

Radicalization and Counter-radicalization in Northern Nigeria

Policy Brief No 2

Religious and Ideological Dimensions of Radicalization

Background

Religion is a prominent issue in the public discourses about the many sources of radicalization. In addition to the economic, social, political, psychological, historical factors, religion is seen as part of the ideologies that provide justification for radicalized individuals and groups.

The role of ideology in radical movements is somewhat paradoxical. Most radical movements define themselves in ideological terms. Yet their rank and file members are not always sufficiently ideologically informed; even some radical leaders may not have firm grasp of ideological subtleties. Equally relevant are the changing saliency of the different ideological components in the evolution of radical movements.

A crucial function of radicalizing ideologies is to provide justification for violence against the innocent, often by denying their humanity, blaming the victim, disengaging morally from the society, etc.

Salafism and Jihadism are the two ideologies that radical Islamist movements commonly adopt. A recurrent trend in Islamic thought and history, Salafism emphasizes a scriptural literalism that holds the meanings of Qur'an and the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad are always manifestly clear, requiring no contextual understanding or reinterpretation at different times and places. Salafism claims exclusive ownership of those manifestly clear meanings, which it claims to be the pristine version of Islam devoid of historical, cultural and social accretions. It rejects alternative interpretations of Islam as heretical innovations. Literalism, Puritanism and Exclusivism are

three key components that make Salafism a radicalizing ideology. Wahhabism, a version of Salafism prominently associated with Saudi Arabia, has been employed to support or challenge the status quo. This dual ideological deployment of Salafism is also discernible in Nigeria.

Jihadism is the ideological reinterpretation of the traditional Islamic concept of Jihad. Traditional interpretations of jihad imposed legal limits on the conduct of jihad, including the stipulations that only duly constituted Muslim political authorities could declare the beginning and ending of hostilities, and only proportional force should be used on legitimate and specific targets. As a contemporary Islamist ideology, jihadism is a cosmic conflict of good vs. evil, which makes it a total war without any limits—a sharp contrast with the legal and political stipulations in the traditional conceptions of jihad.

This brief is based on two studies. Using the method of discourse analysis, one study examined how Islamic scholars (known as *ulama*, the plural of the Arabic term *alim*, which means the learned) **may** ideologically contribute to radicalization **and** counter-radicalization through their sermons, lectures, and public pronouncements that are recorded in compact discs and sold in various outlets. The study explores not only the theological issues in contention but also the important social, cultural, economic, and political issues at stake.¹

¹ M. Sani Umar, (2014), The Roles of the Ulama in Radicalization, Counter-radicalization, and Deradicalization, NSRP Project on Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization, & De-radicalization in northern Nigeria, NSR

The second study examines the *life histories* of deceased and current JAS members. These histories were collected through interviews with family and friends of forty (40) JAS members were identified through snowball method of sample selection.

The interviews were conducted in Maiduguri and Bama in April-June 2014 under difficult circumstances that made snowball as the only feasible method. Given the small size of the sample and the method of sample selection, the findings should be considered as illustrative rather than

representative.

By assessing the ideological impact of Islamic ideas and the different pathways followed by radicalized individuals who joined the JAS, the study reveals the limited ideological impact on the rank and file members of the insurgency.²

2 M. Sani Umar and David Ehrhardt, (2014) Pathways to Radicalization: Life Histories of JAS Members, NSRP Project on Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization, & De-radicalization in northern Nigeria, NSRP, Abuja.



Islamic scholars and their roles in ideological radicalization and counter-radicalization

The biggest asset of the ulama is their religious learning through which they construct Islamic identities, norms, beliefs and practices. They are deeply rooted in their communities in ways that allow them to articulate community concerns. Their mosques and Islamic schools give the ulama not only institutional platforms but also extensive social networks and channels of effective communication through which the ulama influence their large and loyal followers.

The influence of the ulama can hardly be overemphasized. Yet it is not unlimited. Sectarian divisions have confined the influence of specific ulama to their disciples only, and have also reduced the likelihood that they will speak with one voice. Intense competition for followers and influence has fragmented the religious authority of the ulama, allowing self-starters, trouble-makers, and autodidacts to claim and exercise religious authority.

Constitutional provisions for freedom of religion, expression and association mean that government cannot impose on the ulama to speak with one voice. Similarly, constitutional provisions against establishment of state religion limit the powers of government to sponsor the popularization of the

religious discourses of those ulama who are opposed to radicalization.

The Jama'atu Izalat al-Bid'a wa iqamat al-Sunna (Izala or JIBWIS) is the populist Islamic movement that has been spreading Salafism in Nigeria since the 1970s. Doctrinal differences and leadership disputes split Izala into different factions, including politically active factions that challenge the status quo. Emerging as a break-away faction of Izala, JAS has added jihadism to the Salafism it inherited from its parent organization.

When Salafism is employed for political activism, it could become a radicalizing ideology that may lead to violence, but not always. Therefore it is imperative to understand how and why ideological radicalization may remain non-violent or end up in violence, including terrorism in some cases.

The ulama can play active roles in promoting radicalization as well as counter-radicalization and deradicalization through the multiple roles they play in society. But it is important to note that the ulama are not a monolithic entity but a heterogeneous group with many significant differences.

Over the last four decades, *some* Nigerian ulama have contributed to radicalization in different ways:

- Creating a **climate of opinion** favorable to radicalization
- Articulating **division and raising tension** through religious polemics
- Constructing **Muslims' victimhood** through far-fetched conspiracy theories
- *Resorting to Ridiculing and demonizing* opponents and perceived enemies
- Providing implicit **justification for physical violence**

It is imperative to note that **not all** of the ulama have contributed to radicalization; some have even preached vigorously against it.

Individual Pathways into Ideological Radicalization

The key findings of the life histories of JAS members can be captured in one sentence: *JAS membership does not have a single profile, or a single pathway of becoming radicalized.* Most members in the small sample are Muslim, Kanuri and male, and joined mostly as young men (age range at joining from 16 to 32). But there were non-Kanuri (1 Babur and 1 with a Kogi ethnic background) and 2 women in the sample as well. Apart from these features, JAS members share little else.

JAS membership is diverse in terms of educational background, family life, economic status and motivation. Twenty-one (21) members had *tsangaya* Qur'anic education, 5 members had some primary secular and Qur'anic education, 12 members had both some secondary secular and Qur'anic education, and 2 members had tertiary secular and Islamic education. Although prominent among the JAS members, *almajirai*, the pupils of Qur'anic schools commonly considered ready recruit into radicalization, are by no means the only ones. Equally important, not all *almajirai* are members of JAS, or even radicalized in any sense of the term.

Ideological impact of Islamic ideas appears to be indirect and vague. In several cases, members joined JAS because they were part of the Izala group that broke away to become JAS. Some of the members joined because they believed in the JAS teachings, and were convinced by the charismatic leadership of Mohammed Yusuf when he was still alive. There is little explicit reference to Salafist or Jihadist ideas among the rank and file members interviewed. This should not be surprising in light of the paradoxical role of ideology in defining and legitimating radical movements but not necessarily commanding the allegiance of ordinary members.

When asked about the reasons why individual members joined JAS, interviewees presented a complex and nuanced picture, mentioning poverty, political and economic marginalization, and corruption as the causes of radicalization. Perhaps surprisingly, in only 3 cases was poverty or monetary gain explicitly mentioned as a cause of the radicalization of specific JAS members. At the same time, virtually all interviewees mentioned monetary gain and poverty as reasons for joining JAS in general. This finding

indicates the complex ways through which economic factors may contribute to radicalization.

Family connections, and social bonds in general, have been widely reported as a common pathway to radicalization. Most of the respondents had friends and/or family members in JAS before they joined the organization; in 28 cases, family members or friends were explicitly mentioned as a crucial step in the pathways to joining JAS. One interviewee notes that after JAS' return from exile in 2009 they concentrated their recruitment primarily toward families of existing JAS members.

Significantly, none of the members were led to join by their fathers, and there are several stories of fathers who were not happy with their children joining JAS. Some were pushed to join JAS by the threat of a security force crackdown because of the membership of their relatives. Some had good relationships with their families, while others did not. Some are/were married, often with children, but others are/were not. It appears that husbands persuaded or forced their wives to join.

Although apparently intuitive, family connections lead to radicalization in various ways: the desire to avenge loss of relatives killed in confrontation between security forces and JAS; the honor or even financial reward that may accrue to families, whose members have been "martyred;" recruitment made easier by family bonds, or by unhappy family ties due to abuse or dysfunctional family backgrounds, etc.

The last but not least the important finding illuminates the critical issue of embracing violence as the final stage of radicalization. Only in two cases did interviewees mention that JAS members were engaged in violence or other forms of criminal activity prior to joining JAS. Conversely, almost all the interviewees noted that the JAS members became involved in killings, destruction of property and other forms of violence after joining the organization. The impact of ideology on ordinary members can be discerned here in terms of their acceptance of violence.

Prior to the violence that erupted in July 2009, religious conviction was more prominent reasons for joining JAS, but social and economic considerations became more prominent reasons after that date. JAS embarked on indiscriminate violence only after July 2009. Consistent with the academic literature, JAS engagement in violence has evolved incrementally.

Policy Recommendations

Survey results indicate that the vast majority of Nigeria Muslims are not affiliated to any sectarian group. Most probably, they are also not inclined toward religious radicalism, much less indiscriminate violence. This is the critical constituency that should be mobilized to resist ideological radicalization. It is strategically important to connect with the vast majority of citizens and foster their support against radicalization.

Specific suggestions for engaging the Ulama:

- Ulama willing to articulate authentically Islamic theological refutation of radical discourses are clearly potential partners, and should be given all the encouragements to do so. Demonization of the other can be exposed as contrary to the Islamic respect for human dignity. Constructions of Muslims' victimhood and the supporting conspiracy theories must be challenged with convincing empirical facts. In addition, the high potential of demonization to lead to violence should be highlighted to serve as a deterrent.
- The grave potential of radicalization to escalate into violence should be amply illustrated by publicizing the terrible consequences of violence on the lives of specific individuals who have been traumatized in so many different ways. Video-recording of their testimonies should be massively aired in order to make potential recruits to realize the grave consequences of radicalization on fellow human beings.
- The centrality of mass and portable media in creating a climate of opinion favorable to radicalization should be frontally confronted through constant monitoring of the radical discourses recorded and spread in mass and portable media as well as cell phones, internet websites and social media. Once new radicalizing discourses are identified, forceful rebuttals should be immediately mounted through the same media.

Specific suggestions for countering ideological radicalization

- Radicalized individuals and groups who resort to violence should be firmly contained. Where it is necessary to deploy security forces, utmost caution is imperative. Rules of engagement should be observed scrupulously to minimize negative impact on the law abiding citizens. Radical groups and individuals who eschew violence should be monitored and controlled

through policies and programs that should be geared, first and foremost, toward preventing them from becoming violent.

- The lack of a single JAS member 'profile' suggests that it will not be fruitful to use profiling as a strategy to identify and target potential JAS members. Instead, the Nigerian government should enhance intelligence capabilities for early monitoring, detecting and addressing the main push and pull factors towards radicalization.
- The critical roles of family ties dictate the imperative to break through the social pressure that family members and friends can exercise to radicalize individuals. A media campaign can be mounted to present ways for individuals to resist pressure from family members and friends. Family counseling can equip parents to detect early signs of radicalization and the appropriate steps to take. The Presidential Victims Support Fund should be prompt and transparent in compensating surviving victims of violence who are mostly often women.
- Defectors and ex-members need to be rehabilitated through a 'hearts-and-minds' strategy that creates a safe space for defectors from JAS, and through the provision of other public goods and the improvement of socio-economic opportunities in the region.
- Collective punishment of families whose members become violent radicals should be avoided not only because it is illegal and morally hazardous, but more importantly, because lawlessness on the part of the security forces is counter-productive. It sets in motion the spiral of violence in which revenge and counter-revenge can rage on and on, thereby sapping resources, morale and legitimacy.

The struggle against radicalization is going to be long and hard, but it must be pursued with carefully crafted policies and programs that should be tactfully implemented. In addition to confronting violent radicals and preventing the spill-over into violence, empirical data should be employed to refute radical worldviews through counter-radical discourses. Addressing the explicitly stated grievances of radicalized groups and individuals should be incorporated into the programs and policies aimed at tackling the underlying conditions and root-causes of radicalization.