945—not 2001—when nuclear weapon use eliminated borders, refuges, and social distinctions (Beck, 2008).

The construction of "Sahelistan" conflict narratives also draws on a vision of transnational jihadism; according to many Anglo-American authors, it greatly differs from its secular terrorist antecedents; thus, it proves to be more dangerous. Radical Islam's fighters deploy only rudimentary combat means; a doctrine rather than revolutionary technology drives them (Ranstorp, 1996; Laqueur, 1999; Juergensmeyer, 2000; Rapoport, 1984). These anti-modernity fighters want to return to an idealized, backward-looking, anti-democratic past. Their religious fanaticism, indoctrination, and self-delusion support a sectarian and Manichean world view. Finally, their sense of sacrifice and penchant for the apocalypse sanctify violence, rendering them indifferent to negotiating a pragmatic compromise.

Such characteristics are not specific to jihadist groups; anarchist nihilists at the beginning of the 20th century and Marxist guerrillas advocated for a cultural revolution and return to the land. Therefore, some scholars challenge the idea that today's Islamist or millenarian terrorism may be more destructive because it wants to destroy all society rather than merely use violence to defend a political cause. For example, Hamas and Hezbollah have killed fewer than their secular predecessors: the Shining Path; Tamil Tigers; Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK); or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (Gunning and Jackson, 2011, p. 378).

In the Sahel, the visual dramatization of the plight of terrorism victims has exacerbated the hostage issue; heavily covered by the media because its episodes are full of suspense, unexpected turns and a possibly successful conclusion, hostage takings dramatize the Islamists' atrocities. Laurent Fabius, the French minister of foreign affairs, and numerous legislators claimed that hostage-takers have primarily targeted French citizens in Africa, capturing 94 French out of 142 of all nationalities in 1997-2012; the French officials used this "sad distinction" to justify troop deployments (Lorgeoux and Bockel, 2013, p. 241). However, scholars estimate that fewer than 300 Westerners count among the 10,000 to 15,000 people kidnapped annually worldwide (Yun, 2008, cited in Dolnik, 2013, p. 232). Following Serge Lazarevic's liberation in Mali in 2014, French authorities suddenly announced there were no more French hostages in the world. In any case, kidnapping is not new in Africa. Already in the 1970s and 1980s, various insurgent groups active in the Sahel—from Sudan to Western Sahara, including Chad—kidnapped numerous French citizens, such as Françoise Claustre, and even executed some of them. In Mauritania, the Polisario Front kidnapped engineers working in the Zouérat mine; this led to a French military intervention from December 1977 to July 1978 (see Box 1).

Box 1 – Hostage-taking: an old story

In Africa, jihadists are not the only one carrying out kidnappings. In general, heavy media coverage focuses only on Westerners; journalists barely cover the fate of locals. In countries harmed by the slave trade, raids and the sales of captives are old problems, criminalized by the colonial justice apparatus and post-independence governments. The Cameroon-Nigeria border area near Lake Chad is a prime location. Locals, targeted today by Boko Haram, were already the victims of hostage-taking by *zargina* (highwaymen); their name comes from the *azraq* (blue) in scarves they use for disguise.[4] The kidnapping industry attracted international media coverage with the taking of a French family, the Moulin-Fourniers in 2013, but it has developed and modernized because of a combination of several factors.

In the 1970s and 1980s, drought impoverished the region's livestock herders, fueling banditry and Chad's civil wars propagated numerous weapons and defeated fighters. Even before mobile telephones, technology in the form of motor vehicles facilitated long-distance travel and quick border-crossings to escape pursuit and carry off booty and hostages.[5] Furthermore, the monetization of the economy led the Mbororo, Fulani herders, to use banks to avoid traveling with large sums of cash; this, in turn, led to highwaymen kidnapping

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[2] On January 24, 2012, disarmed Malian soldiers were massacred at Aguelhok; most observers suspect the perpetrators were Tuareg separatists from the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), rather than Islamists. See President François Hollande's September 19, 2013 speech: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4zRlvjhHig .

[3] The RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents recorded 2,614 victims from 522 attacks against local targets (73%) and international targets (27%) between 1997–2012. Since then, the term "terrorist" has been applied to all kinds of insurgent groups. During 2013, a UN expert recorded 3,398 people killed in 342 terrorist incidents; 2,400 died in North Africa and the Sahel (Le Monde, 2014, p. 2).

[4] Already in 1935 in the Dikwa region, the British deplored a wave of child kidnappings by horsemen who operated in broad daylight dressed in white (Hogben and Greene, 1966).

[5] See Pérouse de Montclos (2015b) on the strategic role of porous borders; their demarcation was important to colonial police forces, but not to local populations.

families and demanding ransoms. The number of such cases has increased; over a ten-year period, ransoms, initially about CFA 1 million (USD 1,700) per child, climbed to CFA 100 million (USD 170,000) for 20 hostages by the end of 2000 (Issa, 2006).[6]

At the same time, banditry became professionalized by crossing ethnic lines. In the past, non-Muslims targeted Mbororos, kidnapped children, mutilated men, and raided livestock; thus, they resisted domination by the Fulani conquerors and jihadists from Adamawa, in what is now Nigeria (Issa and Ngoyoum, 2009). However, this situation has now changed; today's highwaymen assemble groups of bandits from all backgrounds even as they continue to enjoy the complicity of local leaders; the latter help hide hostages to make up for income lost after Cameroon converted them into government functionaries in 1977 and they lost their power to tax. The best proof of this: the highwaymen's heirs now operate without masks because, as strangers to the region, they no longer fear being recognized and identified by neighbors.

Paradoxically, the French military began Operation Serval in northern Mali in January 2013 to oust Islamic militants, when the number of Westerners kidnapped in the Sahel was declining (Laremont, 2011; Guidère, 2011). French troop deployment was obviously going to endanger hostages held by AQIM; earlier attempts to liberate them by force had ended in failure.[7] French officials used the hostages to justify Operation Serval; they also claimed that they needed to restore Mali's sovereignty and rid the region of a scourge, one that could reach Europe and thus threaten "world peace," to use terms from Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter that authorizes foreign military interventions. Officials found it important to globalize the Islamist peril by connecting it to an "arc of crisis" likely to set the entire Sahel ablaze. However, the media often forgot certain geographic limits: unlike Afghanistan's Taliban in 2001, AQIM fighters and their allies had never perpetrated terrorist attacks in the West. Nevertheless, the prophecy was that they would or could occur in the future in response to French military ground and air operations from Mali to Somalia.

Terrorism narratives: arc of crisis, terror crescent and the domino theory. In constructing narratives of "Sahelistan" terrorism, officials and journalists advance a third main argument: the region's various jihadist groups have global ambitions, work together, and would destabilize the entire region through a domino effect, as in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam when communists took control of Saigon in 1975. The concept of arc of crisis has projected an image of interconnected conflicts, or even strategic coordination by a terrorist hotbed and central command located in southern Libya. Thus, it appeared that Boko Haram in Nigeria, AQIM in Mali, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) from Mauritania all belonged to one "Islamist International."

Such conflation comes easily, since these groups often bear similar names, particularly *Ansar* (helpers), which is a generic term related to Mahdism as much as to Salafism; it refers to those who came to the rescue of the Prophet Muhammed in Medina in opposition to *Muhajirun* (emigrants) from Mecca. Today, plenty of *Ansar* groups abound, such as the *Ansar Bait al-Maqdis* in the Sinai, or Boko Haram dissidents in Nigeria. Similarly, there is the *Jamaat Ansar al-Muslimin Fi Bilad al-Sudan*, and homonymous organizations, such as *Ansar al-Sharia* in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, or the Tuareg fighters of *Ansar Dine*, led by Iyad ag Ghali, in Mali; the latter have nothing to do with the peaceful doctrines and founders of the *Ansar ud-Deen* Society in Lagos or the *Ansar Dine* Brotherhood, led by Sheikh Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara in Bamako.

However, to analyze radical Islam's evolution in the Sahel with a transnational lens, we need to distinguish between groups sharing the same ideology and strategic relations, not just logistical links for weapons supply or bomb-making training. In the Sahel, only AQIM and al-Shabaab have declared allegiance to al-Qaeda, concluding alliances of convenience that are more or less durable with other Islamist organizations. In the "arc of crisis," Boko Haram appears to be the missing link of a "Jihadist International" looking in the direction of tropical Africa. The group's leaders have never declared allegiance to al-Qaeda and, apart from some individual contacts, have never coordinated with groups claiming Osama bin Laden's mantle (Pérouse de Montclos, 2014: 2015c). At the beginning of 2015, Boko Haram's announced support for ISIL clearly showed the former's weakness and fragmentation; many Boko Haram members remain faithful to Mohammed Yusuf's original teachings. The sect's trajectory, doctrinal heterodoxy, and messianic ambitions demonstrate the power of local insurgencies, just as earlier Mahdist and Millenarian rebellions did. Historians of Islam have taken care to distinguish these earlier rebellions by noting whether they were purely endogenous, or whether, on the contrary, they had roots in a Sudanese model of revolt (Saaed, 1992).

Islam in Borno State: a retrospective view. Using a historian's point of view, we will analyze further the political, economic, and social contexts that allowed Boko Haram to expand. The Kanuri pride themselves on having been the first Muslims in what is now Nigeria since the 11th century. Historically, their empire went beyond present-day borders into northern Cameroon, southern Chad, and Niger. Kanuri identity stems from an Islamic culture led by *Mai* (kings); the latter, like Hausa emirs, were political and military leaders as well as spiritual authorities—the commanders of the faithful. Before colonization, the Kanem-Borno kingdom also boasted its religious influence, one spread by an itinerant court, Kanuri nobles, scholars, and

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6. See also Seignobos (2011) and Issa (2010).

7. It is unclear whether Michel Germaneau, Antoine de Léocour, and Vincent Delory, kidnapped in Niger in 2010 and 2011, were executed by their abductors or killed by the French army when soldiers opened fire.

calligraphers; the latter were so well-respected that copies of their Korans sold in distant Libya.[8]

To a certain extent, this prestige protected the region from disturbances that, under the banner of Islam, troubled the Hausa region, now northwest Nigeria. The Borno king refused to support a call to jihad by a Fulani, Usman Dan Fodio; beginning in 1804, his jihad led to the creation of a Fula-dominated caliphate based in Sokoto. In the ensuing doctrinal debates, the king argued that he knew everything about Islam. On this occasion, he received support from a Fezzan-born and Tripoli-educated theologian, Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi; the latter ended up seizing power from the ruins of the old Saifawa dynasty in the 1820s (Brenner, 1973; 1992). The Kanem-Borno kingdom repelled Fulani attacks with the assistance of the region's Arab merchants and military reinforcements sent by Fezzan's governor from distant Libya. After Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi died in 1837, his descendants became the empire's sole leaders; beginning in 1846, they simultaneously held the Kanuri titles of *Shehu* (sheikh) and *Mai* (king).[9]

Subsequently, the Kanemi dynasty also refused to answer the Sudanese Mahdi's 1890 call to fight infidels. On the contrary, the sheikh publicly condemned the doctrinal deviance of the "dervishes" and imprisoned their messengers (Biobaku and Al-Hajj, 1966). He particularly opposed the notorious warlord Rabih Fadlallah, prohibiting any arms or ammunition sales to him; however, the sheikh could not prevent smuggling. In the end, the rebels seized power in Borno in 1893. This troubled period shows that the region has never been completely free from raids and war, especially in the neighboring Bagirmi Kingdom, in northern Cameroon (Reyna, 1990). However, the Fadlallah episode also reveals the ambivalence of a tolerant, centuries-old traditional Islam that could preserve the Borno Kingdom from revolutionary temptations on the one hand, while designating it as a desirable target for fundamentalists on the other. At the end of the 1990s, because Maiduguri had resisted Salafism, the city attracted the most extremist preachers of the so-called Izala Society "eradicators," including sheikhs Muhammad Auwal Adam Albani and Adam Mahmud Jaafar; one of the latter's students, Mohammed Yusuf, founded Boko Haram.

In retrospect, the sect's radicalization does seem aberrant, since it emerged from what was one of Nigeria's most peaceful outer regions, at least until the 2000s; Borno State's slogan, "Home of Peace," still adorns local license plates. Even during colonization, the British did not need to fight the King of Borno's court to conclude a non-aggression pact. On the contrary, the king took advantage of the Europeans' arrival to restore the Kanemi dynasty, which Fadlallah had overthrown in 1893. The British even went as far as to kidnap the title holder, Shehu Garbai, from the other side of the border at Dikwa to install a new sheikh in 1902; at the time, Dikwa was in German territory under French control (Hiribarren, 2013)! During World War II, the Maiduguri airport served as a rear base for British military operations in Libya. The passing and discreet presence of Western troops did not even slightly disturb the equilibrium of a society preserved from the "torments" of modernity by the indirect rule system that London had installed. A colonial officer stationed in Borno State in the 1940s and 1950s, Rex Niven, recalls it as a happy time when the trip to Maiduguri was as "romantic" as the road to Samarkand (Niven, 1982, p. 86)! The railroad did not reach Maiduguri until 1955, and was never extended to Chad.

After independence in 1960 and the establishment of a federal system in 1967, North-East State (renamed Borno State in 1976), escaped the conflicts that ravaged the rest of Nigeria: the Biafra war in the southeast and a big-city crime explosion, such as in Lagos on the Atlantic coast. The state also generally escaped the civil wars that wracked Chad until the 1990s. On the contrary, Maiduguri broadly profited from smuggling operations with neighboring countries; it also served as a refuge for representatives of the armed groups fighting across the border. Nigeria, financially powerful from its 1970s' oil boom, intended to play the role of gendarme in the region: at once guardian and judge. In fact, at the time, France and Switzerland turned to Nigeria to negotiate with Chadian National Liberation Front rebels for the release of French and Swiss nationals held captive in the Lake Chad region.

From Rabih Fadlallah to Sheikh Hayat: two protests under the banner of Islam

The situation has reversed since the 1970s; now Chad sends troops into Borno State and plays the mediator, prematurely announcing a ceasefire with Boko Haram at the end of 2014. The region's porous borders and populations receptive to Salafist influences call for a more detailed examination of the Islamist rebellions, now called terrorism, that once ravaged the region.

In northeastern Nigeria, two rebellions are worth noting. First, the famous Mahdist epic of Rabih az-Zubayr ibn Fadl Allah, better known as Rabih Fadlallah. Born in Khartoum around 1842, Fadlallah served in the Egyptian cavalry during the Ethiopian campaign (Babikir, 1950). He invaded Darfur in 1887 and soon reached Oubangui-Chari, where he clashed with the French over a massacre of explorer Paul Crampel's mission in 1891. After seizing Bagirmi in 1892, Fadlallah defeated the Borno sheikh's armies near Dikwa, where he built a palace in 1893. He imposed a kind of military dictatorship under the yoke of Sharia law; the French finally caught and beheaded him in 1900.

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8. Historically, the Borno *Mai* also made military alliances with the Ottomans in Tripoli. Around 1555, the latter sent reinforcements to the Borno king to help repel attacks from the Hausa of Kebbi. See Martin (1969) and de la Roncière (1919).

9. The title *Shehu* should not be confused with *Sarikin Bornu*, attributed by Fulani jihadists from Sokoto to the Emir of Misau in the Bauchi region, in homage to the latter's victory when he briefly seized the Borno Kingdom's capital in 1808. As an irony of history, Borno later welcomed the last independent Sokoto sultan as he fled the caliphate; he was killed at the Battle of Burmi against the British in 1903.

Significantly, British colonizers portrayed Fadlallah as a common pillager.[10] This dual characterization—warlord and pillager—reminds us of today's view of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an AQIM leader known as "One Eye": he is simultaneously a smuggler, drug dealer, hostage-taker, and AQIM commander. Fadlallah got his start as first lieutenant to al-Zubayr Rahma Mansur, a major Sudanese slave trader. A ruthless warlord, Fadlallah has managed to mobilize up to 20,000 men, provisioning them by allowing them to sell their captives, raid, and pillage. In other words, Fadlallah's criminal acts met a military need—to feed his troops. A clever tactician, he avoided direct confrontations with Europeans. It was not at Fadlallah's request that one of his allies murdered Crampel, even though the French held him responsible (Box 2).

Box 2 – Fadlallah and the French

In general, prosaic considerations with no relation to religious fanaticism motivate attacks on the few European travelers in the region (Dion, 2014). In the past, the Sultan of Sokoto undoubtedly ordered Gabriel Cazemajou's murder during the French explorer's journey to Borno in 1899; the sultan feared that Cazemajou intended to sign a pact with the sultan's enemy, Rabih Fadlallah. In the same year, Fadlallah executed another explorer, Ferdinand de Behagle; he had refused to sell Fadlallah weapons when they met to negotiate a peace and trade treaty without the French government's authorization. At the time, with tensions already high, some colonial officers asked traditional authorities to refrain from making military reprisals against a warlord defending his territory, one not really threatening France's interests. The Sultan of Bagirmi had killed Crampel eight years earlier to steal his weapons. The Bagirmi sultan then turned against Fadlallah by concluding an alliance with the French, who had few scruples about his murderous past. The British were no better than the French. After Fadlallah's death, they briefly considered naming his son, Fadlallah, as Sultan of Borno, before the French killed him in 1901. Such compromises, dictated by local power relations, are common. More recently, in Ndjamena (Chad) in 1982, for example, the French supported and armed the Hissène Habré dictatorship, that was responsible for executing Commandant Pierre Galopin in 1975. At present (2015) in Bamako (Mali), Paris protects President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, a former prime minister who has never been held accountable for the Malian army murder of Swiss Consul Jean-Claude Berberat at Niafunké in 1994.

Said bin Hayat, the second significant Islamist in the then-colonizing region, was born in northern Cameroon around 1884. A Fulani sheikh, Hayat received a religious education in Dikwa before settling in Adamawa. In 1919, he moved to Yobe and the Dumbulwa woods, living on a hill where ritual sacrifices called *Hauro* took place; he named it *durirde julbe* (The Place Where the Believers Pray).[11] In three years, his encampment attracted more than 3,000 people, quickly alarming both local and British authorities. This scenario resembles the establishment by the so-called "Talibans" of a rural holy encampment in Yobe in 2002; some of its initial followers constituted an embryonic Boko Haram). Said bin Hayat, a direct descendant of the Sokoto Caliphate's founder, represented the notorious Mahdi in West Africa that had defeated the British in Khartoum. He enjoyed immense prestige since all his brothers had been killed by Fadlallah.[12] However, his *Ansar* companions lived exclusively from farming, they paid *jangali* (taxes), and regularly helped British colonizers build public works they British needed, such as a road between Ngalda and Fika. When Herbert Palmer, Borno's British Resident, sent spies to Dumbulwa, they found no thought of disobedience or revolt, only rumors spread by the Emirs of Gombe and Fika, fearful of competition from the growing community.

In fact, the Fika emir saw his status contested when he came to power at the end of 1922. Thus, he sought British support to remove rivals and compensate for his lack of legitimacy. The local British-appointed *jalkali* (judge) even fabricated false documents to compromise Said bin Hayat and assert the judge's authority. The Borno sheikh had also assumed power at the end of 1922; unlike his predecessor, he did not know Said bin Hayat and mistrusted the *Ansar*, actively contributing to their downfall. The British installed the Sultan of Sokoto in 1915 as a reward for helping to repress a 1906 rebellion in Satiru; the Sokoto sultan disapproved of the Mahdist tendency toward sedition. Said bin Hayat, arrested and interrogated by Herbert Palmer, found himself deported and imprisoned in 1923, first in Potiskum, then in Kano. He was freed only one year before independence in 1960, making him the British Empire's longest-held political prisoner.

The Mahdist Peril: the British colonizers' vision. It appears that the obsessive fear of Mahdism was as strong as contemporary fears of jihadist terrorism are. At the time, Charles Gordon's death at Khartoum in 1885 haunted the British; they feared that the Mahdist revolt would spread throughout the Empire's Sahelian territories. In northern Nigeria, the British thus began to fight Jibril Gaini, a follower of Said bin Hayat's father who had established an *Ansar* community in Burmi, in the steppes of Borno on the Bauchi and Gombe side of the Gongola River. Gaini's followers defeated the British in 1902, despite their leader's capture and exile to Lokoja. However, the British razed their encampment in 1903 and killed the Sultan of Sokoto as he fled

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[10] Similarly, the British considered Jibril Gaini (also known as Gwoni or Mallam Zai), the leader of the Bormi *Ansar* in Borno in 1902, to be a slave trader and opportunist rather than a real Mahdist.

[11] The following information is drawn mainly from Saeed (1985).

[12] His father, influential in Adamawa and the Mandara Mountains region, married Rabih's daughter after converting to Mahdism in 1883. A self-proclaimed emir, he first called on Sokoto leaders to join him, accusing them of being *dajjal* (antichrists) and betrayers of jihad ideals. He then contested Rabih's seizure of power in Borno. In 1899, he was killed in Dikwa by Rabih's son as he tried to mobilize the troops of his ally, Jibril Gaini. See Kyari (2006).

to Sudan (Lavers, 1967). In 1906 at Satiru, to the south of Sokoto, colonial troops also had to repress another rebellion, losing 27 soldiers, including three white officers. Vengeful, the British sought to contain Mahdists in Yobe and the Mandara Mountains by preventively arresting their leaders, respectively Said bin Hayat in 1913 and Hamman Yaji in 1927.[13]

At the time, a secret British intelligence report aptly summarized the colonizers' concerns about the emergence of an Islamist International.[14] The report's principal author, Gordon Lethem, had followed Nigerian pilgrimage routes to Mecca in 1925, traversing Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. His investigation raised the possibility of Bolshevik infiltration of the Senusiyya Brotherhood in Khartoum and the Tijaniyya Brotherhood in Casablanca. The Mahdist movements might have dreamed about a "Great Evening," but their influence hardly extended beyond Sudan. Lethem, however, felt the Mahdists posed more danger because they recruited among populations that had fled Nigeria's colonization; some wanted to reconquer the Sokoto Caliphate through a new jihad. The Fulani, in particular, experienced their *hijra* (exodus) as a divine trial and venerated their dead sultan as a *shahid* (martyr). More separatist than the Muslims who remained in Nigeria, the Fulani had also participated in Mahdist and Sudanese anticolonial revolts in Kassala in 1919 and Gedir in 1915.[15]

Lethem identified another source of concern: the Mahdi's descendant in Khartoum, Said Abdur Rahman, could not convince Lethem of his loyalty to the British Crown. Although Abdur Rahman preached moderation, he did not publicly disapprove of the fanatics who idolized him; they believed he reincarnated one of Islam's prophets, Isa—that is, Jesus! Exiled Sudanese Fulani, the Fellata, regularly cited his name in calls to revolt against the colonizers. The Fellata also referred to other great figures who appeared to embody Muslim resistance to European conquest: King Fuad I of Egypt, Abdulkarim al Khattabi, the leader of the Rif rebellion in Morocco, or the imam and Yemeni ruler Yahya Muhammad Hamid-ed-Din. Their portraits circulated throughout the Sahel, along with flyers printed in Cairo and Tripoli that denounced the damaging effects of Christian education and medicine, just as Boko Haram does today.

Lethem grew concerned about the North African Islamists' increasing influence on Nigeria (Box 3). In the past, the Sokoto Fulani and Borno Kanuri had traded a great deal with Libya and Tunisia; colonization, Lethem worried, had led to the latter's replacement by Sudan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. For all that, he admitted there was no evidence of a Mahdist organization or conspiracy. Despite their fervor, often bordering on fanaticism, Islamic protesters drew on rumors and an anticolonial mindset that did not require foreign financial or logistical support (Lethem and Tomlinson, 1927, pp. 73, 81). Sheikh Said bin Hayat, often evoked with nostalgia in some Nigerian Muslim and nationalist circles, was one of the most significant figures in this regard. His *Ansar* community did not aim to overthrow the British (Saaed, 1992; Ubah, 1976). However, in 1923, a simple letter greeting the son of Said Abdur

Rahman, the Sudanese Mahdi, sufficed to convince officials that Usman dan Fodio's descendant planned to launch a holy war against the British. The letter was specifically cited as proof of a vast conspiracy to coordinate simultaneous acts of rebellion in Sudan, Nigeria, and Egypt. British intelligence services, wanting to avoid open criticism of the Resident of Borno who had arrested Said bin Hayat, refrained from making the results of their investigation public; their findings disproved accusations that Hayat was guilty of subversion and complicity with foreign Mahdist circles (Lethem and Tomlinson, 1927, p. 11).

Box 3 – The British Fear of an "Islamist International"

British anxiety about "Islamist International" infiltrators extended beyond Mahdism and lasted until independence. British colonizers distrusted preachers from the Tijaniyya Brotherhood; followers of Ahman al-Tijani (1735–1815), a sheikh born in Ayn Madi in the Algerian desert, they had begun arriving in northern Nigeria during the 1920s. They threatened to disturb public order by protesting the Sokoto Caliphate's aristocracy, founded on the *Qadiriyya* and presently allied with the British (Hill, 2013). After World War II, British colonizers grew concerned about the consequences of the Palestinian conflict and the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Britons sent a teacher from Kano's Arabic school to Egypt to investigate the situation in 1947. His verdict: Al-Azhar University in Cairo was "infested" with fundamentalists called *wahhabi* or *subbanu* (Kaba, 2000, p. 190). After that, the British preferred to finance the education of Nigerian imams and Koranic judges in Sudan because they appeared more moderate. This was the case of Sheikh Abubakar Gummi, the Izala Society founder; he had to attend classes in Khartoum, and would not receive authorization to go to Cairo where Nasser was trying to muster Muslims to fight imperial powers following the 1956 Suez crisis (Bunza, 2005). The British also remained concerned about monitoring and controlling pilgrimages to Mecca throughout the entire colonial period. British authorities improved the situation for pilgrims to avert sedition, prevent epidemics, and fight human trafficking by merchants who sold slaves to finance their trip, or who were themselves captured by Arab slave traders in Hejaz.

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13. In 1907 at Maroua in Cameroon, the Germans also beheaded Mal Alhadji, leader of a Mahdist revolt; he had received the support of Mallam Liman Arabu, the right-hand man of Said bin Hayat's father. Just as opposed to Sokoto Caliphate corruption, a British ally, Goni Wadai, joined the Mahdists to expel Europeans from the region. The Germans finally defeated and killed him at Garoua in 1907. See Njeuma (1994), and Njeuma and Martin (1992).

14. I thank Vincent Hiribarren of King's College London for providing me with information about Lethem and Tomlinson, (1927). French intelligence services in Tunis and Niamey have also followed the development of "Islamism" by sending agents on the pilgrimage to Mecca. See e.g., Kanya-Forstner and Lovejoy (1997) and Dia (2012).

15. Kanuri and Fulani fighters from what is now Nigeria had already assisted the Sudanese Mahdi in his attack on Christian Abyssinia in 1887.

Recurring features of past Islamist rebellions. Instead of an Islamist International, most of these fundamentalist Islamic movements shared a desire to transcend the contingencies of ethnic allegiances. This pan-Islamic vision recalls Abubakar Shekau's speeches inviting Muslims around the world to join his struggle. Just as Boko Haram remains deeply rooted in Kanuri territory in Borno State while attempting to move beyond that boundary, many "fundamentalist" movements in the Sahel did not want to limit their call for blood ties to any one community: such an approach would have been militarily and strategically counterproductive. The Fulani, for example, too small a minority to control the large Sokoto Caliphate territory, had to form solid alliances with local populations: Usman dan Fodio's jihad rallied various communities, including some "pagans" (Adeleye, 1974, p. 75). Fadlallah, from Sudan, had to mobilize Hausa soldiers; their descendants apparently settled in Kofar Mata, an old Kano district, where Said bin Hayat lived when freed in 1959 until his death in 1978.[16] In his former Dumbulwa encampment, Hayat had attracted Fulani and Muslims originating from Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

Nevertheless, we find it striking that these theocratic proto-states never formed alliances to coordinate their actions and create a real "Islamist International." The Sultan of Sokoto, the Sudanese Mahdi, the Toucouleur Empire, and the Massina Emirate never fought together against French or British colonizers. On the contrary, they often fought one another. For example, in 1862, the Toucouleur Empire took over Massina, another jihadist state, with help from Hausa and Kanuri commanders from Sokoto and Borno. Sokoto Caliphate Fulani did not hide their hostility toward the Borno Empire Kanuri; they fought with each other through proxy emirates during a contested succession in Hadejia in 1848. The *calif* (leader) of Sokoto finally ordered his vassals to bar Fadlallah's men in 1894 because he feared an invasion, not because he wanted to restore Borno's traditional authorities. Similarly, the Sokoto sultan fought Jibril Gaini's Mahdists when they challenged his authority at Bormi in Bauchi. Despite their pan-Islamist ideology, jihadist movements thus weakened and divided the *ummah* (community) along existing doctrinal, sectarian, and military divisions.

In this, we see the great paradox of rebellions that aim to overthrow established powers and construct theocratic states. Usman dan Fodio's jihad and Fadlallah's military campaigns triumphed on the ruins of, respectively, the old Habe (Hausa) city-states and the decaying Kanemi dynasty. Borno had suffered three scourges: endless succession struggles, severe economic crises, and encroaching Fulani jihadists. The Bornouan province of Damagaram, centered on Zinder, benefited from the mergence of Usman Dan Fodio to free itself from the Borno Shehu. The Shehu also lost Hadejia, Katagum, Missau, and Gombe on his western marches without retaking control of Bagirmi or the Mandara Mountains in the east. The coveted Lake Chad basin, a meeting point for Fulani from the west and Shuwa Arabs from the east, saw the Borno Empire's Kanuri suffer a collapse of slave exports as Tuareg attacks multiplied, European colonizers abolished the slave trade in North Africa, and Borno's alliances proecting their caravan routes collapsed as a result of the takeover of Fezzan by the Ottomans in the 1830s (Cohen and Brenner, 1974, p. 174).

The government's role. We note that Boko Haram prospered in a context of widespread pauperization, weakened traditional authorities, and increased doubts about Nigerian government legitimacy; anti-government protests had grown since the federal authority's power shifted to Christians in the south when the military dictatorship ended in 1999. Boko Haram's, leaders have criticized the corrupt institutions of a would-be parliamentary democracy as much as they accused the Borno Shehu of making compromises with "impious" regimes. By communicating in Hausa rather than Kanuri, both Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau preferred to exalt Usman dan Fodio's victorious jihad rather than the Kanemi dynasty's peaceful and pious Islam. The Borno nobility, having cooperated with the British colonizers, accepted to negotiate for Nigeria's independence by reducing the prerogatives of Sharia law. Shettima Kashim Ibrahim, Borno's vizier and major political figure, sat on a committee that recommended restricting Islamic law to civil matters, a reform passed in 1958. Meanwhile, non-Muslims won the right to choose trial by Koranic or secular courts (Anderson, 1959). Since the military dictatorship ended in 1999, Borno and Yobe have been the only northern states never to hand down a court sentence based on Sharia law, despite its extension to criminal matters from 2000 (Weimann, 2010).

Significantly, the 2009 crisis that led to the sect's uprising and Mohammed Yusuf's extrajudicial execution occurred just after the death of a highly respected *Shehu*, Mustapha ibn Umar Kyari Amin el-Kanemi. His successor, Umar Garbai Abba Kyari, was much less accommodating, and deliberately sided with secular authorities; he never publicly criticized the security forces' excesses when they massacred civilians. Kyari proved even more unpopular since he was chosen by Ali Modu Sheriff, a detested, corrupt governor, against the advice of the court, which preferred Kyari's predecessor's elder son had appointed him. In practice, the *Shehu* actively participated in the military repression by ordering his vassals to denounce and turn over sect members to the police, known for their heavy use of torture. Thus, Boko Haram targeted traditional leaders; the group's militants killed the new *Shehu*'s brother (among others) in May 2011. Since then, the sect's fighters have focused on deposing local emirs and replacing them with their own men. At Gwoza, for example, fighters first drove away Alhaji Idris Timta, the title holder, in September 2013; they later killed him in a highway ambush in Gombe in March 2014. The fighters forced his son and successor, Muhammed Timta, to leave the area after they seized it the following August (*The News*, 2014).

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16. Kanuri refugees from Borno State are also reputed to have founded the first market in Kano in the fifteenth century (Fisher and Humphrey, 1977). In addition, the Fulani encampment of Said bin Hayat at Dumbulwa attracted Muslims from today's republics of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.

17. His predecessor, Umar Ibn Abubakar Garbai, was also the target of an assassination attempt in April 1968 after his inauguration.

Like earlier jihadist movements, Boko Haram developed during a transition period: at the end of a military dictatorship when modern and traditional political authority was weakening. However, succession periods—always unstable—do not automatically lead to Islamist insurrections. Shehu Mustapha ibn Umar Kyari Amin, who sits at the Borno State House of Representatives and is therefore a stakeholder in secular power, saw his accession challenged when he was enthroned in 1974; nevertheless, he built his religious legitimacy over time.[17] Boko Haram emerged well after traditional Muslim government officials in Nigeria became secularized. For example, civilian and military regimes deposed both the Emir of Kano in 1963 and the Sultan of Sokoto in 1996. In fact, their spiritual aura did not protect them from Islamist protests.

In 1980, Kano, the largest predominately Muslim city in Nigeria's North State, saw an uprising of the Maitatsine sect that killed about 5,000. The city's population did not demonstrate in the streets to protest an assassination attempt on its emir, an attack attributed to Boko Haram in 2013. On the contrary, in August 2014, protesters demonstrated against the nomination of Lamido Sanusi, his successor; in November 2014, Abubakar Shekau claimed credit for an attack on Sanusi's mosque.

In other words, we find it too simplistic to claim that Boko Haram's radicalization and rising power result only from weakened modern and traditional political authority, as if the latter's power simply flowed into the group. Other specific factors simultaneously played into the sect's expansion, such as Mohammed Yusuf's extrajudicial execution and Governor Ali Modu Sheriff's Mafia-like practices; such developments have no connection to a hidden Saudi or Libyan hand. Boko Haram has not succeeded in extending its social base beyond Kanuri territory in Borno State mostly because its followers know less about other northern regions, where they are quickly spotted as "foreigners," and not because Hausa have obeyed their local leaders and cooperated with the security forces. Similarities to past jihadist insurrections should not suggest that history is being repeated.

In its own way, Boko Haram testifies to the profound transformation of an Islam previously the preserve of the educated élite, nobility, and traders. Judging by the sect's modernity, video messages, and Internet communications, Boko Haram differs greatly from the primitive 1980 Maitatsine rebellion in Kano (Pérouse de Montclos, 2015d). Furthermore, the group's geographical scope and theocratic political ambitions differ greatly from the moral economy and state-building of the Sokoto Caliphate. Rather, this narration of a terrorist threat recalls British anxieties during the colonial era. The narrative creates the perception that Boko Haram is one link in a vast "arc of crisis" across the Sahel, one that takes on a global dimension in its opposition to the West. In that sense, both a long-term history and a brief history that tends erase the complexity of the local mechanisms that have fed insurrection over the long term have conjured the "People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for the Propagation of Islam and Jihad."

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