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Islamic martyrdom in northern Nigeria¹

Abstract

The paper discusses some elements of the tradition of martyrdom among Muslims in northern Nigeria. It describes the basic frameworks of the concept of martyrdom in Islam with special reference to its contemporary usage. Then it discusses the shape of the idea of martyrdom during the times of Usman dan Fodio's jihad. It further examines the concept of martyrdom as presented in the speeches of Muhammad Yusuf, the ideologue of the Boko Haram organisation, as well as its practical implementation in the times of the current rebellion in northern Nigeria.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Islam, martyrdom, northern Nigeria, suicide

1. Introduction

The idea of physical sacrifice of one's life for the sake of beliefs is common in various religions across the world, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam, (Kilani & Suberu 2015: 122-123). The concept of martyrdom serves as a means to make sense of one of the most difficult experiences humans unavoidably face. As David Cook puts it,

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[u]ltimately martyrdom is an attempt to rescue some type of meaning and dignity from death. Since all humans die, often unexpectedly, many in agony or horror, martyrdom represents a control over the uncontrollable. It does not seek to avoid death, but gives meaning to it by embracing the process and making it significant for the other faithful and also for prospective converts. By recounting in excruciating and oftentimes gory detail this death process the martyrology makes death comprehensible and familiar, even enticing to some people (Cook 2007: 11).

Apart from its religious sense, the idea of martyrdom gains pragmatic meaning when analyzed with regard to a phenomenon of suicide terrorism. In this dimension, martyrdom has been presented by plenty of authors as a rational choice based on martyrs' conviction that benefits of their death outweigh the cost (Moghadam 2008: 51). When applied by a non-state actor (e.g. an insurgent group) as tactics of asymmetric war against more powerful state forces, suicide terrorism is perceived as rational strategy to defeat stronger enemy. Indeed, there exist several reasons to see the decision to adopt suicide missions as a rational and well calculated method, such as relatively low operational and cadre costs, as well as large-scale impact of the attack, which captures media attention, shocks public opinion and can influence policymakers. These factors prove martyrdom's rationality on the level of organizational decisions, whilst they do not explain why individuals accept their role as martyrs to fulfil the goals of the organization they belong to or the group they identify with. Beyond rational arguments, cultural and religious symbolism plays a vital role in motivating future martyrs to sacrifice their lives in suicide missions (Hafez 2009).

In northern Nigeria, the first suicide mission took place on the 16th of June 2011, in Abuja. It was planned by Mamman Nur and Khalid al-Barnawi (reflected in Arabic as Ḥālīd al-Barnāwī)², members of an organisation known as Boko Haram³, who presumably had connections to Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (Arabic

² Hausa and Arabic names, terms, and words are written in standard orthography and scientific transcription, respectively. The transcription is given in italics and follows the first mention of the English-domesticated terms such as e.g. jihad or sura (in brackets).

³ The full name of the organisation is *Ġamā'at Ahl as-Sunna li-d-Dā'wa wa-l-ġihād* (Arabic for 'Association of the People of the Sunna for Preaching and Jihad'). In March 2015, the then leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State then caliph, Abubakar al-Baghdadi (Arabic Abū Bakr al-Baġdādī), and renamed his organization for *Ad-Dawla al-Islāmiyya Wilāyat Ġarb Ifriqiya* (Arabic for 'Islamic State West Africa Province', ISWAP). In the present paper I use the popular and recognizable name "Boko Haram" to refer to the group of fighters responsible for the rebellion in northern Nigeria, although it has never been accepted by the rebels themselves. Cf. an interesting account on dubious nature of the term "Boko Haram" in Brigaglia & Iocchi (2017).

Al-Qā'ida fī Bilād al-Maġrib al-Islāmī, AQIM). The perpetrator, Mohammed Manga, attacked the police headquarters in the Nigerian capital, killing six people including himself. He was a 35-year-old well-to-do businessman, married, with five children, and was reported to have left a will of four million naira for his family (Salkida 2011). The attack was conducted with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device. In a photograph taken shortly before his death, Manga was pictured sitting in a car, holding a rifle, waving his hand to the camera and smiling to the photographer and those who would see the picture after his death. In the aftermath of the attack, Boko Haram enjoyed many fresh converts who were enthused by Manga's readiness for the ultimate sacrifice and devotion to God. The fact that certain people appreciated the mystical aspect of Manga's martyrdom is underlined by the way local tabloids narrated his story. For instance, one of the reports claimed that "shortly after he [Manga] carried out the suicide mission, he was said to have put a call to one of his friends that he was on his way to Paradise" (*Nigeria Films* 2011).

Suicide operations have become one of the most characteristic features of Boko Haram's armed struggle against those perceived by the organisation as unbelievers. From the beginning of its military campaign in 2011 until June 2017 the group deployed 434 bombers (*The Economist* 2017). Although the practical implementation of the concept of martyrdom has become a landmark of Boko Haram's current activity, the thesis of the present paper is that ideological frameworks of this concept existed before. Firstly, the idea of martyrdom is clearly quotable from the Islamic scriptures; secondly, it was relied on in the 19th-century jihad (Arabic *ġihād*) led by Usman ḍan Fodio (known in the Arabic language sources as 'Uṭmān Ibn Fūdī) in the territories of today's northern Nigeria; and thirdly, it was elaborated on by Muhammad Yusuf, a preacher and the first ideologue of Boko Haram. Therefore, some of these concepts and canons were later exploited by the leaders of the current insurgency to motivate fighters to sacrifice their lives in the fight against the secular state. To explore the concept of martyrdom in this part of the world and its contemporary application in the Boko Haram rebellion, this research analyzes the content of Muhammad Yusuf's speeches in Hausa and his sermons transcribed to and published in Arabic. Other consulted sources include the English translations of jihadi treatises published by AQIM and ISWAP, academic literature, and Nigerian press.

2. Martyrdom in Islam

The notion of Muslim martyrdom is mostly associated with the suicide missions that have been growing in number since the beginning of the 21st century

(Moghadam 2008: 47). However, the idea of bodily suffering and death for the sake of beliefs is deeply rooted in the Islamic history. One of the earliest stories about martyrdom dates back to the Meccan period of Prophet Muḥammad's life. It is a well-known account of Bilāl, an Ethiopian slave, who was tortured by his master because of his Islamic beliefs. He was laid down outside in the sweltering heat, exposed to the sun. His master placed a heavy stone on his chest and declared: "You will continue like this until you die or you deny Muḥammad and worship al-Lāt and al-'Uzza" (Ibn Hisham [n.d.], I: 339-340, after: Cook 2007: 13). Al-Lāt and al-'Uzza are two pre-Islamic deities from Tā'if and Mecca (Fahd 2000: 93-94). Finally, Bilāl did not die during his ordeal, because one of the earliest converts to Islam, named Abū Bakr, bought him from his master and freed him from slavery. Even though Bilāl was saved, his story is often recalled as the early paradigm of a person martyred because of the Islamic faith (Cook 2007: 13-14). He consciously (to the extent we can judge from this account) refused to renounce Islam and chose to suffer bodily harms in the name of his belief, even though it could have led to his death.

The Arabic term *šahīd* (lit. 'witness', pl. *šuhadā*) that is typically used with reference to martyrs in Islam, appears in the Quran (Arabic Qur'ān) in various connotations, including its literal meaning that is attested in verses 2:282 and 24:4, among others. Muslim scholars maintain that in several Quranic verses the term clearly refers to martyrs: "Allah may know who are the believers and choose martyrs from among you"⁴ (3:140); "Those who obey Allah and the Messenger will be in the company of those whom God has favoured of the Prophets, the saints, the martyrs, and the righteous people" (4:69); "And those who believe in Allah and His Messengers are truly the pious and the martyrs in their Lord's Sight. They shall have their wage and their light" (57:19) (Kohlberg 2012). There are also rich descriptions of the rewards those who sacrifice their lives in the fight for Islam will receive in the afterlife: "struggle in the Cause of Allah with your possessions and yourselves. That is far better for you, if only you knew. He will then forgive you your sins and admit you into Gardens, beneath which rivers flow, and into fine dwellings in the Gardens of Eden. That is the great triumph" (61:11-12).

Numerous accounts of the Islamic martyrdom are provided in the hadiths (Arabic *ḥadīth*, pl. *aḥādīth*). There are various types of martyrs recalled in the tradition, including innocent martyrs who reflect the type of martyrdom that is universal

⁴ All the Quranic verses are quoted based on the interpretation of the Quran by Fakhry (2002).

for monotheistic religions, and fighting martyrs – a concept limited to Islam only (Cook 2007: 23). An example of the first type is provided by the story of Ḥubayb Ibn 'Adī who was captured in revenge for the Qurayš killed during the Battle of Badr in 624. The tradition says that, while waiting in detention for his execution, he found a razor to shave with it, but refused to use it as a weapon to free himself, as it would require killing another person. While awaiting death, he was already marked special and provided support from God. One of the women from the neighbourhood reported that she had seen Ḥubayb eating a bunch of grapes, during the time when there were no fruits in Mecca at all, and he was bound with iron chains, additionally. Directly before his execution he asked his oppressors to let him pray and recited a poem: "I [am] being martyred as a Muslim, / Do not mind how I am killed in Allah's Cause, / For my killing is for Allah's Sake, / And if Allah wishes, He will bless the amputated parts of a torn body"⁵ (Saḥīḥ al-Buḥārī 3045).

The second type of martyr indicated by Cook is the fighting one. A vivid example is provided by the story of the Battle of Badr. Before the battle, Muḥammad informed his followers about rewards dedicated for those who fight the enemy frantically. He is reported to have told them:

By the one who holds the soul of Muḥammad in His hand, every man who fights today and is killed, demonstrating patience, seeking a reward from God, going forward without going backward, God will take him into paradise (Ibn Hisham [n.d.], II: 267-268, after: Cook 2007: 23).

Having heard this, one of the warriors cried out: "Really, now! Nothing is between me and entering paradise other than killing those infidels?!" He was eating dates at that moment, therefore he threw them away, took up the sword and rushed into the battlefield, where he fought until being killed. The story portrays the idea of martyrdom, and it presents the cause and the effect clearly: Muḥammad promised a reward to the most dedicated, and then observed his followers believe him and die for this belief (Cook 2007: 23).

Currently, the concept of martyrdom is exploited by the extremists to rationalize the use of violence. It is quite characteristic, though, that the literature authored by recent proponents of armed jihad usually ignores any dimension of martyrdom other than death as a result of fight. Contemporary authors tend to ignore

⁵ All the hadiths passages are quoted after the *sunna* on-line collection available at <https://sunnah.com/> [21.12.2019].

the rich tradition of martyrdom in non-military settings and recognize warfare as the only occasion in which achieving martyrdom is possible. As Salafis (Arabic *salafīyya*), they follow the rule of advocating the literary interpretation of the Quran and avoid quotations from traditions or exegesis except from the most authoritative collections of Muslim and Al-Buḥārī. Thus, they struggle to define the martyr as a warrior. It is problematic, because most accounts of dying in the battlefield are provided by the hadiths and early Islamic literature, while in the Quran we find no single story of a martyr of this type. Moreover, the Quranic meaning of *šuhadā'* is multi-layered, with none of the interpretations clearly restricted to an armed fighter. It is also difficult to base the justification of the suicide missions on the opinions of classical writers who hesitated about the legality of suicidal operations and the practice of a single fighter responsible for killing significant number of the enemies.

The first challenge that the advocates of suicide bombings face is how to provide convincing argumentation, based on reliable sources, that martyrdom is actually not equivalent to committing suicide. There exists strong evidence in the Islamic scriptures condemning suicide by stressing the sacrosanct nature of life. Quran states that "whoever kills a soul, not in retaliation for a soul or corruption in the land, is like one who has killed the whole of mankind" (5:32), while another verse says "and do not kill yourselves" (4:29). Similarly, one of the hadiths quotes Prophet who told his followers that "if somebody commits suicide with anything in this world, he will be tortured with that very thing on the Day of Resurrection" (Saḥīḥ al-Buḥārī 6047). Thus, contemporary Salafi scholars strive to distinguish between martyrdom and suicide. When Nāṣir ad-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999) was asked for opinion about using suicide bombings against enemies, he responded: "That is not considered suicide, suicide is when a Muslim kills himself to be saved from his miserable life" (Kilani & Suberu 2015: 130). Similarly, Yūsuf al-Qarāḍāwī, a well-known Egyptian scholar, claimed that Muslims' attacks on their enemies are not suicidal acts but heroic martyrdom operations. Basing his argumentation on the Quranic verses of sura (Arabic *sūra*) *Al-Anfāl* (The Spoils), "make ready for them whatever you can of fighting men and horses, to terrify thereby the enemies of Allah and your enemy" (8: 60), al-Qarāḍāwī portrays martyrdom operations as a legitimate method of war against unbelievers (Kilani & Suberu 2015: 130).

The distinction between suicide and martyrdom is also important in the debate on the motivations that should underlie the jihadi efforts. Ideally, jihad is fought anonymously for the sake of God only. Based on the Islamic tradition, a fighter who conducts a suicide operation to achieve personal gains like fame, material

rewards, vanity, expression of courage or honour, does not enter paradise, but is damned as a suicidal (Hafez 2009: 59-60). Thus Salafi-jihadi intellectuals underline that ordinary suicide is committed for personal gains, while martyrs die in the name of God (Moghadam 2008: 63). It is visible that contemporary jihadi scholars contend with the actual context of martyrdom stated in the authoritative texts and face the dilemma of presenting suicide warriors in the desired framework of martyrdom operations. Cook states that, "reading contemporary books on the subject of martyrdom one senses some desperation on the part of writers because of this fact" (Cook 2007: 148).

The practical aspect of providing religion-based justification for suicide missions can be exemplified by Hamas in Palestine. In propaganda materials disseminated by this organisation since the Second Intifada of 2000-2005, suicide operations are presented as a way to obtain salvation. Contrary to the content popularized during the first Intifada (1987-1993), which focused on exposing the advantages conferred by the martyr on the society and the importance of the struggle for a cause of liberating the land from occupation, materials promoted in the 21st century underline religious aspects of the suicide operations. Authors propagate the idea that suicide mission leads the believer directly to heaven and martyrdom is currently perceived as an individual act of moral purification, in contrast to the previously exposed aspect of bringing benefits to the society.

Documents disseminated by Hamas fall into three categories: 1) *waṣīyya* – the last will, through which the martyr passes advices on morality and ethics to his close ones; 2) *sīra* – a biography of the martyr; 3) transcripts of speeches provided by Hamas members during funeral ceremonies of martyrs. These documents are distributed on a large scale in the leaflets, placards, audio and video cassettes, as well as on the Hamas-related websites. Additionally, some fragments are also quoted in mosques during Friday sermons. Their content is based on private memories of those preparing for a mission, and enriched with the Quranic and hadith quotations. The texts serve as an effective mobilisation tool for future suicide bombers.

Some documents produced by Hamas suggest that Muslims should persistently seek to sacrifice their lives in order to find themselves in heaven. As one martyr-to-be maintained, "[p]aradise anticipates its beloved ones. Therefore, you should not miss the opportunity to meet your Lord", and another one stated, "I wish for you to raise your sons and daughters to desire martyrdom" (Alshech 2008: 33). Moreover, authors present evidence that the fighters achieve salvation immediately after dying in a suicide mission. They narrate stories about miracles happening in the vicinity of martyrs' burial places. In many documents, Hamas maintains

that fighters' bodies and their personal belongings emit a scent of musk – the fragrance that is related to paradise in the Quranic verses⁶. The hadiths collections by Buḥārī, aṭ-Ṭabarī and the Quranic commentary (*tafsīr*) by al-Qurtubī consider the scent of musk as a proof that the martyr has been accepted by God in heaven. Therefore, the documents provide prospective martyrs with evidence that paradise actually exists and offer a means to access it. They increase the likelihood that an individual would decide to join the fighters and commit the ultimate sacrifice. Unsurprisingly, Hamas does not solve the problem of legality of suicide missions in the light of the Quran, which values worldly life and guides believers towards fulfilling their obligations dutifully in their earthly lives (Alshech 2008).

3. Martyrdom in the times of jihad of Usman ḍan Fodio

Although suicide operations in northern Nigeria were not conducted by contemporary radical Muslim organisations before 2011, the idea of martyrdom in the battlefield is not unfamiliar in this region. It dates back to the military jihad led by Usman ḍan Fodio (1754-1817). As a member of a prominent Fulani Torodbe clan, ḍan Fodio perceived the elites of the Hausa city-states, located in the territories of today's northern Nigeria, as corrupt and ignorant of Islamic principles of governance. He became especially critical of the king of Gobir, a city-state close to Degel, where ḍan Fodio was born. He lived in that area before performing symbolic hijra (Arabic *hiġra* 'migration') to Gudu in 1804, imitating Prophet Muḥammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina. After the migration, ḍan Fodio consolidated his army and called on military invasion on the city-states. He blamed local establishment for the acceptance of the syncretic practices originating from the pre-Islamic era which might lead to apostasy. Thus, he condemned those who used to sprinkle their heads with ashes in the presence of the earthy rulers, and who used the Holy Quran for magical purposes. Ḍan Fodio drew people's attention to the fact that the ruling dynasty (called Habe in his native Fulfulde language) had put on them extra taxes that were not prescribed by the sharia law (Arabic *šarī'a*), usurped offices by inheritance, and made their gains illegally. In practice, ḍan Fodio's emergence in the opposition to the then ruling elites should also be perceived in the light of political and eco-

⁶ See verses 22-26 of sura *Al-Muṭaffifīn* (The Skimpers): "The pious are indeed in Bliss; / Upon couches gazing round. / You will recognize in their faces the glow of bliss. / They are given to drink from a sealed wine; / Whose seal is musk. / Over that, let the competitors compete".

conomic rivalry, even though the religious arguments played central role in the narratives legitimizing his war (Waldman 1965).

Jihad led by *ḍan Fodio* and his followers turned out to be a successful initiative. After less than six years, they founded the Sokoto Caliphate in the Hausaland, establishing control over traditional rulers of Habe dynasty. Sharia was introduced as an official legal system, emirates were built as administrative units based on the city-states, and Arabic was promoted as an official language. Despite its weaknesses – many emirs did not follow the official regulations strictly – the Caliphate remained one of the dominant political structures in West Africa until the colonial conquest (Trimingham 1970). British administration involved certain emirs in the indirect rule system, and at least symbolically, the traditional religious establishment – the legacy of the Sokoto Caliphate – has been maintained during the independence era.

Dan Fodio strived to conduct jihad in accordance with the Islamic rules. Paying attention to the intellectual sphere of his initiative, in the beginning he concentrated on teaching and calling for purification of religious practices. He sent letters to traditional rulers, whom he regarded as strayed from the path of Islam, with warnings to purify their religious stances. Only after three decades of peaceful preaching activities, he decided to undertake military action, but even then he laid exhaustive theoretical foundations for the struggle. In the times of jihad, religious literature blossomed, as many works were produced by Usman *ḍan Fodio* himself, his brother Abdullahi *ḍan Fodio* (1766-1829), and his son Muhammadu Bello (1781-1837). They wrote in Fulfulde, Hausa, and Arabic, considering various groups of population to whom their works were addressed. The reason to produce literary works so extensively was clear. Since jihad was not only a religious initiative, but had also political and economic motivations, and at some point could even be called a popular uprising, its success depended mainly on the support from the masses. The leaders of jihad were aware that literature explaining the necessity for military struggle in religious terms was a key to their success.

The list of writings authored by Usman *ḍan Fodio* contains more than one hundred titles in Arabic only (Hunwick 1995: 58-80). Despite the abundance of literary works encouraging Muslims to engage in the war, the leader of the jihad nowhere addresses the issue of martyrdom. Even his most significant work entitled *Bayān wuḡūb al-hiġra'ala al-ibād* ("Clarification of the necessity of hijra for the servants of God"), which is by far the most extensive treatise about the rules of jihad and hijra in the modern Islamic literature, does not bring up the subject of the benefits of martyrdom. The most probable explanation for this is Usman *ḍan Fodio*'s

limited experience in the battlefield. He focused on providing theoretical justification of the jihad, but did not engage in it personally, which was the reason why he didn't feel the need to dwell on details of bodily sacrifices of warfare (Cook 2007: 89).

Nevertheless, very limited remarks on martyrdom can be found in the works of other prominent Fulani writers, including Usman dan Fodio's daughter, Nana Asma'u (d. 1864), who described in several works heavenly pleasures accessible for those who sacrificed their lives during the jihad (Boyd & Mack 1997: 176-188). Her brother, Muhammadu Bello, wrote a number of poems to commemorate the believers who died in the battlefield. Bello's works, as well as those of Abdullahi dan Fodio, report lists of names of those who were martyred during jihad, but for the most part without details (cf. e.g. Denham, Clapperton & Oudney 1828: 461). In *Infāq al-maysūr fī Tārīḥ bilād at-Takrūr* ("Accomplishing the feasible concerning the history of the land of Takrūr") by Muhammadu Bello, we find one of the scarce accounts of the martyrdom:

From the Day of Alus, when the mill of war turned; they attained, and we attained, and we bore the glorious deeds;

Their secret was the martyrdom they gave us – this death that preserves our exploits.

Whoever they killed, they caused to reach his goal, blessed is he, with grace and excellent musk.

Spirit, basil, and eternal paradise, together with inheritance of the free women hours.

Whoever inhabits paradise will be dressed all in silk, brocade, and bright gold' (Bello 1964: 142, after: Cook 2007: 90).

It is probable that there existed more reports on martyrdom achieved by the believers during battles conducted by the Fulani army, and possibly also descriptions of heavenly pleasures that would motivate fighters to sacrifice their lives. During the jihad, many poems were disseminated in their oral version, which helped to streamline the effective propagation of the ideas over a wide area, especially among the illiterates. On the other hand, their oral form impeded their conservation, which is a possible reason of the current lack of preserved sources elaborating on martyrdom during the jihad.

4. Martyrdom in contemporary northern Nigeria

The significance of martyrdom is acknowledged by contemporary warriors to considerably greater extent than what is provided in the reports from the

19th-century *dan Fodio's* jihad. Fighters connected to Boko Haram rebellion have referred to the idea extensively since the beginning of the military campaign led by the organisation. However, we also find abundant references to the concept of martyrdom in the teachings of Muhammad Yusuf (1970-2009), the main ideologue of Boko Haram, who died before the eruption of the current violent rebellion. He was a controversial Islamic preacher and gained noticeable popularity in north-eastern Nigeria at the turn of the 21st century. His teachings laid the ideological foundations for the doctrine that is currently used by Abubakar Shekau (born ca. 1968-1975; also known under his arabicized nickname *Abū Bakr aš-Šikawī* which appears as Abu Bakr al-Shekawi in Latin script) and the ISWAP rebels to justify the use of violence. Yusuf's ideology was based on two main concepts: lack of acceptance of the Nigerian state as secular, and thus un-Islamic; and condemnation of Western influences in northern Nigerian culture and education that led him to disapprove secular schools. As a result of his growing popularity and openly anti-governmental instruction, his activities attracted the attention of the state security forces. In July 2009, Yusuf was killed in Maiduguri alongside about eight hundred of his followers during heavy clashes with the Nigerian military.

As an opponent of the Nigerian state, Yusuf vigorously preached the necessity of opposing the government, that he painted as un-Islamic, and replacing it with religious authorities that would operate based on Islamic and not secular jurisprudence. He perceived this process as jihad against the secular rulers and called on his followers to sacrifice their lives in the fight for the Islamic cause. Certain parts of his preserved lectures suggest that he promoted a non-violent form of the struggle, which he occasionally equated with mission (Arabic *da'wa*) (Brakoniecka 2016: 21-22; Yusuf [n.d.]a; Yusuf [n.d.]b). However, when the conflict between his followers and the state security forces became more violent, Yusuf turned to the more military forms of jihad, espousing the confrontational aspects of the concept of jihad in his speeches, especially those made towards the end of his life. In these sermons, Yusuf put the fight against the Nigerian state in the framework of martyrdom to which he encouraged his followers to carry out.

On 28th of March 2009, Yusuf delivered a sermon that was later popularized under the title *Guzurin mujahidai* (Provision of the Muslim fighters). He presented the characteristics of an ideal martyr that Muslims should emulate if they want to enter paradise as easily as martyrs do. For him, the most important attributes of a warrior in the path of God include: readiness to sacrifice as much as God wants them to devout, even against their own will or that of their parents; perse-

verance in prayers and fasting; patience to endure trials sent by God; and deep fear of God. According to Yusuf, for any Muslim who wants to become God's own soldier, it is necessary to achieve these virtues first. Before coming to jihad, everybody should train themselves and focus on self-improvement to attain virtues desired by every prospective martyr (Yusuf 2009).

In another speech, Yusuf refers to police and army officers who, in his opinion, indiscriminately kill Muslims in northern Nigeria. He quotes Quranic verses on martyrdom: "And do not say of those who are killed for the Cause of Allah that they are dead. They are alive" (2:154) and "Do not think those who have been killed in the Way of Allah as dead; they are rather living with their Lord, well-provided for. Rejoicing in what their Lord has given them of His Bounty, and they rejoice for those who stayed behind and did not join them; knowing that they have nothing to fear and that they shall not grieve" (3:169-170). Yusuf stresses the fact that those who were killed by the unbelievers, are alive and well in the house of God. Therefore, any believer killed by the army or police officers should be treated as *šahīd*. Yusuf provides detailed descriptions of martyrdom, such as the fact that a martyr does not feel any pain of death. He cites *wašīyya*, a testimony, of one of the martyrs who died during the war in Afghanistan. In the battlefield, the martyr's stomach was cut open. Despite the fact that his intestines spilled out on the ground, he was sitting calmly and bearing witness to the power of God. People around him were crying because of his fate, and he asked them, with a sense of surprise, what was the reason for their despair (Yusuf 2008).

Another martyrdom account provided by Yusuf concerns two Muslims who died after a bomb exploded in their car when they were on their way to the mosque. Several months later, in the site of their death, the fragrance of musk lingered in the air as an evidence that they had entered paradise. According to Yusuf, martyrs spend their time with God in heaven, and when God asks them if they would be willing to die for him again, they agree, because for a true believer martyrdom is a pleasure. Furthermore, Yusuf recalls Muslims who sacrificed their lives during the Battle of Uhud in 625. He narrates that the bodies of the *šuhadā'* were buried at the bottom of the Uhud hill. Forty years later, heavy rains in that region washed the ground and uncovered the remains of the martyrs. The bodies were buried again, but they left blood on the leaves around the martyrs' graves, which has not dried up until today (Yusuf 2008).

Several sermons by Muhammad Yusuf were translated into Arabic and printed by *Al-Urwa al-Wuṭqā* (The Firmest Bond), a group related to Boko Haram, which is named after the renowned 19th-century journal edited by Salafi scholars, Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) and Ġamāl ad-Dīn al-Afġānī (d. 1897). Pre-

sumably, the members of *Al-Urwa al-Wuṭqā* were involved with the Islamic State organisation, and for a certain period of time were responsible for Boko Haram's media presence. In the introduction to a booklet containing his speeches (Yusuf 2015), the authors call Yusuf *ṣahīd*, referring to his execution by the forces of unbelievers i.e., Nigerian police officers, during the July 2009 Maiduguri clashes.

One of the Yusuf's lectures presented by *Al-Urwa al-Wuṭqā* carries the title *Hayyā li-l-ġihād* (Come to jihad), which is a paraphrase of the words of Islamic call to prayer (Arabic *'aḍān*). The author discusses the necessity for Muslims to stand and fight against the enemy, who is equated with the representatives of the secular state. Yusuf quotes verses 38-41 of sura *At-Tawba* (Repentance) to convince his followers about their obligation to participate in the struggle against unbelievers. After instructing listeners how to prepare their souls for jihad, by purifying them and avoiding polytheism (Arabic *širk*), he discusses material aspect of these preparations:

This mobilisation also covers physical preparations like shooting training, obtaining rifles and bombs, and preparing Muslim army for the fight against unbelievers. You should sacrifice your souls, your houses, your cars and bikes in the path of God. Spare no blood of yourselves and that of your relatives to glorify God (Yusuf 2015: 17).

Then, Yusuf cites a large number of hadiths to provide textual evidence of the benefits of martyrdom. He quotes passages from the collection of Muslim: "All the sins of a *ṣahīd* are forgiven except debt" (Yusuf 2015: 21, after: Saḥīḥ Muslim 1886a), and "He who asks Allah for martyrdom, Allah will raise him to the high status of the martyrs, even if he dies on his bed" (Yusuf 2015: 21, after: Riyāḍ aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn 1, 57), as well as Abū Dawūd: "The Messenger of Allah (saws) said: If anyone fights in Allah's path as long as the time between two milkings of a she-camel, Paradise will be assured for him. If anyone sincerely asks Allah for being killed and then dies or is killed, there will be a reward of a martyr for him [...] If anyone is wounded in Allah's path, or suffers a misfortune, it will come on the Day of resurrection as copious as possible, its colour saffron, and its odour musk" (Yusuf 2015: 18, after: Sunan Abi Dawud 2541). Relying on the Quran and the authoritative collections of hadiths extensively, Yusuf follows the pattern of argumentation typical for the Salafi scholars, who underline the necessity to build their opinions mostly on textual basis.

After Muhammad Yusuf's demise, his followers dispersed throughout the region. In September 2010, Yusuf's former assistant Abubakar Shekau emerged as a new head of the organisation. He took harder line in the confrontation with the Nigerian authorities, declaring in his first made-public video that he had closed the page

of *da'wa* (mission, mostly related to preaching) and opened that of jihad, obviously, referring clearly to its violent form. He commenced an armed struggle in the literal sense of the word. The rebels are responsible (together with the state security forces who are also significant party to the conflict) for more than 35 000 deaths, almost 2 million refugees, and many atrocities in the region (Sumaina 2019).

Boko Haram fighters use new means of communication to call on their brethren to participate in warfare. Aminu Sidiq Ogwuche, who was responsible for planning Nyanya bombings in 2014, used his Facebook account to promote the idea of martyrdom. He wrote on his profile page: “[t]hose who strive in the path of Allah love death like the *kuffār* love life [...] Let them know, we are always ready to meet our Lord anytime he wills” (Scan News 2014). To illustrate the significance of a spiritual aspect of suicide mission for the perpetrators, professor Abdul Raufu Mustapha recalls an example of Mustapha Umar. He was a Boko Haram member who accidentally did not die in a suicide bomb attack he conducted in Kaduna in 2012. Local journalists reported him crying over his failure to access paradise during the mission. When interrogated by the police, he told the officers he “was unhappy because not dying with the victims of the attack had denied him the opportunity to make heaven” (*Information Nigeria* 2013; Mustapha 2014: 167).

Another interesting aspect of Boko Haram’s understanding of martyrdom was stressed by Kashim Shettima, the governor of Borno state between 2011 and 2019, which is the epicentre and birthplace of the conflict. Observing the crisis in the state, Shettima identified martyrdom-related motivations inspiring people to join Boko Haram and participate in its campaign of terror:

[They] are led into believing that when they kill, they obtain rewards from Allah and the rewards translate into houses in paradise. When they are killed, they automatically die as martyrs and go to paradise straight away. In other words, death is the beginning of their pleasure (Abbah & Idris 2014).

In this narration we find an ordinary belief about martyrs who, if killed in the battlefield, go to heaven directly and do not face responsibility for the mistakes made earlier in their lives. However, Shettima’s opinion underlines additional aspect of the Boko Haram doctrine related to martyrdom that makes rebels feel free to kill Muslims and non-Muslims indiscriminately:

One dangerous thing about their ideology is their belief that when they attack a gathering or a community, any righteous person in the sight of God, who dies as a result of their attack, will go to paradise, which means they would have assisted the person to go to paradise in good time by their actions, and any infidel killed by their attack will go to hell, which to them is what he or she deserves and no regret for his death (Abbah & Idris 2014).

Shettima perceives the Boko Haram fighters' doctrine of life sacrifice and martyrdom as having broader dimension than the typical understanding of the notion obtainable in the literature. According to his perception, they do not only believe that they enter paradise as a result of a suicide operation, but also assume that their actions have a causative effect on the salvation of others who were caught up and died as a result of their actions. By killing the rightly-guided, they assist them in meeting God and achieving heaven even earlier than they would otherwise; an added advantage.

Boko Haram's recent activity provides an interesting insight into the relation between the notions of martyrdom and suicide missions. It is difficult to assess how many suicide bombers deployed by Boko Haram have made conscious decision to participate in what the organization leadership sees as jihad. In fact, evidence exists that many suicide bombers were coerced, stunned with drugs such as tramadol, or suffered from psychological trauma after being abducted. Certain number of perpetrators possibly were not even aware of the fact that what they were partaking in was a suicide mission (Okereke 2017; Bloom & Matfess 2016: 111-112). Thus, the quite common assumption that martyrdom mission can be freely equated with suicide bombing raises doubts. The main component of a martyrdom operation is the willingness of the attacker to sacrifice his/her life (Pape 2005: 27-29), which certainly is not the case with coerced suicide bombers. Therefore, many recent missions conducted under the umbrella of Boko Haram cannot, in fact, be classified as martyrdom operations. Mia Bloom and Hilary Matfess go even further, claiming that "[w]hile the majority of these attacks have been suicide bombings, this is perhaps a misnomer as 'suicide bomber' implies that the perpetrator's decision to martyr oneself is made of his or her own volition. Yet, many of the Boko Haram attacks were conducted by girls too young to have agency" (Bloom & Matfess 2016: 111). The lack of perpetrator's consent or even awareness entails that he/she should be perceived a victim and not a warrior-martyr of the war seen by the rebels as jihad.

Most recent development of jihadism in northern Nigeria is marked by factional disputes between Abubakar Shekau and his opponents. After having pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015, in August 2016 Shekau was ejected from ISWAP and replaced by presumably a son of late Muhammad Yusuf, known under his Arabic name Abū Muṣ'ab al-Barnāwī⁷. The reason to question Shekau's

⁷ According to some reports, in March 2019 Al-Barnāwī was demoted and a man known as Ba Idrisa became ISWAP's new leader (Zenn 2020). Abubakar Shekau and his followers remain active in the southern part of the Borno state (Onuoha 2016) and carry on fighting with ISWAP.

authority was – apart from the controversies related to his leadership and the way he treats his commanders – a disagreement on conditions upon which it is legitimate to declare *takfīr* (Arabic for 'excommunication') on Muslims living by conscious choice under the rule of unbelievers, and to fight against them, as a consequence. Several papers authored by the jihadi theologians present their criticism of Shekau's eagerness to fight Muslim civilians in detail. One of them is a treatise titled "Some advice and guidelines" published in 2017 by *Mu'assasāt al-Andalus* (Arabic for 'Foundations of Andalus'), a media wing of AQIM (Brigaglia & Iocchi 2017: 27; Al-Tamimi 2018a). Another work, titled "Slicing off the tumour of Shekau's 'Kharijites'⁸ in pledging allegiance to the honourable ones" was probably co-authored by Abū Muṣ'ab al-Barnāwī and released by ISWAP in 2018 (Brigaglia 2018: 3; Al-Tamimi 2018b). The authors of these treatises suggest, in regard to the use of violence, that targeting Muslim civilians – a common practice of Shekau's forces – should preferably be avoided, even if they are not enthusiastic about the jihadi project (Brigaglia 2018). Interestingly, in these works we find little direct reference to the concept of martyrdom, except for listing names of people who died in the battles with the state forces (cf. Brigaglia 2018: 8), with special reference to the heroic martyrdom of Muhammad Yusuf. While the concept of martyrdom is not a central focus of the Shekau-ISWAP debate, the dispute concerns the phenomenon of martyrdom indirectly, as it relates to legitimacy of war in the land inhabited by Muslims. Within this framework rival parties' views on permissibility of the use of violence can be extrapolated to whether Muslims can or should not fall a victim to martyrdom operations.

5. Conclusions

Reports on martyrdom, containing mystical stories about those who entered paradise because of their readiness to sacrifice their lives for God, account for a substantial content of jihadi literature, both written and oral. Lectures, speeches and printed documents disseminated by the terrorist organisations are used to mobilize prospective suicide bombers, luring them with detailed descriptions of heavenly pleasures waiting for them. These accounts are provided and popularized by preachers and leaders of jihadi organisations, in whose best interest it is to gain recruits willing to die as warriors. It is no coincidence that the members of

⁸ Arabic *ḥārīġī*, pl. *ḥawāriġ*. Kharijites, historically speaking, were the earliest Islamic sect, which traces its beginning to a religio-political controversy over the caliphate. They were known for their puritanism and fanaticism. They considered any Muslim who committed a mortal sin an apostate (Levi Della Vida 2012).

Al-Urwa al-Wuṭqa have selected Muhammad Yusuf's speech on martyrdom from many others, translated it into Arabic and popularized to reach a wider audience. Moreover, the supposed benefits of martyrdom are also described by the suicide bombers themselves in the testimonies they often give before carrying out their missions. They transmit their message to the brethren who remain alive, explaining why it is worth to become a martyr. They leave evidence that preparing for martyrdom is a form of self-fulfilment that gives happiness, and some of them, like Mohammed Manga did, even decide to present it in graphic forms.

In northern Nigeria, suicide operations were not applied as a battle technique before 2011. However, since then bombings have become an important component of the Boko Haram rebellion. Because of their virtual absence in that region before Mohammed Manga's attack on Abuja police headquarters, it is often assumed that introducing this previously unknown method was inspired by outside forces. While most certainly the Abuja attack was indeed organized in cooperation with Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb, it is important to underline that there had been elements of local martyrdom tradition as well. They date back to the times of the 19th-century 'Dan Fodio's jihad, though the reports of those who sacrificed their lives during the war consist surprisingly insignificant part of jihadi literature that has been preserved in abundance until today. Many more accounts are to be found in the speeches of Muhammad Yusuf, the main ideologue of Boko Haram, whose teachings provide the foundation and legitimize the current rebellion. The importance that Yusuf attached to the concept of martyrdom suggests that he contributed to the readiness of his followers to engage in physical struggles, including those who decide to carry out suicide missions until today. It is important to underline, however, that during the Boko Haram rebellion, many people conduct bombing attacks under duress, because they were coerced by the fighters, or perceive suicide as a means to free themselves from the difficulties they suffer while being held hostage in terrorists' camps. The concept of martyrdom is, after all, only one among the many possible motifs to perform a suicide operation.

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