

Religious Conflict Worsens Under Nigeria's Late Military Rule (1993–1999).

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Abstract:

During the period (1993–1999), Nigeria experienced a turbulent phase marked by the return of military rule and the entrenchment of authoritarianism, which contributed to intensifying conflict within the country. General Sani Abacha assumed power following a military coup in 1993, raising slogans of combating corruption and chaos; however, his regime moved toward repression, banning political parties and pursuing opponents, which deepened feelings of marginalization and division among the religious components. That phase also witnessed extensive arrest campaigns targeting religious and political figures, provoking domestic criticism and international pressure. Following Abacha's death in 1998, Abdulsalami Abubakar assumed power, declaring his commitment to releasing political detainees and moving toward civilian rule. The study accompanied a set of crises that, together with the preceding events, contributed to the escalation of religious conflict — most notably external influences, economic crises, the corruption of military rule, as well as the growth of hardline religious discourse. In contrast, the period was marked by a clear duality represented in the escalation of security repression alongside the expansion of the popular base of the Islamic Movement within Nigerian society...

Keywords: Africa, Nigeria, the religious history of Africa, conflict, religion, Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, Hausa-Fulani, the Islamic Movement, Abacha, Abdulsalami Abubakar, Olusegun Obasanjo, military coup, Boko Haram..

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria witnessed developments that left a major impact in exacerbating religious conflict, bringing the country to a stage that made it ripe for entering a phase of armed religious conflict. Accordingly, the research title was chosen as (The Escalation of Religious Conflict under Nigeria's Late Military Rule (1993–1999)); the first date represents the return of military rule, while the second represents the democratic transition of 1999 and the return of civilian rule. The title raises several questions, the most important of which are: how did Salafi discourse, during the period under study, contribute to entrenching a culture of religious distinction and takfir (excommunication) of the other? What social and economic factors prepared the environment for the emergence of Boko Haram? In order to address these questions, the research was divided into an introduction, three sections, and a conclusion. The first section examines the return of military rule from the rule of Sani Abacha (1993–1998) to Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998–1999), and their role in entrenching authoritarianism, and studies its impact on inflaming religious conflict. The second section addresses the factors behind the escalation of religious conflict, while the third section sheds light on the Nigerian Islamic Movement between repression and expansion. The research relied on a range of Arabic, foreign, and Persian sources carrying differing views and distinct perspectives on the subject, asking God that we have succeeded in presenting something new to the historical record.

The Return of Military Rule and the Entrenchment of Authoritarianism, and Its Impact on Inflaming Religious Conflict (1993–1999):

Nigeria witnessed one of its most turbulent and religiously and politically complex phases, as the country was ruled successively by Sani Abacha and Abdulsalami Abubakar, as follows:

1. Nigeria under Sani Abacha (1993–1998):

The sharp slide toward military authoritarianism coincided with escalating religious tensions across the country's various regions, amid the decline of the democratic project and the erosion of the legitimacy of civilian state institutions. As domestic pressure mounted, led by civil society organizations and human rights groups, General Ibrahim Babangida was forced to relinquish power, and on 27/8/1993 an interim national transitional government was formed under the presidency of Ernest Shonekan. However, this government lasted only three months, facing widespread popular rejection and questioning of its political legitimacy, particularly from civilian and religious forces who saw it as an indirect continuation of military dominance, and as incapable of addressing the acute polarization between Islamic and Christian forces that was becoming entrenched in Nigeria's general landscape.¹

Defense Minister General Sani Abacha led a military coup in November 1993 that toppled Shonekan's government, justifying this by the state of chaos, corruption, incompetence, and economic stagnation afflicting the country. However, researcher Amina Sa'dun Abbas al-Bunashi cited a number of reasons that she generalized to all coups, including:²

a. Tribal cause: a product of British policy, which deepened divisions by favoring certain tribes and granting them military privileges; subsequent military leaderships followed the same policy, relying on their own tribes to ensure their continuation in power.

b. Personal motive: among a number of military leaders, who monopolized power relying on military force and party alliances; and since Britain had kept the Muslim majority away from governance, and their enlistment in the armed forces had been in numbers proportionate to their population share, the arrival of any Muslim military leader to power became a cause for inciting Christians and seeking to overthrow them.

c. Economic cause: as a result of deteriorating economic conditions and the failure of previous administrations, whether civilian or military, to address them, which reinforced the pretext for military intervention under the banner of "reform."

d. international cause: external powers sought to intervene in order to bring their allies to power, exploiting the absence of democratic mechanisms, relying on military elements linked to or trained by the British army, in addition to employing mercenaries and fueling crises within a social, political, and economic environment prepared for a coup.

The researcher endorses all of the above-mentioned reasons as motives for coups, and at the same time as drivers of religious conflict, while the coup [officially] focused on economic causes and administrative corruption.

However, the coup regime did not find solutions to what it had overthrown; on the contrary, it quickly established an explicit model of closed authoritarianism, based on (security repression, muzzling the press, suppressing political and religious freedoms, granting economic privileges to those close to the regime, and the spread of institutional corruption³, and the monopolization of wealth and power by a narrow military

¹Jamal Taha Ali, *Mechanisms of Democratic Transition in Africa: Nigeria as a Model*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Baghdad, College of Political Science, 2008, p.164; Navid Rasouli, *Nigeria: A Land of Languages and Ethnicities*, al-Huda International Publications, Tehran, 1385 [SH], pp.80–81.

²Amina Sa'dun Abbas al-Bunashi, *Internal Developments in Nigeria 1979–1999*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of al-Qadisiyah, College of Education, 2017, pp.52–53.

³Although Nigeria is one of the world's largest oil producers, under Abacha it began importing fuel due to shortages caused by cross-border smuggling, in which the army took part, while the state of the refineries deteriorated such that they operated at only a third of their capacity. Nigeria is considered one of the world's cheapest countries in terms of gasoline prices, and it is estimated that about 30% of fuel is smuggled; the oil sector constitutes 90% of government revenues, which made a 20% drop in oil prices worsen the situation further. For more, see: Cindy Shiner, *Nigeria: Rights Advocates Face new foe: Public Apathy*, *The Washington Post*, May 20, 1994, P.A27.

elite)⁴. This approach contributed to deepening feelings of marginalization within different religious circles, especially after it banned political parties, dissolved parliament, and replaced civilians with military officers to administer Nigeria's thirty states⁵, and drafted a new constitution that was a slightly amended version of its predecessor, without touching the essence of military dominance, and found no solutions to the problems fueling religious violence⁶. It was therefore not surprising that this phase included a coup attempt against Abacha's regime, including the failed coup of March 1995, which resulted in the arrest of more than 161 officers⁷, prompting the regime toward further militarization of the state and tightening its security grip, such as sidelining a number of senior officers in an attempt to contain any potential rebellion⁸

These measures were reflected in society by fueling a climate of repression and fear, which had a negative impact on religious conflict in Nigeria, pushing the situation toward further escalation.

In an attempt to absorb public discontent, Abacha announced in 1995 his pledge to hold general elections in 1996; however, this promise soon collapsed after the prominent politician Moshood Abiola and a number of his party's leaders were accused of conspiring with military officers to overthrow the regime. This led to a wide-ranging arrest campaign that targeted political and religious leaders alike, with death sentences issued against a number of them, later commuted as a result of mounting international pressure. These events led southern Christians to describe Abacha's government as lacking competence, and as remaining in power only through the support of the northern Muslim elite, who forced a number of generals into retirement⁹. Matters escalated and reached their peak following the execution of environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight members of the Ogoni people on 10/11/1995, a step that provoked a wave of broad international condemnation, especially given the case's connection to the rights of religious minorities. Nigeria's membership in the Commonwealth was suspended, Nigeria received official condemnation from the UN General Assembly, in addition to intensive action from international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International.¹⁰

These events prompted the United States to impose partial sanctions, including cancelling entry visas for military regime leaders and their families, restricting arms sales, and suspending economic and military aid; however, it refrained at the same time from imposing a comprehensive oil embargo, since oil represented about 90% of Nigeria's foreign currency revenues. This was due to the intertwining of economic interests and the continued activity of major American oil companies, and US dependence on Nigerian oil, which accounted for about 44% of Nigeria's oil exports, amounting to more than half a million barrels per day. Washington justified its position by stating that Nigeria did not threaten its vital national interests or US national security, that the Abacha regime was not seeking weapons of mass destruction or supporting terrorism, as well as the limited strategic importance of the West African region compared to the Middle East¹¹

It appears that this stance was the result of Washington's recognition of the weak prospects for international consensus on imposing a comprehensive oil embargo through the Security Council.

⁴For more, see: Ruqayya Muhammad Mahmoud, *The Phenomenon of Political Instability in Nigeria*, unpublished MA thesis, al-Mustansiriya University, College of Political Science, 2020, pp.97–98.

⁵Cindy Shiner, *Op.Cit.*, P.A27.

⁶Jamal Taha Ali, *op. cit.*, p.168; Ibrahim Nasr al-Din, *National Integration in Africa: The Nigerian Model*, African Futures Studies Center, Cairo, 1997, p.93.

⁷Khairy Abd al-Razzaq Jasim, *Democratic Transformations in Africa: A Case Study of Nigeria*, Strategic Studies Series, No.73, Center for International Studies, University of Baghdad, 2005, p.49.

⁸Jamal Taha Ali, *op. cit.*, p.164.

⁹Cindy Shiner, *Op.Cit.*, P.A27.

¹⁰Jamal Taha Ali, *op. cit.*, p.165.

¹¹For more, see: Ruqayya Muhammad Mahmoud, *op. cit.*, p.95; Jamal Taha Ali, *op. cit.*, p.165; Cindy Shiner, *Op.Cit.*, P.A27.

The African position, particularly that of Nelson Mandela's government (1994–1999)¹², also showed notable alignment with the international trend opposed to the Sani Abacha regime. In November 1995, his government took a firm stance against the military regime in Nigeria, based on the continuing human rights violations. The South African government sent diplomatic missions to Nigeria aimed at convincing the Abacha regime of the necessity of halting these violations and beginning a return to the democratic path. However, the failure of these efforts led Mandela's government to escalate its position, withdrawing its diplomatic representative and severing relations with Nigeria, as well as calling for its exclusion from the Commonwealth and suspension of its membership, in addition to demanding the imposition of economic sanctions, including a call to ban the export of Nigerian oil. South Africa continued its campaign against human rights violations in Nigeria across various international forums, particularly within the framework of the Organization of African Unity, the Commonwealth, and the United Nations, in an attempt to mobilize international pressure against the Nigerian regime.¹³

From the two preceding paragraphs, it becomes clear that there was an attempt to escalate the isolation of the Nigerian regime and to internationalize Nigeria's human rights crisis; in any case, this indicates the failure of diplomacy and the escalation of international sanctions.

In the face of these pressures and sanctions imposed by the international community, and Western states' opposition to this government, the Abacha government sought to expand its relations with the East, including Iran, which was visited by numerous Nigerian delegations¹⁴. It also announced, on 1/11/1995, the start of a three-year political transition program; however, the program received widespread criticism for its slowness, the vagueness of its mechanisms, and its lack of serious guarantees for addressing political and religious divisions. In this context, five political parties were registered, whose membership was dominated by elements loyal to the regime. These parties announced the nomination of General Abacha as the sole consensus candidate for the presidency in the elections of August 1998¹⁵

confirming the formalistic nature of the political process and the exclusion of genuine opposition, in which religious forces constituted one of the pillars of popular rejection.

However, the political scene witnessed a sudden shift with the death of General Abacha on 28/6/1998 from a heart attack. A few weeks later, Moshood Abiola also died in detention under circumstances that remained the subject of wide controversy in political and religious circles, despite official medical reports attributing the death to natural causes; his supporters, however, continued to blame the army¹⁶

Religious conflict thus found new channels through which to reemerge in new forms.

2. Nigeria under Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998–1999):

¹²Nelson Mandela (1918–2013): one of the most prominent leaders of the struggle against racial discrimination in South Africa; he assumed the presidency of the country in 1994 after the end of the apartheid regime, adopting an approach based on supporting human rights and democracy on the African continent. For more, see: Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, Back Bay Books, New York, 2008.

¹³For more, see: Afra' Atta Abd al-Karim al-Rayyes, *Nelson Mandela: His Life and Political Role*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Baghdad, College of Education (Ibn Rushd), 2002, pp.349–350.

¹⁴Muhammad Ibrahim Zarafati, *A Comparative Study of the Reflection of the Islamic Revolution in Sudan and Nigeria*, Baqir al-Ulum Higher Education Institute, MA thesis, 1389 [SH], p.120.

¹⁵These parties were: the Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM), the Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), the National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), and the Congress for National Consensus (CNC). For more, see: Jamal Taha Ali, *op. cit.*, p.166.

¹⁶For further detail on the events accompanying Abiola's death, to the extent that they raised fears of civil war, see: Hugh Dellios, *Nigeria fears new ethnic-led civil war: Abiola death sparks memories of Biafra*, Chicago Tribune, Jul 11, 1998, P.NW1.

Following Abacha's death, the ruling military council proceeded to select Abdulsalami Abubakar as head of state. He declared his commitment to releasing political detainees, respecting international commitments, and leading the country toward an orderly democratic transition that would end Nigeria's political isolation and rebuild the state's legitimacy domestically and internationally. He dissolved the five parties created by the Abacha regime and annulled all previous elections for lacking democratic foundations, affirming that the people aspired to a genuine democratic experience based on legitimate rules guaranteeing the integrity of popular representation. He dissolved the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and established other new bodies responsible for registering parties and preparing the voter register¹⁷, culminating in a series of elections held between late 1998 and early 1999 that ended with the inauguration of Olusegun Obasanjo as president of the republic on 29/5/1999, thereby beginning the (Fourth Republic) phase.¹⁸

With the Abubakar government's declared intention to end military rule, competition intensified among political forces to attract popular support. In this context, the use of religious discourse as a tool of political mobilization emerged prominently, as a number of candidates resorted to promises of reviving Sharia courts and applying Islamic penal law in response to growing popular demands in the northern states. As will become clear in the following chapter, Ahmad Sani Yerima¹⁹

only won the governorship of Zamfara State after raising the slogan of (religious reform) as the basis of his election campaign, promising his constituents, once he took power, to issue a criminal law based on Islamic penal codes²⁰

This promise represented a turning point in inflaming religious conflict, heralding growing anxiety among the Christian communities.

Abubakar also issued the 1999 constitution by decree, then presented it to the military council for approval; this constitution was therefore criticized on the grounds that it represented the opinion of the few. Despite this criticism, it was through this constitution that the process of democratic transition in Nigeria took place²¹, as it provided many of the foundations on which democracy rests, including:²²

It affirmed the democratic approach of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, stating in Article 14, paragraph 1, that the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be a state founded on the principles of democracy and social justice.

It also recognized freedom to form and join political parties, as an embodiment of democracy; nevertheless, it placed certain restrictions on party formation.

The 1999 constitution included many democratic principles, such as (gender equality, separation of powers, freedom of the press, and others).

¹⁷Jamal Taha Ali, op. cit., pp.166–167.

¹⁸Bushra Abd al-Kadhim Ubayd, *Ethnic Diversity and Its Impact on Nigeria's Political Structure (A Study in Political Geography)*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Baghdad, College of Education for Women, 2008, p.36.

¹⁹It is commonly believed that the governor of Zamfara, Ahmad Sani, introduced the criminal Sharia system in his state in 1999 to avoid being removed from office, since his party's representatives in the state assembly were a minority. By introducing Sharia law and embracing Islam, Governor Ahmad improved his standing with voters. His introduction of Sharia law contributed to his popularity, especially among the general public. Other northern state governors followed suit and introduced Sharia criminal laws in their states. Government resources were used to build Sharia courts and to fund the implementation of Sharia criminal law. For more, see: Rose C. Uzoma, *Religious Pluralism, Cultural Differences, and Social Stability in Nigeria*, *Brigham Young University Law Review*, Summer 2004, published by Brigham Young University, pp.660–661.

²⁰Ahmad Amal Muhammad Imam, *Ethnicity and Party Systems in Africa (A Comparative Study)*, Arab Bureau of Knowledge, Cairo, 2015, p.148.

²¹Jamal Taha Ali, op. cit., pp.169–172.

²²Same source.

From the points above, we note that what changed did not represent the requirements of Nigerian society that had entered religious conflict on their account; rather, it was a product influenced by internationally proposed concepts and was not homegrown, which foreshadowed the escalation of the conflict.

Factors behind the Escalation of Religious Conflict during the Period (1993–1999):

A set of newly emerging factors, together with factors Nigeria had inherited from previous eras, contributed to pushing religious conflict toward a stage of escalation, serving as a warning bell for a coming dangerous phase. These factors include:

1. External Influences:

The external factor played an influential role in altering Nigeria's democratic trajectory during the 1990s; however, this role was marked by a clear duality that negatively affected internal stability and indirectly contributed to escalating religious tensions:

a. Western states, foremost among them the United States, Britain, and the European Union, exerted continuous pressure on the then-ruling military regime to hand over power to an elected civilian government. After the announcement of the return to civilian rule in 1999, these states sought to publicly demonstrate their political support for the new regime; US President Bill Clinton addressed a joint session of the Nigerian parliament in which he praised Nigeria's return to democracy, while Britain restored Nigeria's membership in the Commonwealth after it had been frozen in 1995, and the European Union lifted the economic sanctions imposed on Nigeria since 1993, particularly restrictions related to military exports. Despite the importance of this international support in advancing the course of political transformation, the problem Nigeria faced was that the transformations that began to emerge were not a natural response to internal requirements stemming from national consensus, but rather came in the context of external pressures linked to the interests of major powers²³

This produced counterproductive results, contributing to entrenching popular doubts toward the nascent democratic process, and opening the door to multiple forms of external intervention, which increased the fragility of the state during a sensitive transitional phase that was already experiencing deep religious divisions — indeed, it opened up the possibility of a return to dictatorial rule should international political calculations require it.

American interest in Nigeria²⁴

grew increasingly under the administration of President Bill Clinton, particularly from 1998 onward, when bilateral relations entered a new phase of rapprochement, aimed at securing vital spheres of influence and ensuring the stability of energy sources such as oil, natural gas, and raw materials — consistent with the American orientation aimed at containing French influence in the region and integrating it into a globalization system armed with economic and strategic interests²⁵; hence there were two official visits by then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher in 1996, followed by two visits by Madeleine Albright. All of the above underscores what President Clinton affirmed when he said: 'It is time to put a new Africa on our

²³For more, see: Jamal Taha Ali, *op. cit.*, p.186; Muhammad Reza Shakiba, *The Land and People of Nigeria*, al-Huda International Publications, Summer 1388 [SH], pp.130–137.

²⁴The philosophy of American foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union is based on adopting a discourse founded on the idea of a (missionary role) in spreading freedom and democracy globally; the US thus presented itself as a patron of democratic institutions, supervising processes of democratic transition, and imposing standards of political conditionality through Western and international financial institutions, focusing on the principles of democracy and human rights as core pillars of its foreign policy, serving the entrenchment of a political-economic model compatible with its interests and enhancing its influence in strategic states and regions, in addition to supporting and shaping pro-Western political elites. For more, see: Iyad Abd al-Karim Majid, *American Foreign Policy toward West Africa after the Cold War: Nigeria as a Case Study*, unpublished PhD thesis, al-Nahrain University, College of Political Science, 2008, pp.78–83.

²⁵Bushra Abd al-Kadhim Ubayd, *op. cit.*, p.211.

agenda'²⁶

This public statement confirmed Muslims' apprehensions and portended a deepening of internal divisions and, consequently, an escalation of religious conflict in Nigeria.

Western states also grew apprehensive about their interests in Nigeria due to Nigerians' embrace of Shia thought and the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria that would work to expel them, as happened to them in Iran. Their media accordingly broadcast propaganda portraying the Iranian revolution as a global danger, and some Western circles considered the Iranian revolution a Shia event that had to be confronted wherever it appeared. This was reflected in the security and strategic analyses conducted by Western intelligence agencies, such as those of France and the United States, which emphasized the necessity of containing any spread of Iranian influence in Africa, including Nigeria. This Western orientation demonstrated its support for sectarian escalation against the Shia, whether through the media or strategic policies, as sectarian violence against the Shia was viewed as a means of containing any potential influence of the Iranian revolution²⁷

Western media thus contributed to complicating the religious scene in Nigeria by fueling religious tension and influencing local public opinion.

Zakzaky also noted in his memoirs that the Nigerian media was not neutral in its reporting, but was subject to Western political and media direction, largely following the same pattern of Western coverage, whether in adopting the same narrative content or in reproducing stereotypes about Islamic movements and religious symbols. In many press reports, a contradictory dual image was presented: limited positive references to certain Islamic figures at the beginning of articles, which soon concluded with predictions of the failure of Islamic projects or doubts about their viability — which, from the perspective of local Islamic movements, represented a form of directed psychological media warfare. Major international media institutions, such as the BBC Hausa Service, in addition to the international news agencies relied upon by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), such as Reuters and TASS, also contributed to reproducing a stereotyped image of the Iranian revolution and its symbols. Photographic news material focused on crowds of demonstrators and manifestations of mass protest, alongside highlighting women in black attire or the hijab, such that these images became recurring scenes topping the covers of magazines and newspapers, invested in provoking visual reaction rather than offering in-depth political or social analysis of the Iranian context. Within this framework, images of Imam Khomeini gained wide presence in Nigerian popular discourse — Zakzaky would place a picture of Imam Khomeini beside him during his debate sessions and speeches, referring to his positions and statements²⁸

— yet they were not always presented as symbols of political change or liberation from domination, but rather as controversial elements used in Western media narrative as indicators of potential Islamic extremism²⁹

This media approach, based on selectivity and reductionism, contributed to forming a confused public awareness toward Islamic movements, and created a climate of mutual suspicion and anxiety among the various religious currents within Nigerian society during the period between 1993 and 1999, deepening the possibilities of religious and sectarian collision rather than containing or addressing them cognitively and through the media.

b. We mentioned earlier the Nigerians' search for authentic religion, which coincided with the success of the Islamic Revolution, which formed a living model for those who saw Islam as a solution to Nigeria's problems, especially since these ideas were not foreign to Nigeria, having taken root since the days of Sheikh Usman dan Fodio. The Iranian revolution therefore contributed to stimulating the emergence of a local Shia

²⁶Iyad Abd al-Karim Majid, op. cit., pp.200, 108.

²⁷"America Seeks to Continue Its Dominance in Nigeria," Jihad Newspaper, 3 Dey 1365 [SH], p.8; Muhammad Mudhi Abd Ali, Iranian Foreign Policy toward the African Continent after the Cold War, unpublished MA thesis, al-Mustansiriya University, College of Political Science, 2015, pp.210–211.

²⁸Amir Bahram Arab Ahmadi, Sheikh Ibrahim Ya'qub Zakzaky, Enghelab Publisher, Azadi Street, Behzad Street, 1397 [SH], pp.64–65.

²⁹Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, Memoirs of Sheikh Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, unpublished manuscript (in press), private copy in the researcher's possession, p.71.

movement in Nigeria, inspired by the image of Imam Khomeini and the protest methods he adopted, which alarmed traditional and extremist Nigerian Islamic groups, who considered it a threat to the Sunni movement and the existing order. They carried out acts of violence and insults against Shia in areas such as Kaduna, Zaria, and Sokoto; attempts were made to assassinate Zakzaky, alongside other terrorist acts against Muslims and Christians alike.³⁰

c. Saudi support for Wahhabism played a pivotal role in reinforcing sectarian conflicts within Nigeria, as Saudi policies were based on the twin principles of takfir (excommunication) and the establishment of the ideal Salafi society, influenced by the thought of Ibn Taymiyyah, whereby anyone who does not follow the Salafi approach is considered an innovator or an unbeliever, with punishment reaching death. Since the 1980s, Saudi Arabia has been keen to confront revolutionary centers supporting the idea of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, by supporting Salafi groups in countries such as Nigeria, through the establishment of mosques and religious schools, and providing direct financial assistance to extremist groups, which focused on confronting Sufism and Shia in Nigeria. Their activities expanded with direct Saudi backing through institutions such as the Muslim World League, which established hundreds of mosques and educational and missionary centers, including its representative office in Abuja, to convey Wahhabi thought and prevent the spread of the Islamic revolution in Nigeria³¹. Since American interests are linked to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia accordingly attempted to destroy the Islamic Movement in cooperation with Western states and the Nigerian army.³²

In short, external impediments constituted a central factor in inflaming religious conflict in Nigeria during the 1990s, contributing to creating a tense environment among followers of different religions and sects, and facilitating the emergence of extremist groups that practiced violence and persecution against Shia and Christians alike.

2. The Role of the Economic Factor in the Escalation of Religious Conflict:

Economic deterioration during the period between 1993 and 1999 constituted a pivotal factor in deepening societal and religious tensions in Nigeria, as this decline coincided with a military rule marked by political closure, administrative corruption, and mismanagement of resources, leading to the expansion of poverty and unemployment and the deterioration of living standards — which prepared a fertile environment for feeding sentiments of resentment and religious polarization.

Although the government enacted and adopted an economic reform program aimed at liberalizing the economy and enhancing productive diversification, adopting fiscal and monetary policies aimed at achieving stability and reducing the economic imbalances that had prevailed for long decades, these steps came at a late stage, after the cumulative repercussions of economic crises had already contributed to inflaming social and religious tensions in previous years³³. Among the most prominent aspects of the economic crisis during that period were:³⁴

³⁰Mahmoud Alipour Gorji, Hadith Qa'ed Rahmati, "Obstacles to the Spread of the Islamic Revolution in Nigeria," *Scientific Journal of Islamic Revolution Studies*, No.60, Islamic Revolution Cultural Research Institute, Vol.17, Summer 1399 [SH], p.226; Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, *Op.Cit.*, pp.65–68.

³¹Hadith Qa'ed Rahmati, *The Impact of the Iranian Islamic Revolution on Nigeria*, Ayatollah al-Uzma Boroujerdi University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Political Science, MA thesis, Dey 1397 [SH], p.49.

³²Same source, pp.231–232.

³³Raja' Jabir Abbas al-Jubouri, *The Impact of Money Supply and Exchange Rate Shocks on the Behavior of Stock Market Indicators in Nigeria and Iraq for the Period (1990–2015)*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kufa, College of Administration and Economics, 2018, pp.74–77.

³⁴Muhammad Abd al-Karim Ahmad, *Boko Haram: From Group to Province*, Dar al-Arabi, Cairo, 2017, pp.46–47; Hashim Ni'ma Fayyadh, *Nigeria: A Study in Social-Economic Components*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Beirut, 2016, pp.82–86.

a. Sole dependence on crude oil as the main source of state revenue, amid Nigeria's inability to develop its refining capacity to meet the domestic market's needs for petroleum derivatives, which led to internal price fluctuations, rising living costs, and a widening sense of deprivation between various groups and regions. This structural imbalance contributed to weakening the national economy and reinforcing manifestations of social discontent, which often took on a religious character in areas of friction between Muslims and Christians.

b. The Nigerian economy, during the last decade of the twentieth century, was exposed to severe inflationary pressures resulting from oil shocks and the mismanagement of public resources. Inflation rates peaked in 1995, exceeding 70%, which was directly reflected in citizens' purchasing power, leading to a broad rise in local prices and distortion in market structure and resource distribution. This reality contributed to intensifying popular discontent, particularly in poor urban areas, where economic hardship intersected with religious polarization, making societal clashes more intense and prone to ignite.

c. The previous oil boom transformed the structure of the Nigerian economy from an agricultural economy into a rentier economy relying almost entirely on crude oil exports, which constituted about 90% of total exports. With declining oil prices and the inability to adapt to international changes, Nigeria faced a mounting burden in financing projects and paying the import bill, resulting in an escalation of external debt during the 1990s. In 1991, debt reached about \$27.5 billion, rising to about \$35.6 billion in 1995. This debt drained state resources and limited its ability to spend on basic services and social development, which reinforced rates of poverty and unemployment and indirectly contributed to fueling manifestations of discontent and tension with religious dimensions.

d. The Nigerian economy during this period was characterized by oil's dominance on the export side, in contrast to broad reliance on importing manufactured goods and raw materials, leading to a structural deficit in the balance of payments. The importance of foreign trade emerged as a tool for securing domestic production needs; however, weak economic performance and the lack of production diversity made the country vulnerable to fluctuations in global markets and contributed to deepening financial crises, along with the accompanying social effects reflected in relations of coexistence between religious groups.

e. Nigeria witnessed sharp fluctuations in the public budget deficit during the years (1993–1999), due to the spread of administrative and financial corruption and the mismanagement of resources. Oil revenues were distributed among the various levels of government in a manner lacking transparency and fairness, while government spending exceeded realized revenues, contributing to the accumulation of debt and the erosion of the state's capacity to perform its social functions. This institutional failure widened the gap between society and the state and reinforced feelings of marginalization.

From the points above, we note that the economic crises Nigeria went through in previous eras are still ongoing, as the successive governments found no radical solutions to them. Having previously classified the economic factor as a driver of conflict, this means it continued on its course, bringing the country to a stage of escalation.

3. Corruption and Military Rule and Their Impact on the Growing Conflict:

The economic factor during this period was closely linked to the nature of military rule, as successive coups undermined the chances of building sound democratic institutions, and contributed to entrenching an environment of despotism and lack of accountability that supported the spread of corruption and the plundering of public funds. Reports indicate that billions of dollars in oil revenues were wasted or embezzled during the years of military rule, with the most prominent example attributed to the regime of General Sani Abacha, who ruled until his death in 1998. These practices led to the erosion of public trust in the state and its institutions, and an increasing resort to religious bonds as an alternative framework for protection and collective identity, which contributed to the continued feeding of the climate of religious polarization in the country.³⁵

It is thus clear that government corruption, which accompanied the economic crises, produced livelihood crises, social deprivation, developmental failure, and eroded trust in the state — all factors that converged with religious divisions to feed an escalating cycle of religious tension and resentment.

The Nigerian Islamic Movement between Repression and Expansion (1993–1999):

The period covered by our research is marked by a clear duality between, on the one hand, escalating security repression, and on the other, the expanding popular spread of the Islamic Movement. Despite

³⁵Muhammad Abd al-Karim Ahmad, *op. cit.*, p.39; Khairy Abd al-Razzaq Jasim, *op. cit.*, p.60.

continuous persecution and arrests, the movement continued its organizational and missionary activities, and the number of its supporters grew notably, reaching a level that prompted the state to escalate its repressive tools against the leadership of the Islamic Movement.

1. Repression as a Tool of Containment: Targeting the Leadership and Besieging Social Expansion:

a. The Nigerian Government: Zeenah Ibraheem recounts in her memoirs that the movement's missionary activities continued to expand until 1996³⁶, when police forces besieged Zakzaky's house on orders from General Sani Abacha's regime, under the pretext of searching for alleged weapons, without finding any evidence. Nevertheless, Zakzaky was arrested and detained without trial for more than ten months, which triggered a wave of widespread popular protests in the cities of Zaria and Kaduna. The authorities confronted these demonstrations with excessive force, opening fire on protesters in Zaria, killing 14 demonstrators, while in Kaduna dozens of participants in the peaceful protests were killed. Zeenah also confirms that she was later arrested along with her children and relatives and detained for nearly two months, during which she was six months pregnant with her seventh child, Hammad³⁷. In an attempt to break the media blackout, Zeenah wrote a secret letter revealing to local and international public opinion what she described as a systematic series of violations against the family and the movement's followers, including home invasions, terrorizing children, confiscating property, destroying the movement's religious schools, pressuring homeowners to evict the family from their residences, cutting off their telephone services, arbitrary arrests of students and Zakzaky's followers, in addition to detainees being subjected to severe physical torture including beating and fractures, while being denied contact with the outside world or knowledge of the charges against them — although among what the police cited to justify their arrest was that they had used an illegal radio station to overthrow the military government and had committed acts threatening national security³⁸

— the memoirs clarify that Zakzaky was transferred between several prisons, beginning with Port Harcourt prison for about nine months, then to Kaduna prison, before being brought before the court after about a month, without being charged with anything except raising the slogan: 'No authority but God's.' Zeenah recounts that this particular charge did not weaken the Sheikh's standing but rather earned him wider popularity, as it evoked among Nigerians the historical memory of the Islamic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, and entrenched Zakzaky's image as an extension of that resistant reform movement³⁹

The number of arrests Zakzaky endured reflects the scale of the threat the movement had come to represent to the military regime.

Her testimony concludes with a pivotal finding: that the systematic persecution during Abacha's era practically contributed to increasing the movement's popularity and its transition from a limited following into a broad, widely influential popular current; the harsher the repression, the greater the popular rallying around the movement's leadership and its ideological and organizational line. The case of the Sheikh's detention continued until Abacha's death, when Abdulsalami Abubakar's government halted judicial proceedings, and Zakzaky and a number of his companions were released, after which he resumed his missionary activity amid growing popular rallying. The movement moved from a stage of limited spread to broader stages approaching hundreds, then thousands, then millions of followers and supporters — 'Whenever we were persecuted, we grew stronger by God's will'⁴⁰. Among the reasons cited for the army's opposition to the Islamic Movement was its political stance calling for severing Nigeria's relations with the Zionist regime, and its steadfast commitment to the Quds Day march on the last Friday of every Ramadan;

³⁶Hassan Fadaei, Amir Siyahpoush, "A Study of Sheikh Zakzaky's Strategies for Spreading Shiism in Nigeria," Vol.20, No.72, Scientific Journal of Islamic Revolution Studies, Spring 1403 [SH], p.51.

³⁷Zeenah Ibeaheem, *A Brief History of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria*, Islamic Human Rights Commission, London, 2022, pp.41–45.

³⁸Ali Shirkhani, Seyyed Saeed Hasheminasab, "The Position of the Shia in Nigeria's Social Structure," *Shia Studies Scientific-Research Quarterly*, No.64, 1397 [SH], p.135.

³⁹Zeenah Ibeaheem, *Op.Cit.*, pp.42–45.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p.55.

the army considered Shia movements an organization that had to be suppressed⁴¹, and with support from foreign governments, the government and security forces took anti-Shia measures under the pretext of combating terrorism and providing security, and also supported clerics and religious figures who opposed the Islamic Movement⁴²; in contrast, Zakzaky's memoirs reveal a gradual shift in his rhetoric from partial reformist proposals to a radical revolutionary discourse that rejects the existing order in principle, holding that the flaw is not to be solved through individuals or certain specific practices⁴³, but lies in the political and legal structure of the state itself⁴⁴

We can thus link the title of our research to what the Islamic Movement arrived at through its rejection of systems not grounded in divine legislation, and its consideration that establishing a new order was a religious necessity, not merely a political option — indicating that the greatest cause of the inflammation of religious conflict was the government itself.

b. Extremist Islamic Organizations: Since the early 1990s, particularly 1993, Nigeria witnessed a new phase of escalating religious tension, represented in the transition of Salafi activity from a limited-impact missionary framework to a widespread organizational movement with profound social, political, and religious effects. Before delving into this transition, two matters that formed the structural framework of the Sunni scene in the country must be noted: the first concerns the general juristic affiliation of the majority of Nigerian Muslims to the Maliki school, in contrast to the prevailing context in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where the Hanbali Salafi reference dominates; the second concerns the internal division within Sunni groups into two main currents: the Sufi orders current, led by the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya, which showed a degree of rapprochement with the Shia sect, particularly in their supportive stance toward the Iranian Islamic Revolution; versus the Wahhabi current, which was itself divided into traditional Salafism and organized Wahhabi Salafism. Although both currents were linked to Saudi Arabia and received annual financial support estimated at millions of dollars, fundamental ideological and organizational differences prevented their complete merger⁴⁵; nevertheless, they converged objectively in opposing the expansion of the Shia movement and seeking dominance over the religious sphere in northern Nigeria. In this context, a group of hardline religious organizations emerged that played key roles in inflaming religious conflict, including:⁴⁶

(1). Jama'at al-Tajdid al-Islamiyya (Islamic Renewal Group): emerged as one of the main components of the hardline Sunni current, founded by a member of the Islamic Movement, in the context of a response to the Shia movement that began to appear after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This group was marked by

⁴¹Mahmoud Alipour Gorji, *Hadith Qa'ed Rahmati*, previous source, pp.231–232.

⁴²Habib Zamani Mahjoub, Reza Adabi Firouzjaei, "A Study of the Structure and Organization of the Nigerian Islamic Movement and Its Impact on the Spread of Shiism in Nigeria," *Comprehensive Humanities Portal*, No.88, Islamic Azad University, Winter 1398 [SH], p.72.

⁴³Zeenah Ibraheem referred to the incident of confrontation with the coconut-wine-drinkers' club group at Zaria University, which shifted from their demand for their rights to segregate public-use facilities and prevent their use in activities contrary to their religious convictions, into a broad confrontation with the university authority and the legal system that provided cover for them. The authorities' reaction revealed a deeper reality: the problem was not drinking alcohol itself, but the system that legalized and legally protected this practice and suppressed those who objected to it in the name of civil liberty. Zeenah Ibraheem, oral interview, Mashhad, Shuhada' al-Sihha Hotel, 18/10/2025.

⁴⁴Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, *Op.Cit.*, pp.87–100.

⁴⁵Ali Fallah Zarumi, *Opportunities and Challenges of Shiism in West Africa with Emphasis on Nigeria*, PhD thesis, University of Religions and Denominations, Faculty of Shia Studies, Department of Shia Studies, 1397 [SH], p.133.

⁴⁶Batna Adam Abubakar, "The Evolution of Women's Status with the Arrival of Wahhabism in Nigeria," *Tarikhnameh Islam Biannual Specialized Journal*, Year 1, No.1, al-Mustafa International University, Spring–Summer 1399 [SH], p.67; Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, *Op.Cit.*, pp.85–86.

its clear violence and its open opposition to the Shia, including repeated assassination attempts against Shia leaders, particularly Zakzaky, in addition to targeting Christians in the north.

(2). The Muslim World League: an international organization based in Mecca, which played a strategic role in promoting the Salafi current, through funding educational and missionary centers, and direct supervision of Salafi activity in Nigeria, including the establishment of mosques and schools and the distribution of Wahhabi publications in local languages. It also contributed to producing a religious and legal elite to confront the Shia current, most notably Sheikh Abubakar Gumi (chief judge of northern Nigeria), Ahmad Lemu (judge of Niger province), and Hassan Gwarzo (judge of Kano province), who received their education in Saudi schools and institutes before assuming leadership roles within the local Wahhabi current.

(3). In 1993, Jama'at Izalat al-Bid'a wa Iqamat al-Sunna (the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Establishment of the Sunna) emerged under the leadership of Sheikh Ismail Idris as the most present and organized Wahhabi organization, having begun expanding its institutional structure at the state and provincial levels, so that each province had its own organizational and administrative structure. This expansion transformed Wahhabi proselytizing from limited preaching activity into an organized religious movement with direct influence in society.

This transformation came backed by Saudi financial support since the early 1990s, which enabled the group to penetrate poor communities by providing partial social services as an alternative to the absent state, which enhanced its religious and political presence in the public sphere, in parallel with intensifying its activity against the Shia movement. It cooperated with Nigerian security agencies in monitoring the leaders of the Shia Islamic Movement and arresting its members, subjecting some of them to torture and mistreatment, alongside conducting media campaigns and inflammatory anti-Shia religious discourse aimed at limiting the spread of Iranian influence within Nigerian society and containing it security-wise and socially.

(4). In the same context, the Islamic Forum was established in Kano, as an integrated institutional model for opposing Shiism, combining schools, missionary centers, and inflammatory media activities, benefiting from external material and intellectual support.

These organizations were key tools that contributed to entrenching their conflict with the Shia sect, thereby creating acute tensions within the Muslim community itself, particularly between the new Salafis on one hand, and the followers of the Maliki school and traditional Sufi orders, foremost the Tijaniyya, on the other. This discourse adopted takfirist positions toward many local religious practices, transforming sectarian competition into a pattern of internal conflict within mosques and religious institutions, while religious tension with Christians persisted at the same time.

2. The Organizational Structure of the Islamic Movement and Transformations of Institutional Expansion:

The mid-1990s represented a pivotal turning point in the trajectory of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, as it moved from limited missionary activity to an entity with an integrated organizational structure and multiple specialized institutions, in parallel with intensifying pressures and security confrontations. Before 1993, the activity of Zakzaky's followers relied mainly on individual preaching in mosques, holding conferences within scholarly associations, and using cassette tapes to disseminate religious lectures. However, the expansion of the support base and the escalation of confrontation with authority pushed the movement to adopt a more disciplined and structured organizational pattern. The movement's organizational structure was formed on the basis of a system of local emirates, whereby emirs are elected from among the sons of each state to oversee organizational affairs and field activities, and these emirs are subject to Zakzaky's direct supervision, with powers of dismissal or expulsion in cases of organizational violation. Alongside the emirate organization, a group of specialized institutions emerged that performed defined religious, social, educational, and media roles, such that the movement became a network of relatively independent units⁴⁷, such as the Martyrs Foundation, the Fodio Schools, the Guards, and the Sisters' Assembly, each with clear tasks within the framework of central leadership. In addition to what we have mentioned, other institutions were also established, including:⁴⁸

⁴⁷Ali Fallah Zarumi, previous source, pp.137–139.

⁴⁸WhatsApp interview, Yahya Abd al-Mu'min, representative of Sheikh Zakzaky's office in Iran, 21/11/2025, regarding the establishment of groups, forums, and institutions created

a. Assembly of Scholars: in the academic and cultural framework, the Assembly of Scholars was established to bring together students, researchers, and university professors affiliated with the movement, with the aim of restoring Islamic intellectual identity within academic circles. The assembly was active in organizing the annual (Imam Khomeini Week) in the first week of June, the Islamic Conference on Contemporary Thought, publishing scholarly articles, and cooperating with the Sisters' Assembly in conducting cultural and educational training courses.

c. Islamic Medical Association: established in 1993 and formally registered in 1996, in response to health crises that led to a rise in maternal mortality due to the lack of preventive care. The movement's physicians accordingly moved to provide high-quality free medical services in poor areas, organized health awareness campaigns, conducted field visits to schools and homes, established blood donation centers, and accompanied marches to treat the injured.

h. Workers' League: in the labor and social field, the league was active in organizing relief campaigns and assistance for poor groups, particularly given the difficult economic conditions endured by the Shia as a politically and security-wise accused minority. During religious occasions such as the commemoration of the birth of Lady Fatima al-Zahra, the league organizes solidarity activities such as donations for the sick and participation in securing the release of some prisoners through fundraising.

It is thus clear that the years 1993–1999 witnessed a profound structural transformation in the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, as security escalation and political repression pushed the movement toward building a multi-armed institutional system, combining missionary activity, educational work, social services, media presence, and civil security organization, transforming it from a simple preaching movement into a comprehensive social framework that succeeded in entrenching its societal presence. Through its activities, the movement reached all strata of society and all parts of the country, despite the intensity of confrontation with the authorities.

3. The Nigerian Islamic Movement and the Project of Peaceful Societal Penetration:

Among the reasons for Zakzaky's popularity was that he adhered to what he said, and applied what he said before uttering it — he would take action first, then implement it, then inform others. He focused on serving the people and struggled against repression⁴⁹

Thus both sides of the conflict found in Zakzaky qualities they were searching for.

Within the framework of the Islamic Movement's social project in Nigeria, the aforementioned institutions and associations played a pioneering role in this regard. During the study period, the Sisters' Assembly was a prominent gathering, being one of the most important organizational tools invested in empowering women and reintegrating them into the public sphere, which contributed to widening the circle of societal outreach beyond narrow sectarian and organizational divisions. This strategy enabled the movement to reach broad segments including Muslims not affiliated with the movement and a number of Christians who found in the movement's social-humanitarian discourse a tolerant religious model that transcended the prevailing stereotypes about Islam. This assembly, in its structure and functions, represented a conscious departure from the traditional patterns of women's exclusion prevalent in the religious environments of northern Nigeria, as it allowed women active participation in meetings and joint programs, including educational and charitable activities that brought men and women together in open spaces, which enhanced the movement's image as a social project transcending strict gender segregation or the exclusion of women from the public sphere. Within this intellectual framework, Zakzaky consistently declared that the marginalization or social exclusion of women had no legitimate basis, but rather reflected a deficient understanding of the objectives of Islamic law, affirming that any assault on women's dignity constituted an unjustified religious violation, condemning arbitrary divorce, and emphasizing the sanctity of the family institution as the fundamental pillar of social stability.⁵⁰

Zeenah Ibraheem's memoirs reflect the transformative impact of this orientation on women's awareness of their religious and social role, as Islam was re-presented as a comprehensive system for life, transcending the confinement of religion to the circle of ritual preaching — as colonialism had worked to confine it — to establish a dynamic relationship between the individual, God, and society, affirming the

within the framework of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria; document held by the researcher; Seyyed Saeed Hasheminasab, previous source, p.319.

⁴⁹Hassan Fadaei, Amir Siyahpoush, previous source, p.56.

⁵⁰Habib Zamani Mahjoub, Reza Adabi Firouzjaei, previous source, pp.62–63.

principle of moral and obligatory equality between women and men. This discourse constituted a clear counterpoint to traditional conceptions that confined women to domestic service or social dependency, and contributed to attracting Muslim and Christian women alike⁵¹. Notably, the family model that Zakzaky represented in his own private life⁵²

lent this discourse tangible social credibility and contributed to its spread among popular circles, away from the image of theoretical preaching unrealized in practice.

Through these various activities, particularly the feminist ones, the Islamic Movement succeeded in building a cross-religious-divide incubating environment, extending to Muslims not organizationally affiliated and to Christians drawn by the movement's service-oriented and humanitarian dimension, providing the movement with flexible outreach capacity⁵³

that hardline Salafi organizations did not enjoy.

Zakzaky applied the idea of rapprochement between religions and sects even inside prison; in his memoirs, Zakzaky recounts the story of the Christian Andrew, who told the jailer and those with him: 'I love these people because they are detained for the sake of the truth... I will help them even though I am not a Muslim'⁵⁴

This quotation reveals an important dimension:

The absence of an absolute religious division within Nigerian society.

The existence of cross-sectarian human solidarity in the face of state escalation of the conflict.

The real conflict was not only within society, but between society and the security state.

The text shows that the discipline of Muslim prisoners in prayer and their collective order led to a number of young prisoners being drawn toward Islam, as evidenced by the testimony of Christian prisoner Alkali, who confirmed that he became convinced of Islam as a result of a personal comparison between Islamic discipline and the organizational disarray of the other side.⁵⁵

The Islamic Movement did not adopt violence, but spread its influence through practical example and behavioral discipline, which made it an influential actor in the religious scene and one of the parties to the conflict over religious identity within Nigeria.

There were also some notable statements made by a Christian pastor from Nigeria during Zakzaky's detention that show the extent of his influence among Nigerian Christians. Roland Sanda, a Christian pastor residing in Kaduna, says: 'I support Sheikh Zakzaky because, throughout history, I have observed that he has been a righteous religious leader, an ambassador of peace, and a human rights activist... He publicly denounces any injustice committed against humanity, and is not swayed by emotion in his actions... He encourages members of his movement to freely engage with Christians, and has never incited them against Christians; rather, he has repeatedly saved their lives by protecting Christians during religious and political crises. Examples of his actions include: the Kafanchan events of 1987, the Zangon Kataf crisis of 1992,... and others. He has done this repeatedly, and teaches members of his movement to follow his example. We Christians cannot atone for the Sheikh's actions... The Nigerian government is committing grave injustice

⁵¹Zeenah Ibeaheem, *Op.Cit.*, p.15.

⁵²Zeenah Ibraheem describes her husband: "He is a very loving, devoted, and humble husband and father. He does housework; he cooks, takes care of our children, bathes them, changes their diapers, feeds them and cares for them, to the point that whenever he is available, they prefer his company to mine... He does everything he can to raise them well and with piety, and as time passed and responsibilities accumulated on him, he hired domestic helpers to meet our various needs... yet he still tries to give a little of his precious time to his family." Zeenah Ibeaheem, *Op.Cit.*, pp.20–21.

⁵³Younis Yahya al-Mu'min, from Kaduna, a student at al-Mustafa University in Mashhad and a member of the Nigerian community in Iran, oral interview conducted by the researcher, Mashhad, Khair Andish Hotel, 17/10/2025, 5–7 pm.

⁵⁴Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, *Op.Cit.*, p.117.

⁵⁵Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, *Op.Cit.*, pp.172–175.

against Sheikh Zakzaky. I consider this injustice to be not only against him, but against his family and the members of his movement, and against us Christians who share a strong friendship with him, because he has saved the lives of our brothers and sisters in times of crisis. It is an injustice against all of humanity. The Islamic Movement in Nigeria includes very kind and peaceful individuals — we have had a very good relationship with Sheikh Zakzaky and his movement's members for a long time, and we understand them well, and they have never wronged us. If they had done so, we Christians would not be in contact with them as we are now.⁵⁶

The relationship with Christianity developed to the extent that he mentioned in an interview the existence of a Christian association within the movement, which joins Christians in celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. In general, Zakzaky became a refuge for all Nigerians, and everyone knows that the Sheikh does not think only of the Shia or Muslims, but seeks security, justice, and peace for all. Not only that, but when Christians wished to rent a house in Zaria, they would rent it near the Sheikh's house, because they would feel safe thanks to him; they therefore supported him so as not to be killed. After the elections in which President Buhari did not win, clashes broke out between Muslims and Christians. Some Christians were killed and others sought refuge with the police; some of them said: 'If Sheikh Zakzaky sends something, we will accept it because we believe he will not harm us.'⁵⁷

This statement confirms to us the extent of Christians' trust in him despite the intensification of conflict between them and Muslims.

Zakzaky maintained that the Islamic Movement was comprehensive, not confined to one tribe over another — regardless of religion or sect — and sought to establish preachers in every village or city so that people could closely learn about the ethics and knowledge of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (peace be upon them). Zakzaky sought to practically guide society toward the understanding that Islam is applicable in every time and place, while also taking into account the circumstances and specificity of each region, since customs, traditions, culture, and norms differ, and what is suitable for application in one region may not be suitable in another⁵⁸. Zakzaky also sought to eliminate the internal divisions and differences existing within Nigerian Islamic society, through calling for preventing foreigners from exploiting Muslims in the country and inciting discord among them, spreading a good example by highlighting the ethics and biography of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (peace be upon them), and presenting the true and authentic teachings of Islam to Muslims at large in Nigeria⁵⁹. The Shia institutions in Nigeria thus seek to build a religious discourse that contributes to coexistence and calls for moderation, despite the security, social, and political challenges they face in a multi-religious environment⁶⁰

In this way, Zakzaky took steps toward rapprochement between religions to steer Nigerians away from the state of conflict.

Zakzaky's project of societal reform is highlighted during his detention at the Kaduna police headquarters, as the detention facility, in addition to including Christians, held Muslims of different orientations, such as followers of Sufism and the Izala movement, who suffered sectarian division even in the performance of rituals. Zakzaky took the initiative to bring them together in a single congregational prayer inside a mosque in the prison, transcending sectarian barriers and establishing a practical model of

⁵⁶Quoted from: Hassan Fadaei, Amir Siyahpoush, previous source, pp.58–59.

⁵⁷Hassan Fadaei, Amir Siyahpoush, previous source, pp.59–60.

⁵⁸Haidar Abd al-Jalil Abd al-Husayn Juwaid al-Harbiyya, "The Role of Hussein Thought in Spreading Muhammadan Islam and Confronting Intellectual Extremism in the Federal Republic of Nigeria," First International Scientific Conference on Scientific Research as an Effective Contribution to Solving Problems and Developing Reality, 19–20 April 2016, pp.10–11, published online:

https://www.academia.edu/103980275/The_role_of_Husseini_thought_in_spreading_

⁵⁹Muhammad Sulaiman Kaduna, Tabihin Sayyid Ibraheem Yaqoub Al-Zak-Zaky (H) Harkar Mosulunci, Printed Gdp, Kaduna, 2015, pp.39–40.

⁶⁰Ibrahim Abdullah al-Mu'azzam, Professor of Arabic Language (Nigeria), "Shia Institutions in Nigeria and Their Impact on Moderate Religious Discourse," lecture within the Visiting Professor Program, University of al-Muthanna, Iraq, 26/12/2026.

religious unity under repressive conditions. This behavior contributed to easing tension among the detainees, and even attracted some police officers to participate in the prayer⁶¹

reflecting Zakzaky's ability to transform a space of conflict and persecution into a field of societal rapprochement and profound peaceful influence.

Hardline Wahhabi Organizations and the Tearing of the Social Fabric:

In contrast, the Wahhabi organizations, foremost among them Jama'at Izalat al-Bid'a wa Iqamat al-Sunna, pursued an opposite path based on social exclusion and jurisprudential rigidity in dealing with issues of women, the family, and others, as their discourse imposed strict restrictions affecting women's educational, social, and economic rights, represented in:⁶²

Reducing girls' educational opportunities, particularly at advanced stages, under the pretext of preventing gender mixing.

Tightening restrictions on women's participation in work and public life.

Entrenching patterns of forced marriage and depriving women of the right to choose.

Leniency in divorce procedures outside judicial frameworks and legal safeguards.

These policies led to the disintegration of the structure of a large number of Muslim families, a rise in divorce and family abandonment rates, and the spread of poverty, begging, and delinquency in urban environments, contributing to producing marginalized youth groups that later became a social reservoir susceptible to mobilization within paths of religious extremism. On the other hand, the sharp contrast between the social discourses of the Islamic Movement and the Wahhabi leaderships was reflected in the nature of relations between Muslims and Christians, as Christians in the southern and central states faced the rise of hardline Wahhabi discourse with suspicion and anxiety, especially amid the entrenchment of a popular image linking Islam to rigidity on issues of women and family and the ease of divorce, which drove some of them to shy away from embracing Islam. This coincided with the escalation of a mocking Christian media discourse that criticized and portrayed Islam as a religion that restricts women and marginalizes their social role.⁶³

Comparing the two paragraphs, we find that the Islamic Movement maintained lines of societal communication transcending religious boundaries, which enabled it to build a more tolerant and open discourse, and contributed to entrenching an alternative image of Islam within Nigerian society as a religion capable of social integration and religious coexistence.

The Most Prominent Religious Conflicts:

Amid this crisis-ridden authoritarian climate of military rule, which attempted to silence both sides of the conflict through a policy that did not resolve the conflict but rather transformed it into a structural expression of a comprehensive state crisis that had lost its institutional control tools, and in which the credibility of constitutional and legal institutions declined, in exchange for the rise of religious, sectarian, and ethnic groups as political actors balancing the state, filling the vacuum of legitimacy and representation, and turning social tension into confrontations of a clear ideological character — the cumulative collapse of constitutional structures during successive periods of military rule thus resulted in the expansion of religious and sectarian tensions, which became one of the most prominent manifestations of popular protest against military rule and the absence of political legitimacy, in addition to being a means of expressing political and social exclusion among the components of Nigeria's religiously diverse society⁶⁴

. Despite the severe repression exercised by military rule, Nigeria nonetheless witnessed conflict incidents under their rule, the most notable of which are set out in the table below:⁶⁵

⁶¹Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, *Op.Cit.*, pp.215–218.

⁶²Batna Adam Abubakar, previous source, pp.70–75.

⁶³Same source, p.68.

⁶⁴Jamal Taha Ali, *op. cit.*, p.168.

⁶⁵Jadid Sharafi, *Ethnic and Religious Conflict in Nigeria and Its Repercussions on State-Building (1960–1999)*, unpublished MA thesis, Djilali Bounaama University – Khemis Miliana, Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, 2018, pp.78–79.

Table (19)

A table showing the most prominent religious conflicts that occurred during the period of military rule (1993–1999), taking Kano State as a model:

Date of the event	Cause of the religious conflict in Kano State
December 1994	Christian desecration of the Quran.
March 1995	A sectarian brawl between the Hausa and Igbo turned into violence, leading to the burning of homes, churches, and shops, and the killing of innocent people.
July 1999	A retaliatory killing carried out by a Hausa-Fulani youth avenging his family and relatives in (Sagamu), targeting the Yoruba community.

The table above makes clear the failure of military rule in managing the file of religious conflict; in Kano State alone, instances of conflict recurred for reasons that could have been resolved, avoiding leading the country into a stage that can be described as one of escalation.

Conclusion

At the end of the research, we arrive at the conclusion that the period between 1993 and 1999 can be considered a preparatory stage for armed extremism. Until 1999, violent jihadist organizations had not yet reached the peak of their activity, but Salafi-Wahhabi discourse during those years had already established a culture of doctrinal distinction that reaches the point of takfir (excommunication) of the different other, and fed a sense of hostility toward non-Muslims. These overall social, economic, political, and other circumstances prepared the intellectual ground for their later armed consequences, such as the formation of Boko Haram in the following decade under the leadership of Muhammad Yusuf, while the Islamic Movement succeeded, through its activities, in becoming a mass movement that reached all strata of society, north and south.....

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