

Article

Doctrine and Geography in Boko Haram's Rise

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Abstract

This study examines the doctrinal transformation and geopolitical repositioning of Boko Haram from its emergence in 2002 through the end of 2024, with attention to ongoing developments into early 2025. It traces the movement's evolution from a local, protest-oriented preaching group in northeastern Nigeria into a cross-border insurgency with a regional footprint across the Lake Chad Basin. The study proceeds from the premise that explaining this transformation requires more than a security or social-factors analysis; it demands an analytical framework linking the evolution of the movement's doctrinal discourse to the shifting geopolitical context in which it operated. By tracing the development of core concepts in Boko Haram's discourse – including takfir, political legitimacy, the enemy, and authority – the study examines the relationship between doctrinal change and geographic expansion, connecting these conceptual shifts to transformations in patterns of violence and the widening of the operational theater. The analysis employs a multi-level approach that combines discourse analysis of the movement's doctrinal production with an examination of its armed operations within their regional context. The study finds that doctrinal transformation within Boko Haram was not merely a linguistic shift in religious rhetoric; rather, it functioned as a mechanism for redefining the boundaries of belonging and hostility, thereby enabling the legitimization of violence and the expansion of its geographic scope. At the same time, institutional fragility and weak border governance in the Lake Chad Basin region provided the geopolitical conditions that facilitated the movement's transition from a local actor to a regional insurgent network. These findings underscore the importance of examining the interaction between ideology and political geography in order to understand the dynamics of contemporary jihadist movements in West Africa.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Takfir, Jihadist insurgency, Lake Chad Basin, Ideology and political geography, West Africa

Introduction

This study addresses the transformational trajectory of Boko Haram as a shift from a local, protest-oriented preaching group to a violent actor with regional positioning. It proceeds from the assumption that explaining this transformation cannot be sustained by attributing it to security factors alone or to abstract ideology; rather, it requires analyzing the complex interaction between the movement's doctrinal structure and its legitimating logic, and the geopolitical context in which it operates. Since the movement's emergence in northern Nigeria in 2002 within a turbulent religious and political environment, its initial discourse took shape within a protest-oriented Salafi framework that contested the legitimacy of the political system and the traditional religious establishment, before gradually transforming into a more radical discourse that redefined society and authority within a sharply dichotomous doctrinal framework.

The events of 2009 represented a pivotal turning point that pushed the movement toward systematic militarization, while post-2015 dynamics contributed to its repositioning within a cross-border regional space in the Lake Chad Basin.

Importance of the Study

The importance of the study stems from its effort to explain this complex transition from local protest to regionalized violence, and from analyzing how doctrinal transformation contributed to redefining the enemy and the vital space and producing new patterns of armed action. In this sense, the study attempts to contribute to understanding the relationship between religious discourse, violence, and political geography in the development of jihadist movements.

Problem Statement

The study proceeds from a dual interpretive problem concerning the dynamics by which Boko Haram transformed from a local preaching group of limited impact into a cross-border regional insurgency. The problem lies in the inadequacy of traditional security or economic approaches to provide an analytical model that links doctrinal transformation to geopolitical repositioning. This is attributed to the absence of interpretive frameworks that track how concepts move from the space of theorizing into tools for legitimating violence and expanding the operational theater. Accordingly, this research attempts to answer the core question: How did the movement reformulate its doctrinal concepts, such as takfir and legitimacy, and how is their impact manifested in directing and legitimating its geographic expansion in the Lake Chad Basin region?

Research Questions

Based on the research problem posed, this study seeks to answer the following primary question: How did doctrinal transformation contribute to legitimating and directing the geopolitical repositioning of Boko Haram from a local to a regional space? To achieve this goal, the following research questions branch off from the main question: - What is the nature of the fundamental doctrinal transformation that occurred in Boko Haram's discourse in the period between 2002 and 2015?

- How did this transformation reflect in redefining concepts (legitimacy, the enemy, and violence) within the movement's literature, and what was its impact on combat behavior?
- What is the nature of the relationship between doctrinal transformation and the widening of the movement's operational theater after 2015?
- To what extent did the geopolitical environment of the Lake Chad Basin contribute to enabling this expansion?
- Did ideological discourse precede field expansion and pave the way for it, or did field action and tactical necessities reshape the discourse later to legitimate the reality?

Study Hypothesis

The study proceeds from a central hypothesis that doctrinal transformation within the movement was not merely a linguistic or preaching change; rather, it constituted a legitimating mechanism that redefined the enemy, the vital space, and the boundaries of belonging, thereby leading to a cross-border geopolitical repositioning. The movement's

shift from a local preaching group to a regional armed actor was not the result of security factors alone; rather, it was linked to rebuilding the doctrinal conception of authority and legitimacy, such that takfir moved from a theoretical description to an organizational tool for producing violence and expanding the operational theater.

Previous Studies and the Research Gap

Despite extensive research interest in Boko Haram over the past two decades, the available literature has been distributed among historical, security, human-rights, and intellectual approaches without developing an interpretive framework that systematically links doctrinal transformation and geopolitical repositioning. The study by Alexander Thurston provided a detailed history of the movement's development in its religious and political context, while the works of Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos focused on structural factors linked to the crisis of the state and institutional fragility. Analyses by Jacob Zenn addressed the organizational structure and operational transformations of the movement, especially after the affiliation of some of its factions with the Islamic State. As for human-rights reports issued by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, they focused on the dynamics of reciprocal violence between the movement and the state after the events of 2009. However, these approaches—despite their importance—did not develop an analytical model that explains how transformation in doctrinal discourse contributed to redefining the geographic field of the conflict.

Hence, the research gap this study seeks to address emerges in three main points:

First, a weak analytical linkage between the doctrinal dimension and the geopolitical dimension in explaining the movement's evolution;

Second, the absence of an in-depth analysis of the process of redefining religious belonging within the movement's discourse and the resulting expansion of the circle of permissibility; and third, the absence of an explanatory modeling that clarifies the relationship between narrowing the criterion of doctrinal belonging and expanding the operational geography, especially in the phase of regional expansion after 2015.

Methodology and Scope

This study adopts an integrated methodological framework based on the case study, drawing on tools of analytical historical method and discourse analysis to link intellectual variables and field reality. The study's procedures are embodied in the inductive reading of a primary research corpus (Corpus) that includes sermons by the founder Mohammed Yusuf, recordings of his successor Abubakar Shekau, and official statements issued by the movement's factions, with reinforcement from field and research reports issued by international centers such as International Crisis Group and the works of the researcher (Zenn), to ensure precision of documentation. The analytical procedure focuses on tracing shifts in central doctrinal concepts such as takfir, legitimacy, the enemy, and *al-walā' wa-al-barā'*, and observing how these concepts moved from the realm of preaching theorization into tools for legitimating violence and expanding the movement's geopolitical field. To add further analytical precision, the study relies on the comparative method to scrutinize data between the Shekau faction and the Barnawi faction, especially with respect to the stance on takfir of society and targeting civilians, to test the research hypothesis concerning the

impact of doctrinal variation on shaping geopolitical behavior and patterns of regional expansion.

In terms of temporal scope and limits, the study covers the period from the movement's emergence in 2002 through 2024, with observation of major transformations through early 2025 to ensure comprehensive tracking. Spatially, the focus extends from Nigeria to include the Lake Chad Basin. The thematic limits are confined to analyzing doctrinal transformation and its relationship to geopolitical repositioning. Despite seeking precision, the study encountered methodological constraints related to the difficulty of direct access to some primary field materials due to security conditions; this was compensated for through analysis of recorded discourse and trusted intelligence and research reports to bridge informational gaps and achieve scientific objectivity.

Structure of the Study

The study is organized into three main sections. The first section addresses the conceptual and theoretical framework for doctrinal transformation and geopolitical repositioning and the relationship between doctrine and geography in jihadist movements. The second section is devoted to analyzing Boko Haram's doctrinal transformation during the period 2002–2015. The third section addresses the dynamics of the movement's geopolitical repositioning and regional cross-border operations in the Lake Chad Basin during the period 2015–2025.

Section One: The conceptual and theoretical framework for doctrinal transformation and geopolitical positioning

Analyzing doctrinal transformation constitutes an entry point to understanding the dynamics by which jihadist movements shift from local protest to cross-border violence. Specialized literature shows that the Boko Haram case cannot be reduced to a purely economic or security factor; rather, it requires examining the development of its doctrinal discourse and how it was redeployed to produce legitimacy for violence and redefine the political field.¹ Before proceeding with the conceptual and theoretical analysis of the movement's transformation, the researcher presents the following table as a reference framework that specifies operational definitions of the study's central concepts and the field indicators to be tracked in Boko Haram's reality, to ensure methodological precision and coherence of analysis in the ensuing sections.

Concept	Its operational definition in the research	Its indicators in the Boko Haram case	Source (reference)
Doctrinal transformation	A change in the ideological framework that interprets the logic of legitimacy, the enemy, and legitimate violence.	The shift from criticizing the state to comprehensive takfir of it and targeting international symbols (such as the UN headquarters, 2011).	(Thurston, 2018) / (Muhammad Yusuf, 2009)
Geopolitical positioning	Redefining the vital space and transcending national borders as colonial obstacles that can be overcome.	Expansion of military operations and field deployment across all Lake Chad Basin states.	(Flint & Taylor, 2018) / (Crisis Group, 2019)
Networked	The shift from a local	Pledging allegiance to "ISIS" in	(Warner & O'Farrell,

¹ Thurston, Alexander. *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Concept	Its operational definition in the research	Its indicators in the Boko Haram case	Source (reference)
“wilaya” affiliation	hierarchical structure to a distributed structure (operational nodes) linked to a transnational, cross-border global center.	March 2015, and integration into the “West Africa Province.”	2020) / (Zenn, 2018)
Parallel governance	The group’s exercise of alternative sovereign functions (taxation, judiciary, administration) in areas of effective control.	Imposing levies on farmers and fishers, establishing checkpoints, and managing economic activities in Lake Chad.	(Hassan, 2019) / (Pérouse de Montclos, 2014)
Ideological geography	The space drawn by doctrinal text is an imagined “land of empowerment” that precedes field expansion.	Presenting the Lake Chad Basin in the movement’s discourse as a single arena of doctrinal conflict that transcends state sovereignty.	(Abubakar Shekau, recordings) / (Crisis Group, 2024)

Table (1)

Subsection One: The concept of doctrinal transformation in jihadist movements

Definition of doctrinal transformation (from protest to takfīr to networked “wilaya” affiliation)

Doctrinal transformation in jihadist movements refers to the change that occurs in the doctrinal framework through which the movement defines concepts of religious legitimacy, the enemy, and legitimate violence. This transformation is not limited to a linguistic shift in preaching discourse; rather, it consists in reinterpreting central concepts such as tawhīd, takfīr, divine sovereignty (ḥākimiyya), and al-walā’ wa-al-barā’, such that they shift from general exhortative or normative concepts into organizational tools used to delineate the boundaries of religious and political belonging and to justify the use of violence. In this context, the concept of “networked wilaya affiliation” emerged as an analytical tool derived from military sociology and political geography literature to understand the structure of contemporary armed organizations. Operationally, it is defined as the movement’s shift from geographic centralization in Maiduguri to a distributed structure composed of cells that are tactically independent yet ideologically linked to a global center (the Islamic State). This geopolitical transformation is manifested in replacing the local place with a cross-border space. This is affirmed by the study (Warner & O’Farrell, 2020) on the expansion of the Islamic State in Africa, and by the International Crisis Group (2019) reports that documented Boko Haram’s transformation into a flexible model difficult to eradicate through traditional military means alone. In this sense, doctrinal transformation represents a transition from protest-oriented or preaching discourse to an intellectual structure that legitimates exclusion and violence and redefines the political arena of conflict.²

Studies of jihadist movements show that this transformation is often linked to reconstructing the concept of the “enemy” within the movement’s discourse, such that it is not confined to political authority but extends to religious or social actors seen as collaborators with the existing system. Thus, doctrinal discourse becomes an interpretive framework that redefines society itself according to the binary of loyalty and disavowal, opening the way to expanding

² Thurston, Alexander, *The Disease Is Unbelief: Boko Haram’s Religious and Political Worldview* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2016), 3–8

the circle of targeting and violence.³

Doctrinal transformation is not understood as a change in declared fundamentals so much as a shift in the system of political “application” (*tanzīl*) of doctrinal concepts. In the first phase (2002–2009), the movement presented itself as a preaching group that criticized Western education and democracy and adopted a protest-oriented Salafi discourse without embracing comprehensive rebellion.⁴ However, the events of 2009 and what followed led to redefining the enemy and legitimacy, such that the discourse shifted from criticizing the state to declaring *takfīr* of it and considering it a “*ṭāghūt* entity” that must be removed.⁵

With the pledge of allegiance by a wing of the movement to the Islamic State in 2015, the movement entered the phase of “networked *wilaya* affiliation,” where it was no longer merely a local insurgency but part of a cross-border network with a transnational jihadist reference.⁶ This development indicates that doctrinal transformation was gradual: it moved from a local doctrinal protest to an ideological integration within a broader geopolitical project.

Indicators of Transformation in Discourse and Legitimizing Reference

Doctrinal transformation can be traced through discursive and organizational indicators, most notably:

The transition from impugning state policies to stripping them of religious legitimacy altogether

In the first phase, the movement’s discourse focused on criticizing Nigerian state policies and rejecting Western education and democracy, but it gradually shifted to stripping religious legitimacy from the state itself, as a “*ṭāghūt*” system. The movement’s leader stated clearly that he rejects working under a government he described as “satanic,” saying: “The sum of these hadiths indicates with definitive clarity that work is not permissible under a government that does not rule by the Book and the Sunnah, but rather rules by satanic laws; likewise, police and military service under it is even more impermissible, *a fortiori*.”⁷ This drift toward *takfīr* and absolute prohibition was met with rigorous scholarly responses: Abubakar Gumi refuted this thinking by emphasizing that prohibition requires a definitive text, warning against what he called the path of “half-educated” people who describe advanced administrative systems as un-Islamic without sufficient legal evidence, saying: “The unlawful must be written in black on white as an explicit text. If it is not, then do not call it unlawful... I am talking about what some half-educated Muslims do today when they see a well-ordered system and describe it as non-Islamic.” He also affirmed that *ijtihād* has principles and controls, and that exclusivist political or *takfīr*-based positions may not be built

³Thurston, Alexander, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 63–72.

Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014), 35–41.

⁴ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014), 36–58.

⁵ Jacob Zenn, “In the Name of Allah: The Evolution of Boko Haram,” Jamestown Foundation, 2013. [Thurston, Alexander, Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement \(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017\), 109–115.](#)

⁶ International Crisis Group, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, Africa Briefing No. 120 (2016).

⁷ Muhammad Yusuf Abu Yusuf al-Maiduguri, **This Is Our Creed and the Method of Our Call**, Maktabat al-Ghuraba’, 2nd ed., 2009, p. 116.

without solid textual evidence.⁸ This transformation was manifested in the movement's shift from local preaching to targeting state symbols and international institutions, such as the bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Abuja in 2011 – an attack carrying symbolic significance for the transformation of conflict from political protest to a doctrinal confrontation with the international system supporting the state.⁹

Expanding the circle of takfīr to include religious and civilian actors accused of collaboration with authority¹⁰

As the conflict escalated, the movement's discourse did not remain confined to takfīr of the state and its institutions; it expanded to include religious and civilian actors seen as collaborators with authority. Scholars who rejected the movement's discourse or participated in official religious institutions were described as part of a system of deviation or as "scholars of the sultans." This accusation also encompassed civil employees and local leaders, expanding the circle of the enemy within society itself and turning religious and political disagreement into a criterion for determining loyalty and belonging.

Thus, takfīr discourse was not limited to political authority; it included local scholars and preachers and residents of areas accused of collaborating with the state or with popular defense committees. Field examples include the assassination of several preachers in Maiduguri after 2011 for criticizing the movement's discourse, as well as retaliatory attacks on villages whose residents participated in forming Civilian Joint Task Force groups to support the Nigerian army.¹¹

Justifying targeting civilians because they are part of the "ṭāghūt system."¹²

With the expansion of takfīr, the movement redefined civilians who do not belong to it as part of the "ṭāghūt system" that supports the state or benefits from it. Accordingly, violence was no longer confined to confrontation with government forces; it included targeting markets, mosques, and villages considered supportive of the existing system. This shift in the criterion of violence represented one of the most prominent manifestations of the movement's doctrinal hardening, as the relationship between society and authority was reinterpreted such that society itself became a legitimate arena of confrontation.

This dangerous transformation appeared in the kidnapping of more than 270 female students from the Chibok school in 2014, as the movement considered government educational institutions part of the system it fights. It also carried out repeated attacks on markets and civilian gatherings in northeastern Nigeria during 2014–2015.¹³

⁸ Thurston, Alexander. *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*. (2018), pp. 1025, 899.

⁹ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014), pp. 10, 174, 180.

¹⁰ Thurston, Alexander. *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 112–130.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, *Spiraling Violence: Boko Haram Attacks and Security Force Abuses in Nigeria* (New York: HRW, 2012), 23–41.

¹² Warner, Jason and Ryan O'Farrell, "The Islamic State in Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 8 (2020).

¹³ Amnesty International, 'Our Job is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill': Boko Haram's Reign of Terror in North-East Nigeria, London: Amnesty International Ltd, April 2015, Index: AFR 44/1360/2015.

Re-entrenching the concepts of “divine sovereignty,” “empowerment,” and “loyalty and disavowal” to become tools of political field sorting

The movement redeployed traditional doctrinal concepts such as “divine sovereignty” (hākimiyya), “empowerment,” and “loyalty and disavowal” within a new political-military context. Instead of being understood within their general doctrinal frame, these concepts became field criteria for determining allies and enemies within society.

As for divine sovereignty: this concept—drawn from radical Qutbist literature—was employed by Boko Haram to prohibit democracy because, in its view, democracy contradicts Islam in its entirety; hence, politicians elected through democracy became all unbelievers for believing in a system that runs “on the opposite side” of Islam, because ruling by “positive (man-made) law,” according to Muhammad Yusuf, is “clear disbelief.”¹⁴

“Loyalty” means joining the movement or supporting it, while “disavowal” is construed as severing ties with the state and its institutions. The concept of “empowerment” was reinterpreted as a political goal that justifies military expansion and control over local space, contributing to shifting the movement from protest-oriented preaching discourse to an insurgent project seeking to reshape authority and society.

Thus, loyalty came to mean joining the movement or supporting it, while disavowal meant severing ties with the state and its institutions. This interpretation was embodied in the movement’s seizure of towns in Borno State between 2013 and 2014,¹⁵ and attempts to establish an alternative local administration, before announcing its pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015 in an effort to confer broader legitimacy on its project.

These indicators show that the discourse no longer remained mere doctrinal exhortation; it became a tool for establishing an alternative authority. From a maqāṣid-based perspective, this transformation is considered a slide from reformist discourse into an ideology that prioritizes control of public space at the expense of overarching necessities, foremost among them preservation of life.

The difference between discursive transformation and structural transformation

Discursive transformation is confined to reformulating concepts, whereas structural transformation means changing the rules of action. In the case of Boko Haram, the matter did not stop at declaring takfīr of the state in theory; it translated into:

Establishing parallel governance structures in controlled areas

Boko Haram—especially its faction linked to the Islamic State (ISWAP)—did not confine itself to military control; it established local governance patterns in some areas of Lake Chad and northeastern Nigeria, including organizing residents’ daily life and intervening in local administration. Specialized studies indicate that the movement developed, from its bases on

¹⁴ Muhammad Yusuf Abu Yusuf al-Maiduguri, **This Is Our Creed and the Method of Our Call**, Maktabat al-Ghuraba’, 2nd ed., 2009, pp. 112–119.

¹⁵ Jacob Zenn, “Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria,” *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 2 (2014): 23–28.

Lake Chad's islands and shores, a form of "rebel governance" tied to actual territorial control, such that it came to exercise alternative authority functions to the state in some local communities.¹⁶

Levying resources and imposing punishments

This parallel governance was associated with building local funding mechanisms relying on taxation and economic coercion. The movement imposed levies on farmers, fishers, and traders, and linked access to farmland, fishing areas, or markets to payment of specified fees. Specialized literature notes that the group developed local financial networks based on the imposition of taxes and fees on economic activities in areas under its influence. Field examples include forcing fishers and farmers in Lake Chad areas to pay portions of their production in exchange for being allowed to continue their activities.¹⁷

Redefining the relationship with local society

Local society in the movement's discourse was no longer merely a potential preaching base; it became a field for sorting among loyal, submissive, and enemy. Studies on "armed group governance" indicate that some factions attempted to acquire a degree of local compliance through a mix of deterrence and provision of a minimum level of organization and services, making them a competitor to the state in some areas. This dynamic appeared in coercive arrangements with local communities, allowing the movement freedom of movement and supply in return for limited security or the continuation of certain economic activities under its conditions.¹⁸

Here, takfir shifts from a doctrinal description into an organizational tool for governing space by force—constituting a structural transformation rather than mere linguistic escalation.

To present an accurate representation of this distinction, discursive transformation can be observed in reformulating the concept of takfir: it moved from being a doctrinal ruling directed at state symbols to including civilian and religious actors such as popular defense committees (Civilian JTF) and opposing scholars, providing the legitimation necessary to broaden the circle of violence.¹⁹ As for structural transformation, it appeared in translating this discourse into a parallel governance (Rebel Governance) system: the movement no longer confined itself to armed attack, but began administering controlled areas in the Lake Chad Basin by establishing checkpoints, issuing judicial rulings, and imposing a coercive taxation regime on fishers and farmers to finance operations—transforming from a protest group into a de facto authority.²⁰ This shift reflects the movement's adoption of a "networked wilaya affiliation" model that links transnational ideology with flexible territorial control.²¹

¹⁶ International Crisis Group, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, Africa Report no. 273 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019), 6–9

¹⁷ International Crisis Group, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, 10–13.

¹⁸ Idayat Hassan, *Insurgents' Governance Structures in Northeast Nigeria*, NUPI Working Paper 897 (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2019), 8–14

¹⁹ Zenn, Jacob. *In His Own Words: A Translation of Boko Haram's Video and Audio Messages*. West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018.

²⁰ International Crisis Group. *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*. Africa Report no. 273. Brussels, 2019.

²¹ Warner, Jason, and Ryan O'Farrell. *The Islamic State in Africa*. (CTC Sentinel 13, no.8), 2020.

Requirement Two: The Concept of Geopolitical Repositioning

Geopolitical repositioning refers to the process of transformation in the geographic field within which political or armed actors operate, and, like the space, they consider a legitimate arena for activity or conflict. This concept is not confined to spatial movement or regional expansion; rather, it indicates redefining the movement's vital space in line with shifts in its goals and strategies. In the context of cross-border armed movements, geopolitical repositioning is manifested in the actor's shift from a limited local scope to a broader regional space, benefiting from border interpenetration, weak state control, and the building of operational networks extending across more than one state.²²

This transformation is also often linked to reimagining political borders themselves: national borders are not treated as a binding framework for political or military action, but are reread as historical or colonial boundaries that can be transcended. In this sense, geopolitical repositioning does not reflect mere geographic expansion; it represents a shift in the movement's conception of the political arena of conflict and in its strategy for redeploying its resources and operational networks.²³

Understanding Boko Haram's evolution is incomplete without considering the transformation in its geographic field. After 2015, the movement's operations were no longer confined to northeastern Nigeria; they extended to a broader regional space in the Lake Chad Basin. This expansion reflects what may be termed geopolitical repositioning, where a change in doctrinal discourse interacted with border fragility and weak state control, shifting the conflict from a local to a cross-border regional theater.

The shift from local to cross-border movement

After 2015, the movement's operations expanded beyond Nigeria into Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, especially in the Lake Chad Basin region.²⁴ This shift reflects a change in the movement's conception of its vital space: the national state was no longer a binding framework, and borders came to be understood as colonial obstacles that could be transcended.

Operational geography versus ideological geography

Ideological geography refers to the space the movement considers a potential "domain of empowerment," while operational geography refers to the range of actual operations. In Boko Haram's discourse, ideological geography preceded actual operations, as the Lake Chad Basin was presented as a single arena for doctrinal conflict before being translated into field action.²⁵

²² Colin Flint and Peter J. Taylor, *Political Geography: World-Economy, Nation-State and Locality*, 6th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 210–214.

²³ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 87–95.

Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17–25.

²⁴ International Crisis Group, 2016.

²⁵ International Crisis Group, 2016.

The role of institutional fragility and porous borders

International reports affirm that institutional fragility and weak border control facilitated redeployment and regional repositioning.²⁶ Yet context alone does not suffice to explain the expansion; it interacted with discourse that criminalizes the state and considers transcending it a religious obligation. Here, the geopolitical factor intersects with the doctrinal factor.

Modeling the interactive relationship between the three dimensions (ideology, organization, and geography)

The structural relationship among the movement's transformation dimensions appears in an organic interweaving that links ideology (the driver), organization (the tool), and geography (the arena) as a single bloc explaining repositioning dynamics. At the ideological level, discourse was no longer mere preaching of ideas; it became an operational driver that redefined the enemy and the domain of Islam. This appeared in the takfir hardening that was clearly evident in the Shekau era, as the movement shifted from criticizing the state to declaring takfir of society as a whole and everyone who participates in the *ṭāghūt* system—recasting Nigerian reality as a state of *jāhiliyya* requiring rupture and legitimating bloodshed, and expanding targeting to include civilians, mosques, and markets.

This doctrinal transformation necessarily required developing an organizational tool suited to this expanding ideology, embodied in the concept of “networked wilaya affiliation.” After the ISIS pledge in 2015, the movement shifted from a centralized structure linked to spatial centrality (Maiduguri) to a distributed network pattern composed of semi-independent operational nodes across the Lake Chad Basin. This pattern granted the movement high flexibility in confronting military campaigns: if one node is struck, others continue operating, distributing leadership risks and ensuring sustainability.

This interaction found its vital arena in the border fragility of the Lake Chad Basin, as the movement exploited porous borders and weak institutional control, as well as ethnic overlap (especially Kanuri) and cross-border social ties to make the region a vital zone for supply and hiding. Here, the dialectic emerges in that ideological geography (the imagined land of empowerment, rejecting colonial borders) preceded and directed field operational geography. Thus, the ideology that declared takfir of the national system necessitated inventing a networked organization capable of crossing borders, finding in the fragility of the Lake Chad Basin an ideal environment for transforming the insurgency from a local actor into a cross-border regional network.

Verification of the hypothesis in the conceptual framework

The theoretical and conceptual analysis in this section demonstrated the validity of the first part of the hypothesis: doctrinal transformation in jihadist movements is not merely a linguistic change, but a radical rebuilding of the system of political application of central concepts such as takfir and legitimacy. This theoretical framework provided the mental map that paved the way for field expansion, affirming that the ideological geography drawn by doctrine is what precedes and determines the limits of later operational geographic expansion.

²⁶ UN Security Council, 2019.

Section Two: Boko Haram's Doctrinal Transformation (2002–2015)

Boko Haram's doctrinal transformation and the course of its future were linked to three factors: the first internal factor consistent with the movement's founder; the second social factor linked to its supporters and members; and the third linked to society and the state. Its geographic determinant was linked to northern Nigeria, with a focus on marginalized Maiduguri. Muhammad Yusuf (d. 2009) began his ideological life along a path influenced by activist Qutbist theses,²⁷ which left a clear effect on his conception of *jāhiliyya* and *ḥākimiyya*. Literature then indicates that he broke away from Ibrahim Zakzaky, who at that time led a student movement influenced by radical Qutbist theses in the mid-1990s,²⁸ and we assume this occurred after the latter announced his Shi'ism. The protest shift was from the person, not the idea, but Yusuf and those angry with him moved toward a direction more adherent to the Sunni form, joining the Izala movement (removal of innovation) that took them in. Yusuf quickly rose within it to the point that its shaykh entrusted him with administering one of its mosques. Yusuf "gulped" knowledge in a way, combining *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* with Ibn Taymiyya's books, and hastening an idea: translating the Qur'an into the Hausa dialect,²⁹ to increase the text's reach to the public and accelerate influence.

"From the perspective of cognitive reception theory, the movement built its reputation on defying established tradition and emboldening people to challenge it. A trend emerged locally known as *Kalakato*—that is, those who raised the slogan 'God said' in opposition to 'the shaykh said,' and who reshaped religiosity based on a closed textual reading that excluded *ijtihād*, cumulative scholarly tradition, and the institutional authority of the 'ulama'. This paved the way for the issuance of hardline religious rulings that regarded the constitution as an act of *shirk*, compliance with positive law as a departure from God's rule, and state institutions—foremost among them the army and the police—as instruments founded upon an unbelieving order."³⁰

The northern states relied on a provision in the 1999 constitution to implement Islamic law,³¹ and politicians competed in devising their models to satisfy the demand for sharia. In this bazaar (can be replaced with: political competition over religious representation), Muhammad Yusuf found a collective framework for outbidding over sharia implementation. Indeed, he entered a political-religious alliance that resulted in his appointment to a religious committee after the elections in which Sheriff won Borno State.³²

27 Onoyemeakpo, Joseph, and Adekunle S. Ajisebiyawo. "Boko Haram and the Ideology of Qutbism: Understanding the Basis for Religious Terrorism and Islamic-Fascism." *International Journal of Research* 9, no. 12 (December 2022).

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366250225_Boko_Haram_and_the_Ideology_of_Qutbism_Understanding_the_Basis_for_Religious_Terrorism_and_Islamic-Fascism.

28 Maga Sule Muhammad and Muhammad Maigari Abdullahi, "The Spread of Shia and Its Activities in Nigeria," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2019): pp 28–41, <https://journal.walisongo.ac.id/index.php/jish/article/view/1755>

29 Thurston, Alexander, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

30 Kyari Mohammed, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram," in *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014), 9–32.

31 Rotimi T. Suberu, "Religion and Institutions: Federalism and the Management of Conflicts over Sharia in Nigeria," *Journal of International Development* 21 (2009): 551–553.

32 Andrew Walker, "Join Us or Die: The Birth of Boko Haram," *The Guardian*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/04/join-us-or-die-birth-of-boko-haram>

As for the movement's popular base and cultural environment, it formed from Salafi currents differing in starting points, including the Izala group and splinter organizations, as well as those influenced by the Qutbist school within the activist current, whose doctrinal conception rests on ḥākimiyya as a condition of faith. Alongside them joined marginalized groups seeking an insurgent framework that would realize their demands—especially since they carried an imperial memory tied to the legacy of Kanem-Borno and Sokoto, representing the ideological geography furnishing the movement's symbolic reservoir.³³ These groups underwent contested religious interactions with their Sufi orientation and Ash'ari creed, making the arena prepared for the emergence of radical movements such as the Islamic Movement led by Zakzaky and the Renewal group that split from it, as well as supporters of the Izala movement, leading to other Salafi movements such as Ahl al-Sunna lil-Hijra, founded by Abubakar Lawan.³⁴ All these components formed a suitable environment that Muhammad Yusuf succeeded in melting and leading within a unified protest project.

Subsection One: The preaching-protest phase (2002–2009)

The features of this phase are defined as a local protest phase and preaching legitimization: Muhammad Yusuf's discourse focused on criticizing state policies and civil education within a local protest-oriented Salafi framework. In this phase, the concept of ḥākimiyya remained a tool for stripping political legitimacy from the democratic system. Yet violence remained within a narrow sphere of limited protest experimentation, and had not yet become a comprehensive insurgency, with the movement remaining tied to a clear geographic centrality in Maiduguri.³⁵

1. Identity discourse and local protest

"Boko Haram" emerged in northeastern Nigeria within a historical memory burdened by nostalgia and the double wound (replace with: and the crisis of geopolitical identity). Maiduguri—the group's cradle and the capital of Borno State—carried an ancient Islamic heritage extending to the thirteenth century, when the Kingdom of Borno was among the strongest kingdoms in sub-Saharan Africa,³⁶ and a political and scholarly center of wide influence. This imperial heritage left in Kanuri consciousness a sense of historical superiority, but it turned into a heavy symbolic burden (replace with: a sense of historical and institutional marginalization) when these communities found themselves on the margins of the modern state, feeding an accumulated sense of deprivation and marginalization and a desire to

³³ Kyari Mohammed, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram," in *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014), 11-12

³⁴ Freedom Onuoha, "Boko Haram and the Evolving Salafi Jihadist Threat in Nigeria," in *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014), 159; Manuel Reinert and Lou Garçon, "Boko Haram: A Chronology," *ibid.*, 237.

³⁵ Muhammad Yusuf Abu Yusuf al-Maiduguri, *This Is Our Creed and the Method of Our Call*, Maktabat al-Ghuraba', 2nd ed., 2009,-

³⁶ Hiribarren, V.A History of Borno: Trans-Saharan African Empire to Nigerian State. Oxford University Press. (2017).

recover an imagined past mythologized by popular narratives.³⁷

In this context, “Muhammad Yusuf” was skilled at crafting a discourse blending three interlocking elements: complaining about the economic and political marginalization experienced by northeastern populations; religious mobilization built on rejecting the constitutional state and everything attributed to “the West”; and employing Kanuri affiliation as a vessel of symbolic selection rather than a mere ethnic bond. This discourse justified rejecting civil education as a colonial Christianizing tool, as Yusuf affirmed: “These foreign, global, colonial schools have adopted matters that contradict Islamic sharia, and it is forbidden to operate them, support them, or study and teach in them.”³⁸ This view did not pass without firm legal opposition: Shaykh Ja’far Mahmud Adam strongly objected to the approach, warning of catastrophic consequences for Muslims, saying in his famous debates and lectures: “If Muslims in Nigeria do not receive Western education, then pagan police will be the ones killing and injuring Muslims, and when they are taken to hospitals they will be treated by pagan doctors and nurses, because Muslims will not possess these skills.”³⁹ Other scholars argued that opposing education would inevitably lead to a decline in Muslims’ economic and political standing in the north and deepen their isolation.

Accordingly, Yusuf completed his rejection of the constitutional state as the opposite of divine sovereignty, rejecting everyone who supported this system or worked under it. Protest began from a local frame, fueled by accumulated state failure and successive attempts at solutions, alongside a sense of abundance of oil, products, and history, without local populations receiving a share. The protest was local in essence, nourished by real grievances connected to unemployment, poverty, and the absence of distributive justice, but it quickly took on a comprehensive doctrinal garb when “Yusuf” reclassified Nigerian reality as a state of *jāhiliyya* requiring rupture and confrontation, employing *takfīr* concepts for this purpose.

He added to ordinary protest a new protest produced by the issue of Sharia implementation, increasing Yusuf’s criticism as his movement began to take shape. He began to see in stricter positions greater popularity, and correspondingly more political demands. The movement issued reprimands to the state governor whenever Yusuf’s and his supporters’ demands were delayed, until it reached describing him as having abandoned fidelity to it.

Later investigations and government documents continued to indicate the role of the governor (Ali Modu Sheriff) as accused of contributing to the movement’s creation or turning a blind eye, because he sought to exploit its influence to build his political capital against traditional families.⁴⁰ Protest reached its peak from both the movement and the state government until reality ended the alliance and disagreement began—managed by the group through employing *takfīr* discourse and inflaming radical feelings that had been invested in for years—leading to the collapse of the political alliance and its transformation into a zero-sum confrontation.

³⁷ Africa Research Institute, *The Past is Present: How Boko Haram Exploits History and Memory*. Briefing Note. (2016).

³⁸ Muhammad Yusuf Abu Yusuf al-Maiduguri, **This Is Our Creed and the Method of Our Call**, Maktabat al-Ghuraba’, 2nd ed., 2009, p. 84.

³⁹ Thurston, Alexander. *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*. Princeton University Press, (2018), pp. 109-110

⁴⁰ Epitaph of a godfather, *TheCable*, April 21, 2015, <https://www.thecable.ng/epitaph-godfather/>

2. The Islamic environment is fertile for extremism

The discourse of extremism and purification began early with talk of removing “innovation” alongside the Salafism of Abubakar Gumi and his group, which turned traditional Sufi Islam into a battleground over who owns the representation of religion. It then passed through the Muslim Brotherhood, which inaugurated the transition to ideologized activist Islam, until reaching the peak of confrontation in burning the 1979 constitution. This is the reference that “Yusuf” melded into one crucible when he declared explicitly: “Every scholar who diminishes the status of Ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Qutb, Hasan al-Banna, or Usama bin Laden is not a true Islamic scholar.”⁴¹ This was followed by revolutionary Shi’ism, fueling the binary of the oppressed versus the *ṭāghūt*. When “Muhammad Yusuf” set out to build his group, he drew from this accumulated legacy more than he innovated. From this laboratory, Yusuf derived his core intellectual tools: unifying *ḥākimiyya*, declaring democracy unbelief, the obligation of rising against the unbelieving ruler, and the binary of the abode of faith versus the abode of *jāhiliyya*.

Turning a field into a sharp polarization always benefits extremists because they possess a clear answer that responds to emotion rather than reason, and can be outbid – especially in an oppositional context. Thus, it was easy for them to win a religious bidding war by the victory of the more hardline over the more moderate, weakening traditional institutions’ capacity to contain. In this space, “Yusuf” found fertile ground: an unfortified religious elite, angry youth seeking certainty, and a state institution wavering between promise and reneging.

3. The relationship with society and authority

Boko Haram’s relationship in its first phase was marked by a striking measure of pragmatism masked as principle. On the societal level, “Yusuf” built his presence through the Ibn Taymiyya Mosque in Maiduguri, which turned into a small parallel state providing a broad social support network and strong relationships, attracting segments of the poor and youth seeking belonging. The discourse expanded through Yusuf’s preaching tours in northern cities from Borno to Sokoto, investing social networks based on Kanuri ethnic ties and links of religious study and reception.

On the authority level, the group entered a pragmatic electoral alliance with the Borno State governor, Ali Modu Sheriff, in 2003 in exchange for promises to implement sharia, and some of its members obtained official posts.⁴² The sheriff also appointed one of Yusuf’s followers as commissioner for religious affairs. Yet this alliance carried from the outset the germ of its explosion (can be replaced with: structural contradictions): Yusuf demanded what a realistic authority could not provide, such as banning civil education and redistributing wealth according to his concept of Islamic governance. With disappointed promises and growing feelings of betrayal, the alliance shifted from pragmatism to a zero-sum confrontation, as Yusuf declared *takfir* of Sheriff to legitimate severing ties with him.⁴³

⁴¹ Muhammad Yusuf, audio recording (sermon), 2009, as cited in: Jacob Zenn, *In His Own Words: A Translation of Boko Haram's Video and Audio Messages*, (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018), p. 54.

⁴² International Crisis Group, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, Africa Report no. 216 (Brussels: ICG, April 3, 2014), 11

⁴³ Soni Daniel, *Boko Haram: FG gets 7-day ultimatum to prosecute Sheriff*, Vanguard News

In parallel, critical scholars were subjected to open takfir; the first practical effect of this escalation was the assassination of Shaykh Ja'far Mahmud Adam in 2007—an event that marked a turning point in dropping deterrent barriers against employing violence against traditional religious authority, and in which the organization announced its final rupture with the scholarly system.⁴⁴

4. The limited operational geography

Across Yusuf's years, the movement remained clearly local in geographic boundaries, with its main anchor in Maiduguri and the Ibn Taymiyya center, extending across five northeastern states: Borno, Yobe, Gombe, Adamawa, and Bauchi, with a lighter presence in northwestern states such as Kano, Jigawa, Katsina, and Sokoto. This presence was mostly limited to a modest preaching response to Yusuf's tours without a real organizational transformation. Even external supports connected to the Taliban and al-Qa'ida were within a secret layer.

An early geographic constraint appeared when "Muhammad Ali al-Barnawi" attempted to establish a separatist enclave in Kanama in Yobe State and the town of Gaidam, imitating the model of hijra and seclusion drawn from jihadist thought. However, this group clashed with residents, and the police intervened in December 2003, exposing the fragility of this separatist model and its inability to withstand contact with reality. Muhammad Yusuf himself and his shaykh disavowed it, claiming they had been outside the country.⁴⁵

The group's operations before 2009 did not exceed the narrow scope of limited protest experimentation, nor did it yet possess the logistical and organizational mechanisms enabling cross-border operations—though Kanuri ethnic links with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon constituted a silent social infrastructure that would later be exploited in a completely different phase.

Subsection Two: The militarization phase and takfir hardening (2009–2015)

The year 2009 represents a turning point of systematic militarization in the movement's history: the founder's killing and the bloody clash with the state shifted the discourse from soft protest to an avenging narrative. This transformation was not merely a security reaction; it was a radical rebuilding of the ideological system through investing the video of Yusuf's interrogation to build symbolic capital based on victimhood and martyrdom.⁴⁶ Accordingly, this legitimized the transition from a preaching group to an armed insurgent organization seeking to uproot the state and the society that differs with it.

1. The change in the criterion of violence

The killing of "Muhammad Yusuf" in July 2009 is a foundational event in the organization's story: it shifted the trajectory of violence from soft ideological building to organized revenge, making fighting, killing, revenge, readiness, and attack the center of the ideological system. This direction was foreshadowed weeks before his death when he explicitly called his

<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/09/boko-haram-fg-gets-7-day-ultimatum-prosecute-sheriff/>

44 Élodie Apard, "The Words of Boko Haram: Understanding Speeches by Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau," *Afrique contemporaine* 255, no. 3 (2015): 48

45 Andrew Walker, "Join Us or Die: The Birth of Boko Haram," *The Guardian*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/04/join-us-or-die-birth-of-boko-haram>

46 Zenn, Jacob. In His Own Words: A Translation of Boko Haram's Video and Audio Messages. West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018.

followers to material mobilization, saying: "One must prepare materially, such as learning shooting, buying rifles and bombs, and training the soldiers of Islam to fight the unbelievers. You must sacrifice your lives, your homes, your cars, and your motorcycles for the sake of God."⁴⁷

In contrast to this shift toward systematic militarization, Dr. Muhammad Sani offered a detailed response in Maiduguri (the movement's stronghold) before 2009, distinguishing between defensive jihad (legitimate when Muslim lands are attacked from outside) and offensive jihad adopted by armed groups against their own societies, describing it as "ineffective jihad lacking scholarly qualification." He explained that these extremists rely on "bad intermediaries" in understanding texts instead of returning to senior scholars.⁴⁸

The impact of Yusuf's killing was magnified by the public dissemination of the filmed interrogation before the field execution, enabling the new leadership to exploit it in building a martyrdom-and-victimhood narrative that granted the organization the symbolic capital it lacked. It did not stop at ordinary description, but added an ethnic dimension that added fuel to the reservoir of resentments.⁴⁹

Abubakar Shekau's leadership adopted a strategy of comprehensive takfir, where takfir shifted from a theoretical description directed at symbols of authority into an organizational tool—a strategic tool for controlling the field and imposing compliance. In this phase, the movement redefined its vital space by shifting from localism to a regional insurgency project, manifested in declaring a "caliphate" in Gwoza in 2014 and beginning to practice parallel governance functions such as taxation and issuing judicial rulings in areas under its control.⁵⁰

Under the leadership of "Abubakar Shekau," whose approach was characterized by adopting comprehensive takfir, violence underwent a qualitative shift at three distinct levels. At the level of the criterion, violence moved from being a selective tool for silencing rivals to being an existential principle by which the organization is defined and through which its message is expressed. At the level of targets, the circle expanded beyond state apparatuses to include society in its broad sense: mosques, markets, schools, aid workers, and traditional imams—becoming a cause of split even for Muhammad Yusuf's son. At the level of methods, since 2011, the organization entered the phase of suicide operations, embodied first in bombing the UN headquarters in Abuja, then in the Kano attacks in 2012 that produced large numbers of civilian victims and revealed what analysts described as the logic of collective punishment as a strategic tool of sustained terror.⁵¹

2. The expansion of the circle of takfir

The concept of political takfir, according to the summary of researchers Onoyemeakpo and

⁴⁷ Muhammad Yusuf, series of recorded speeches (Bluetooth/DVDs), June 2009, as cited in the report: International Crisis Group, "Northern Nigeria: Background to Boko Haram", Africa Report N°168, (20 December 2010), p. 12.

⁴⁸ Thurston, Alexander. *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 15-16.

⁴⁹ Manuel Reinert and Lou Garçon, "Boko Haram: A Chronology," in *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014), 238

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group. *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*. Africa Report no. 273. Brussels, 2019.

⁵¹ Élodie Apard, "The Words of Boko Haram: Understanding Speeches by Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau," *Afrique contemporaine* 255, no. 3 (2015): 59-61, <https://doi.org/10.3917/afco.255.0043>.

Ajisebiyawo, represents the most dangerous operational tool that transferred Qutbist ideology from theorization to practice within Boko Haram. The Shekau phase witnessed a radical expansion in applying this tool, turning it into a comprehensive administrative mechanism rather than a doctrinal ruling studied and regulated by classical jurisprudential controls.⁵²

Whereas Yusuf's takfir was largely directed toward the state, its symbols, and collaborating scholars—leaving open the possibility of rescuing the general public and rehabilitating them—takfir under Shekau came to encompass wide social categories for ordinary life practices: sending children to government schools, working in official institutions, participating in elections, and even praying behind imams who call for stability. Shekau grounded this in a selectively chosen interpretation of Ibn Taymiyya's statement that "excuse by ignorance is not considered in major shirk," deploying it categorically in a way that drops any consideration of context or intent.⁵³

This expanded takfir performed two contradictory functions at once: an internal mobilization function that strengthened followers' cohesion through the feeling of selection against a world described as total فساد; and a field function that broadened the circle of legitimate targets in a way that facilitated a strategy of collective terror. Yet the same mechanism carried the seed of internal erosion: targeting Muslims themselves led to continual bleeding of the social base and produced internal objections that helped pave later organizational splits.

3. Transformation into a global insurgent organization

The period 2013–2015 constitutes a qualitative break in the organization's nature: it shifted from the pattern of an armed preaching group that employs violence in the service of discourse to the pattern of an insurgent organization seeking territorial control and the establishment of an alternative system. Inspired by ISIS, the organization occupied entire cities in northeastern Nigeria, and "Shekau" announced a local "caliphate" in Gwoza in 2014, administering it through checkpoints, resource collection, and issuing judicial rulings.⁵⁴

The kidnapping of Chibok girls in April 2014—attracting wide international attention—provides an analytical model for understanding the logic of violence in this phase: kidnapping was not merely a forced recruitment practice or a funding source; it was simultaneously a strategic propaganda operation that elevated the organization's symbolic presence beyond its actual field capacity.

Subsection Three: Analyzing the Dynamics of Transformation

1. Is transformation the result of state pressure?

Transformation in the course of violence, targets, tools of execution, and victim selection proceeded through rushed internal interpretations that cannot be explained except through the activist framework that invents the event and then builds its doctrinalization. The activist

⁵² Onoyemeakpo, Joseph, and Adekunle S. Ajisebiyawo. "Boko Haram and the Ideology of Qutbism: Understanding the Basis for Religious Terrorism and Islamic-Fascism." *International Journal of Research* 9, no. 12 (December 2022).

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366250225_Boko_Haram_and_the_Ideology_of_Qutbism_Understanding_the_Basis_for_Religious_Terrorism_and_Islamic-Fascism

⁵³ A lecture by Abubakar Shekau, entitled "This Is Our Creed". Published on extremist websites; no publication date. : <https://archive.org/details/This.Is.Doctrine/This.Is.Doctrine.SD.360p.mp4>

⁵⁴ Thurston, Alexander. *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, pp. 197–240

method—even if it claims discipline to ideological frameworks—relies on ideology to interpret actions. When the movement needed to widen the scope of takfir, Muhammad Yusuf's ideas and words were translated into actions. When Sheko declared takfir of everyone in a recording known as "Arnani," in which he preached takfir of rulers, states, and Muslims, his motive was expanding the scope of attack and permitting bloodshed. When Barnawi needed to regulate takfir, he constrained it. That is, all the moves were governed by the political interest of the organization's leaders.⁵⁵

Another factor that continued to affect the thinking process was the state criterion and the style of confrontation: investigations revealed that the state, through both its failure to suppress and its excess in suppression, sometimes provided cover for the organization's propaganda, indicating the importance of holding a broad dialogue to adopt a strategy based on good practices, especially amid the growing idea of stigmatizing Kanuri as terrorists.

The sermons and tools of Muhammad Yusuf reveal that he linked history and text to his political positions and to Muslims' conditions in more than one country—especially those under severe abuses, such as Abu Ghraib abuses in Iraq, Qur'an burnings, Guantánamo, and the Palestinian cause. He exploited these to direct listeners through takfir tools and calls to fighting, yet they remained bound by the ceiling of the "preaching phase" in his public discourse at the time, as embodied in his famous statement to the global media: "An Islamic system of governance must be established in Nigeria, and if possible throughout the world, but through preaching."⁵⁶ These positions were limited and local and easily framed as symbolic, whereas under Shekau, they transformed into a clear program of action.⁵⁷

In the context of external criticism of the intellectual system that produced this transformation, sharp reactions emerged from Sufi leadership (Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya), which saw these young preachers as a danger to social peace and local religious identity. Dr. "Lawai Atiq" (from Tijani leadership) described these preachers as lacking Nigeria's scholarly and historical depth, calling them "General Enterprises" who studied abroad and returned ignorant of 99% of the fundamentals of religion in the local context, wanting to lead blind people while possessing only one eye.⁵⁸ In the same theoretical direction, Shaykh "Abduljabbar Kabara" used Ibn Taymiyya's own texts to show that "ignorant Salafis" (in his reference to extremists) did not even understand their own shaykhs' books they cite.⁵⁹ Thus, the picture of the scholarly siege faced by Yusuf's discourse from various Nigerian religious components before its full shift toward explicit violence is completed.

Summary of Doctrinal Transformation up to 2015

⁵⁵ Élodie Aparé, "The Words of Boko Haram: Understanding Speeches by Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau," *Afrique contemporaine* 255, no. 3 (2015): 59-61, <https://doi.org/10.3917/afco.255.0043>.

⁵⁶ Muhammad Yusuf, statement to Agence France-Presse (AFP), January 11, 2006, as cited in:

Jacob Zenn, *In His Own Words: A Translation of Boko Haram's Video and Audio Messages*, (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018), p. 22.

⁵⁷ Élodie Aparé, "The Words of Boko Haram: Understanding Speeches by Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau," *Afrique Contemporaine* 255, no. 3 (2015): 48-49.

⁵⁸ Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 110-115

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 215. See also: (Abduljabbar Kabara's Facebook posts, 2015)

Tracing the movement's historical trajectory in this section revealed verification of the hypothesis through systematic militarization after the founder Muhammad Yusuf's killing: takfir under Shekau shifted from a doctrinal ruling directed at the state into a comprehensive administrative mechanism legitimating targeting society, civilians, and expanding the circle of violence. This takfir hardening gave the movement the ideological fuel to move from local protest to comprehensive insurgency, demonstrating that ideology was the primary driver in redefining the enemy and the operational field before any purely security pressure.

Section Three: Geopolitical repositioning and regional crossing (2015–2025)

Subsection One: Networked transformation and redefining the vital space

1. The effect of the pledge and network organization.

The pledge of allegiance by "Abubakar Shekau" to "ISIS" in March 2015 represents a turning point that goes beyond the procedural-symbolic dimension to an identity and organizational re-engineering. This pledge came amid escalating military pressure, raising the question of whether it expressed a deeply rooted ideological conviction or an institutional survival strategy under tightening regional security pressure. Most likely, it was a mix of both, explaining why the pledge did not lead to genuine organizational integration but to a conditional partnership in which local leadership maintained its tactical independence.

On the organizational level, the pledge enabled a transition from a centralized hierarchical pattern with a geographic reference (Maiduguri) to a distributed network pattern with a global ideological reference. This transition carries major security consequences: it makes the organization less vulnerable to total collapse when any of its centers are destroyed, and more capable of absorbing leadership losses and reconstituting. On the propaganda level, the pledge enabled leveraging ISIS's media production machine to reach a recruitment audience across borders and local ethnic identities.

2. The shift to a regional pattern

With the evolution of Nigeria's response method and the formation of the alliance seeking to combat Boko Haram in Lake Chad, the organization transformed into a system of semi-independent operational nodes distributed across the Lake Chad Basin, each with a degree of tactical independence while maintaining a unifying ideological affiliation.

This shift enabled flexibility in confronting multinational security campaigns, since the whole network is not harmed by striking any single node; adaptability to varying local environments, as each node became capable of recruiting local elements, securing self-financing, and building its own tribal and social alliances; and distributing leadership risks across multiple centers rather than concentrating them in one person or place.

Subsection Two: Expansion in the Lake Chad Basin

Boko Haram's regional expansion in the Lake Chad Basin constitutes a field embodiment of the study's hypothesis about the interactive relationship between doctrinal transformation and geopolitical positioning. After pledging allegiance to ISIS in March 2015, the movement moved from the pattern of "localism" to the space of "networked wilaya affiliation," where

national borders among Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad no longer represent legal obstacles but became “strategic breaches” redefined doctrinally as “land of empowerment.”

Historical tracking of the movement’s operations reveals that ideological geography preceded field expansion: the cross-border doctrinal discourse legitimized material crossing before it occurred. To clarify this transformational trajectory from local to regional scope, the following table presents the timeline of the most important field expansion stations, showing operation types and their strategic significance in the context of the movement’s geopolitical repositioning.

Year	State	Type of operation	Strategic significance
2014	Cameroon, Niger, Chad	Targeting military bases and security points.	Beginning to transcend national borders and internationalize the conflict to reduce pressure inside Nigeria.
2015	Lake Chad Basin region	Pledging allegiance to ISIS and shifting to a “networked wilaya affiliation” model.	Transition from centralized structure to independent operational nodes, ensuring organizational sustainability.
2016	Nigeria (Lake region)	Announcing “Abu Musab al-Barnawi” as wali over the West Africa Province.	Institutionalizing the organizational split and the emergence of a new strategy seeking to win the popular base.
2023	Lake Chad region	The “Buduma” faction splits from West Africa Province (ISWAP).	Continued erosion of ISIS’s organizational centrality and emergence of local actors rejecting external tutelage.

(Table 2)

1. Distribution of operations across borders

The geopolitical structure of the Lake Chad Basin represents a foundational structural variable in explaining the cross-border character the organization acquired: borders between Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad in this region are a colonial extension drawn entirely apart from ethnic, tribal, and social reality; thus, they remained formal sovereign borders in the face of a cross-border social reality that ignores them. This contradiction between official sovereignty and social reality provided the organization with a wide strategic margin to exploit governance gaps at the borders.

Cross-border operations began escalating since 2014 in Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, targeting, in their early stages, military bases and security points, before expanding to include civilian areas, markets, and displacement camps. This expansion performed two simultaneous strategic functions: first, reducing military pressure inside Nigeria by forcing regional forces to distribute resources across multiple fronts; second, internationalizing the crisis such that resolving it becomes conditional on regional coordination that rarely proceeds with the required smoothness.⁶⁰

2. Patterns of alliance and split

Analyzing the organization’s structure in its regional phase reveals a complex dynamic of alliance and split that starkly reflects internal contradictions that the pledge did not resolve

⁶⁰ International Crisis Group, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, Africa Report no. 273 (Brussels: ICG, 2019), 2

but only reframed. In August 2016, ISIS appointed “Abu Musab al-Barnawi” as wali over the “West Africa Province,” thereby excluding “Shekau,” who refused submission to any external tutelage,⁶¹ and he split with his independent faction. The chasm between the two factions manifested in a fundamental normative issue regarding the stance toward targeting Muslims: whereas “Shekau” defended a strategy of comprehensive terror without distinction, the Barnawi faction sought to win the popular base and publicly criticized attacks on mosques and markets – requiring revisiting the strategy of takfir.⁶²

The dynamics of splitting did not stop at the historical conflict between Shekau and Barnawi; it continued as a structural feature within the organization even during periods of military decline. In this context, the split of the “Buduma” faction – known as Kayla – from ISIS in 2023 stands out; this faction announced joining the wing rejecting submission to West Africa Province affiliated to the ISIS center.

Trusted research reports, especially the International Crisis Group report (2024), show that this continuing internal fighting between splinter factions did not lead to an overall decline in violence intensity; rather, it produced geopolitical redistribution and changed the map of field control, especially in Lake Chad islands. This reflects the continuing condition of “erosion of organizational centrality” from which the organization suffers, as local loyalties and field interests in the lake areas sometimes advance over ideological loyalty to global centers.⁶³

A methodological comparison between the two factions reveals a radical divergence in doctrinal vision and field behavior. Regarding takfir, the Shekau faction (JAS) adopted a “comprehensive takfir” strategy extending to society as a whole, based on a hardline interpretation that removes “excuse by ignorance” from anyone who participated in the tāghūt system or prayed behind its imams. By contrast, the Barnawi faction (ISWAP) adopted a regulated takfir focusing on state symbols and the army while seeking to neutralize ordinary Muslims. This divergence reflected directly in targeting civilians: Shekau adopted the logic of “collective punishment” and comprehensive terror through bombing mosques and markets, while Barnawi publicly criticized these operations and sought to win the popular base by avoiding the permissibility of common people’s blood.

At the level of governance, the Shekau faction was characterized by coercive military control based on looting and pure coercion. By contrast, the Barnawi faction developed a form of “rebel governance” in lake areas, including managing economic activities, collecting zakat and organizing taxes, and establishing an alternative judicial system.

Regarding expansion, the Shekau faction focused on suicide attacks and conventional territorial control in Gwoza and Borno. The Barnawi faction pursued a “networked wilaya affiliation” pattern through flexible expansion in lake islands and vital commercial nodes, benefiting from border fragility to strengthen its cross-state regional positioning.

3. Administering areas and temporary control.

⁶¹ Jamestown Foundation, “Islamic State in West Africa Province's Factional Disputes and the Battle with Boko Haram,” Terrorism Monitor, March 22, 2020

⁶² Mahmood, Omar, and Ndubuisi Ani. “Factional Dynamics within Boko Haram.” ISS Paper 305. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2018. p. 3

⁶³ International Crisis Group, *JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters*, Africa Briefing No.196, Dakar/Brussels, 28 March 2024, pp. 2,6.

When the organization extended its influence over areas in the Lake Chad Basin, it resorted to an administrative pattern partially drawn from ISIS's experience in other environments and adapted to African specificities. It relied on collecting resources from fishing and pastoral communities, imposing behavioral rules on residents, and making temporary protection deals with local groups in areas where the state is absent.

However, this control remained fragile and temporary by nature for structural reasons: the organization did not possess the human mass necessary to administer land, nor the economic resources sufficient to sustain loyalty. The more it expanded geographically, the more it faced strikes by the Multinational Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad Basin, which since 2015 constituted the most organized counter-confrontation, even if it remained short of final decisiveness.

There is another view: the organization drew from historical memory the idea of stopping at commercial nodes and building its profits upon them through levies, transit and protection fees, arms trade, and this appears in some of the organization's expansions, its survival map, and its economy, which formed a network even involving some corrupt state officials, as appeared in official investigations.⁶⁴

Subsection Three: The dialectic of discourse, violence, and the network

1. Did discourse precede expansion or the reverse?

Sources confirm that ideological geography is the field drawn by doctrinal discourse as an imagined land of empowerment, and that it preceded actual field expansion. The Lake Chad Basin was presented in the movement's discourse—especially in Abubakar Shekau's recordings—as a single arena of doctrinal conflict that transcends state sovereignty and colonial borders before being translated into field action. The ideology that declared takfir of the national system necessitated inventing a networked organization capable of crossing borders, finding in the fragility of the Lake Chad Basin an ideal environment for expansion. Thus, doctrinal discourse legitimized and directed field action, rejecting national borders as a colonial product with no weight in the logic of "the abode of Islam."

The regional phase of Boko Haram poses a central analytical problem concerning the causal relationship between discourse and geographic expansion: did ideological discourse from the outset carry the seeds of regional expansion such that expansion was a logical completion of its content, or did tactical necessities and field pressures impose expansion, prompting later reformulation of discourse to justify and frame it?

Available evidence suggests that Qutbist-jihadist discourse carried from its founding cross-border and cross-national seeds, as it rejects national borders in principle as an imposed colonial product carrying no weight in the logic of "the abode of Islam." From this angle, one can say that regional expansion was present in the intellectual system as a legitimate—even desirable—possibility before field and organizational conditions emerged to transform it from principle to action. Kanuri cross-border ethnic networks added the social infrastructure,

⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters, Africa Briefing No.196, Dakar/Brussels, 28 March 2024, pp. 2–3, 8–11.

making this expansion practically possible, preceding any added doctrinal justification.

However, the shift from principle to application required tangible discursive adaptation. What proved effective in Maiduguri in terms of topics, vocabulary, and grievances was not necessarily fit for circulation among Cameroonian fishing communities or Chadian pastoralists, whose complaints and identities differed, forcing the organization to soften some aspects of its discourse or borrow local grievances not originally in its intellectual program. Thus, a living dialectical relationship arose between discourse-producing action and action reshaping discourse, in a continuous feedback loop.

Final Verification of the Hypothesis

Final verification of the hypothesis in this section is embodied in the concept of networked wilaya affiliation: the ISIS pledge in 2015 broke the tie to local geographic reference (Maiduguri) and integrated into a global ideological reference that considers national borders mere colonial obstacles. Expansion in the Lake Chad Basin demonstrated that interaction between cross-border doctrinal discourse and geopolitical fragility enabled the movement to reposition as a regional network, confirming that doctrinal discourse legitimized and directed field action, not the reverse.

Key findings

1. The research showed that doctrinal transformation within Boko Haram was not merely a linguistic shift in religious discourse; it represented a “legitimizing mechanism” that redefined political legitimacy, the enemy, and the boundaries of belonging, providing the ideological cover necessary for the movement’s transition from local protest to cross-border regional insurgency.
2. The analysis showed that the concept of takfir evolved from a theoretical doctrinal ruling directed at symbols of authority in the preaching phase (2002–2009) into a comprehensive “organizational tool” under Abubakar Shekau, used to legitimate a strategy of comprehensive terror and targeting society, civilians, and international institutions, transforming violence from a selective tool into an existential principle of the organization.
3. Tracing the discourse indicates that “ideological geography” preceded actual field expansion, as discourse rejecting national borders as a “colonial product” legitimized the act of material crossing toward the Lake Chad Basin before it occurred in the field.
4. The study showed that the pledge of allegiance to ISIS in 2015 produced a structural transformation toward a “networked wilaya affiliation” pattern, enabling the movement to shift from a centralized structure tied to a specific place—Maiduguri—to a pattern of distributed operational nodes, granting the organization strategic flexibility, sustainability, and distribution of leadership risks despite regional military pressure.
5. The study concluded that expansion in the Lake Chad Basin produced a pattern of “rebel governance,” as the movement exercised alternative sovereign functions such as judiciary, taxation, and regulating economic activities such as fishing and agriculture, exploiting institutional fragility and porous borders to shift from a protest group to a de facto authority in temporarily controlled areas.

6. The methodological comparison between the Shekau and Barnawi factions revealed that divergence in the “political application” system of doctrinal concepts, such as regulated takfir versus comprehensive takfir, determined differences in geopolitical behavior, especially with regard to the popular base, criteria for targeting civilians, and patterns of territorial control.

Conclusion

This study shows that the transformation Boko Haram experienced since its emergence in 2002 was not merely an escalation in the level of violence; rather, it was the result of a complex interaction between doctrinal transformation and the geopolitical context within which the movement moved. Reinterpreting concepts such as legitimacy, takfir, and loyalty contributed to building an intellectual framework enabling the redefinition of the enemy and expanding the circle of targeting. At the same time, the geopolitical environment of the Lake Chad Basin—characterized by institutional weakness, porous borders, and cross-state social networks—provided the conditions that enabled the movement to expand its operations beyond Nigeria.

The study’s results indicate that understanding the dynamics of contemporary jihadist movements requires moving beyond approaches that separate ideological analysis from security analysis; patterns of violence and geographic expansion cannot be explained without studying the interactive relationship between doctrinal discourse and the geopolitical structure in which armed actors operate. Thus, the study provides an interpretive framework linking intellectual transformation and reshaping the operational field, which may contribute to developing more integrated approaches to understanding the phenomenon of violent extremism in West Africa.

The study’s Scientific Contribution

The added scientific value of this study lies in presenting a composite analytical model that goes beyond traditional security and economic readings by linking doctrinal transformation and geopolitical repositioning methodologically. The study succeeded in bridging the research gap related to how doctrinal concepts such as takfir and ḥākimiyya shift from preaching ideas into organizational and field tools that legitimized violence and expanded its geographic scope. It also provided grounding for the concept of “ideological geography,” proving that the doctrinal conception of an imagined land of empowerment in the movement’s discourse is what later drew the limits of field expansion in the Lake Chad Basin. In addition, the study contributed to modeling the concept of “networked wilaya affiliation” as a tool for understanding the transition of extremist groups from local hierarchical structures to flexible cross-border regional networks.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the study’s pursuit of comprehensiveness, it encountered methodological limits imposed by complex security conditions in the Lake Chad Basin region, preventing direct access to some primary field sources. This was compensated for through analyzing the corpus (Corpus) of recorded speeches and trusted international reports to ensure scientific precision. The temporal scope of observation also stopped in early 2025. Accordingly, the study opens prospects for future research that can focus on sociological dimensions of ethnic recruitment networks—especially Kanuri—or study the impact of continuing organizational splits

between the Barnawi and Shekau factions on the sustainability of “rebel governance” models in areas where state sovereignty is absent. The door also remains open to study the impact of intensified regional military interventions on changing the movement’s “doctrinal strategy” in the future.

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