

Sectarian Triangles: Salafis, the Shi‘a, and the Politics of Religious Affiliations in Northern Nigeria*

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Abstract: “Sectarianization”—the political instrumentalization of sectarian identities—is a profitable strategy for many state and non-state actors. This paper presents a theory of sectarianization, as well as an accompanying typology. The paper does not seek to explain the causes of sectarian conflict; rather, the paper examines how third parties respond to exogenous instances of such conflict. The paper argues that third parties face incentives to cultivate strategic ambiguity about their own stances, especially amid significant religious and political competition. In such competitive environments, third parties appear to take stances based on the interaction among three factors: first, a short-term cost-benefit analysis of whether to take sides and if so, how far to align with either of the main two sectarian actors; second, pre-existing relationships between the third party and the two main sectarian actors; and third, a desire to maintain long-term credibility with the broadest audience possible.

“Sectarianization”—the political instrumentalization of sectarian identities—is profitable for many state and non-state actors. Recent literature on sectarianization rejects “primordialist” explanations that treat sectarian conflict as a product of immutable identities. The sectarianization literature also helps to refute the idea that state authorities are passive bystanders to sectarian conflict. The sectarianization literature focuses on the Middle East (Wehrey 2014; Hashemi and Postel 2017; Wehrey 2017), but its core finding—that religious identity is shaped by first-hand political experiences—has been paralleled elsewhere (e.g., McCauley and Posner 2019).

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The sectarianization literature has limitations. First is its emphasis on authoritarianism. The argument that an “anti-democratic political context is essential for understanding sectarian conflict in Muslim societies today” (Hashemi and Postel 2017, 5) does not apply to several of the largest Muslim populations in the world. Sunni–Shi‘i conflict occurs even in some democracies. Second, the literature sometimes attributes too much cunning to the state; even authoritarian regimes sometimes respond to conflict in “contradictory and haphazard” ways (Wimmen 2017, 63). Third, state actors are not the only movers in sectarianization (Matthiesen 2013; Cammett 2015). Fourth, the literature sometimes overlooks sub-national variations; local actors’ sectarianizing behaviors often reflect local interests (e.g., Kamran 2009) and as Fanar Haddad has argued, sectarianism can operate in sub-national, national, and transnational spheres (2020, 5). Fifth, the literature depicts actors making binary decisions about whether to exploit sectarian identities, leaving out more ambivalent options that actors can pursue. Finally, the literature’s focus on Sunni–Shi‘i sectarianism sometimes overlooks internal divisions within these camps.

Responding to these limitations, this paper presents an expanded theory of sectarianization, as well as an accompanying typology. I do not seek to explain the causes of sectarian conflict; rather, I examine how third parties respond to exogenous instances of such conflict. I argue that third parties face incentives to avoid explicitly allying themselves with either of the original two parties to a sectarian conflict. Third parties often cultivate strategic ambiguity about their own stances. I identify several postures available to third parties: remaining completely neutral toward both of the sectarian actors; expressing sympathy for one sectarian actor while criticizing the other; and allying with one sectarian actor but denying that the alliance exists. I further argue that third parties are more likely to pursue ambiguous responses to sectarian conflicts amid significant religious and political competition, and especially when third parties do not feel that their political or physical survival is immediately at stake.

In such competitive environments, third parties appear to take stances based on the interaction among three factors: first, a short-term cost-benefit analysis of whether to take sides and if so, how far to go toward favoring either of the main two sectarian actors; second, pre-existing relationships, positive or negative, between the third party and either or both of the two main sectarian actors; and third, a desire to maintain credibility over the long term and with the broadest audience possible. The second factor, pre-existing relationships, helps explain why a third party will

not always side with the sectarian party that is closest to them theologically; for one thing, there may be bad blood between them and the third party may be reluctant to or fearful of empowering a past or present adversary. Moreover, a pre-existing positive relationship with one actor can limit how far the third party is willing to tilt toward the other, even when the third party's preferences change. The third factor, the concern with credibility, can also outweigh the short-term benefits of forming an alliance with a sectarian actor. The more diverse a third party's constituency is, the more likely that maintaining credibility may be associated with the idea of neutrality.

The paper analyzes the case of Nigeria, particularly the country's Muslim-majority north. Nigeria's religious diversity—including inter-religious (primarily Muslim–Christian) diversity and intra-religious diversity—creates an array of potential alignments and relationships, all within a society whose citizens describe themselves as highly pious (Pew Research Center 2018, 66). In northern Nigeria, Sunnis are the majority but the Shi'i minority is vocal, and may number in the low millions out of a northern Muslim population of 80 million or more, and a total Nigerian population of over 200 million (The Economist 2018). Moreover, a crucial part of the context in Nigeria and elsewhere is that third parties are not merely deciding whether to back “the Sunnis” or “the Shi'a.” There is a “fragmentation of sacred authority,” both globally (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996) and in Nigeria (Kane 2003). This fragmentation has facilitated the rise of Shi'i activism but has also intensified intra-Sunni competition. For politicians, fragmentation means that their outreach to any one Sunni constituency can antagonize others; there is often no viable generic pro-Sunni, anti-Shi'i posture, only different balancing acts. In some emerging democracies, forms of “benevolent secularism” can mitigate fragmentation, helping to foster cooperation between state actors and religious actors while also increasing interfaith cooperation (Buckley 2017); such contexts help to create atmospheres of trust and widespread confidence in a consensus-based social reality. In other emerging democracies, however, “do or die” politics (a phrase made famous by former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo) can collide with religious conflict, exacerbating mistrust between actors and fracturing narratives about national identity. In Nigeria, third parties reacting to sectarianism move in a deeply fragmented political, religious, and media environment.

Northern politicians have incentives to be neutral when possible and anti-Shi'i when necessary, but they also have reasons to fear the

long-term consequences of antagonizing the Shi'a completely. Politicians sometimes court Shi'i votes, and they have seen the disruption that the Shi'a—whose main Nigerian manifestation has periodically staged violent protests since the 1980s—can cause. Meanwhile, Sunni religious leaders compete with one another for followers, and thus do not always have incentives to unite against the Shi'a or to support anti-Shi'i politicians. Moreover, the media environment is saturated with rumor and conspiracy theories, incentivizing politicians, traditional rulers, and some Sunni clerics to take bland stances on sectarian conflicts when possible. Finally, the balance of power between mainline Sunnis, the Shi'a, and Sunni extremists differs greatly from one locality to another.

The sectarianization literature might predict that because Nigeria is not a fully authoritarian system, it has less likelihood of experiencing sectarian conflict than do countries under authoritarian rule in the Middle East; yet Nigeria is infamous for Muslim–Christian conflict (Griswold 2011), intra-Sunni conflict (Loimeier 1997; Kane 2003), and, increasingly, Sunni–Shi'i conflict (Abu-Nasr 2017). Or the sectarianization literature might predict that northern Nigerian political and religious elites, who are almost universally Sunni, would pursue anti-Shi'ism to shore up power. Yet more complex outcomes routinely occur: some Sunni figures attempt to remain completely neutral, certain Sunni religious leaders express rhetorical sympathy for the Shi'a while criticizing other Sunnis, and Sunni politicians sometimes implicitly pursue anti-Shi'ism while maintaining plausible deniability about their own roles in exacerbating sectarianism. In Nigeria, as in many other places, third parties respond to sectarian conflicts with different degrees of bet-hedging.

THEORIZING SECTARIANIZATION

To advance the theorization of sectarianism, this paper focuses on four types of actors: politicians, religious leaders, traditional rulers, and extremist groups. This list foregrounds some common participants in sectarianization, but is not exhaustive. The paper conceptualizes how such actors respond to sectarian conflicts that have already arisen, and seeks to understand how and why they react as they do. Instead of explaining the causes of sectarianism, the paper instead focuses on capturing third parties' multifaceted incentives and constraints.

For politicians in competitive electoral environments, the typical cost-benefit analysis vis-à-vis sectarianism is that when sectarian conflict is

low or dormant, politicians are better off remaining neutral, in order to solicit votes from all of the key constituencies in their area. Amid conflict between two or more sectarian blocs, however, politicians may feel forced to pick the more numerous or powerful side—but only to a degree, because picking a side today may carry costs tomorrow. In Nigeria, electoral coalitions can shift dramatically because elections are somewhat competitive, especially at the gubernatorial level. Incumbents often win, and political machines can control states over multiple cycles, but electoral upsets occur every cycle; for example, in 2003, the first year that governors were facing re-election under Nigeria's Fourth Republic, incumbents or incumbent parties were defeated in 10 out of Nigeria's 36 states. Politicians often need to build different coalitions for different elections; embracing one side while antagonizing another can have short-term benefits that politicians must weigh against long-term risks. As in other contexts, fracturing a coalition can cost politicians power (e.g., Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich 2011).

The dynamism of the environment creates webs of pre-existing relationships that politicians cannot always discard easily. Spurned coalition partners can create serious problems for politicians; in Nigeria, the costs of antagonizing a key religious bloc can be severe, not just electorally but even in terms of physical violence. When possible, politicians seek to reduce the costs of alienating a coalition partner, and to leave the door open to future alliances. Meanwhile, politicians are embedded in elite networks that may connect them in surprising ways to sectarian leaders; one example is alumni networks, as seen below.

Politicians must also worry about their credibility, particularly in environments where publics lose confidence in official sources of information. In such environments, rumors and conspiracy theories fill perceived gaps in official explanations of events (Simons 1995). Rumors elevate social tensions and can encourage violence (Stewart and Strathern 2003). Even in relatively stable countries, conspiracy theories can attract wide swaths of the public, especially audiences who endorse “Manichean narratives” (Oliver and Wood 2014). In northern Nigeria, rumors and conspiracy theories help to feed sectarianization. The media atmosphere saps public confidence in political and religious authorities and makes any explicit favoritism potentially costly to many leaders' already damaged credibility; in northern Nigeria, the Shi'a also have a formidable online presence, which they often use to target the reputations of Sunni politicians and religious leaders. Politicians' ambiguity about their stances within sectarian conflicts can also have costs, feeding rumors that affect leaders'

credibility. Yet Nigerian politicians often seem to calculate that their credibility will fare better if they maintain plausible deniability than if they explicitly take a side.

Religious actors who are not the initial movers in a given sectarian conflict, but who are third parties to it, also make cost-benefit analyses. Religious actors face pressures to choose sides, particularly with their ostensible co-sectarians against an ostensible sectarian rival. Yet religious third parties also have incentives to maintain their “share” in crowded religious marketplaces (Stark and Finke 2000). For a Sunni leader who feels more threatened by a rival Sunni group than by the Shi‘a, neutrality or even a rhetorical opening toward the Shi‘a can make more sense than pursuing a united Sunni front against Shi‘ism. As in other contexts, religious actors’ political decision-making reflects their positions within the religious fields around them (Smith 2016; Smith 2019). Ascendant religious movements may harness sectarianism in a bid to challenge their more institutionalized competitors, and religious leaders who feel under threat may also feel forced to pick sides. Religious leaders who feel only a moderate amount of defensiveness, however, may take less aggressive stances and may even attempt to mediate conflicts. Religious leaders’ rhetorical choices can in turn affect their audiences’ modes of political participation (McClendon and Riedl 2019).

As third parties, religious actors also have pre-existing relationships that shape their choices about how to respond to sectarian conflict. Notably, one Sunni group might feel more antipathy toward another Sunni group than they do toward the Shi‘a; meanwhile, a given Sunni group’s relationship with the Shi‘a may not necessarily be antagonistic. These dynamics help to shape counterintuitive outcomes where one Sunni constituency leans toward the Shi‘a in the Shi‘a’s conflict with another Sunni constituency. At the same time, such leanings can be tempered by the incentive to maintain credibility with Sunnis writ large. And religious leaders, like politicians, are sometimes part of elite networks characterized by surprising degrees of communication and even harmony behind the scenes, even amid public conflict.

In terms of credibility, there is evidence that religious actors prioritize their credibility when making political decisions. In Christian democracies, churches can lose credibility by becoming overtly politicized and embroiled in electoral campaigns (GrzyMala-Busse 2015; GrzyMala-Busse 2016). Conceptions of what it means to be politically and religiously credible, however, can vary from one religious community to another; some religious constituencies, such as Pentecostal Christians

(Sperber and Hern 2018), may be more likely than other groups to take an interest in politics.

For traditional rulers, the default cost-benefit analysis runs in the direction of neutrality. In northern Nigeria, most traditional rulers are Muslims, and virtually all of the Muslim rulers are Sunnis. In calm circumstances, traditional rulers have incentives to appear above the fray of intra-Sunni and even Sunni–Shi‘i rivalries. Northern traditional rulers are expected to exercise moral authority over the entire community and to mediate conflicts within it.

In terms of pre-existing relationships, traditional rulers can be affected in various and idiosyncratic ways by their personal relationships with different religious constituencies. But the most important pre-existing relationship for a given traditional ruler is often with politicians. In many parts of the world, traditional rulers have had their independence undermined by government authorities, elected politicians, and even armed groups (Molenaar et al. 2019). More than either of the two sectarian actors in a given conflict, then, it may be politicians who shape a traditional ruler’s response.

The sensitivity of traditional rulers’ positions creates credibility risks amid sectarian conflict. In periods when intra-Muslim rivalries intensify, traditional rulers face pressures to balance several priorities: the need to avoid angering politicians, the need to maintain Sunni support while navigating intra-Sunni tensions, and the need to avoid a complete break with the Shi‘a, who make up a significant portion of some rulers’ subjects. Failure to speak or act on behalf of core constituencies can be perceived as weakness, but sectarian conflict simultaneously increases risks that rulers will be perceived as being “captured” by one side. Amid such pressures, northern Nigeria’s Sunni traditional rulers often embrace overt anti-Shi‘ism only in moments of crisis and tension, and sometimes do so reluctantly and with costs.

For violent extremists, the cost-benefit analysis vis-à-vis sectarianism runs in the direction of enflaming sectarian tensions. Extremists grow and build power in spaces where the state is weak or corruptible, including by advancing religio-political narratives to attract followers. Sectarianism can be a core part of such narratives. Extremists also increase or decrease their own sectarianism in response to different events and pressures (Haykel 2010). Violent extremists’ pre-existing relationships, however, can prevent them from aligning with either side in a sectarian conflict. Among Sunni extremists, for example, there may be bad blood with

other Sunni blocs, discouraging extremists from joining in an anti-Shi'i front.

Extremists, like the other third parties discussed above, face credibility risks. If extremists let other actors drive narratives about sectarianism, extremists can be coopted into other actors' sectarian projects in ways that dilute the extremist brand. Responding to such incentives and constraints, extremists may superimpose their own frames, including hyper-sectarian frames, over others' sectarian conflicts.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To help analyze northern Nigeria's sectarian triangles, I offer a "descriptive" or "conceptual" typology that "explicate[s] a concept by mapping out its dimensions" (Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012, 218). The typology describes various responses that third parties make when sectarian actors either bid for those third parties' support or attempt to delegitimize the third parties. Each "sectarian triangle" discussed below includes the two most outspokenly sectarian Muslim actors in northern Nigeria—the Sunni literalist constituency known as Salafis, and the Shi'i group known as the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN)—as well as a third party. As with other religio-political entanglements, sectarian alignments can create "strange bedfellows" when actors with different religious perspectives make common cause on a particular political issue (Bilodeau et al. 2018).

To understand and typologize sectarian triangles, I offer four case studies nested within the broader case study of northern Nigeria. The nested case studies exemplify various possible configurations within sectarian triangles. I identify five postures that a third party might take: (1) overt alliance, where the third party openly sides with one sectarian actor and attacks the other; (2) unacknowledged alignment, where the third party favors one sect to the detriment of the other but officially refrains from taking sides; (3) rhetorical preference, where the third party speaks favorably but guardedly about one side while taking no other action within the conflict; (4) neutrality, which may involve either aloofness from the conflict altogether, or an attempt to act as mediator; and (5) rejectionism, where the third party vilifies both of the other actors in the triangle. Given that much of the sectarianization literature focuses on overt alliances between states and sectarians, and given that

Table 1. Sectarian Triangles in Northern Nigeria

Third Party Posture	1. Overt Alliance	2. Unacknowledged Alignment	3. Rhetorical Preference	4. Attempted Neutrality	5. Rejectionism
Nested Case	Not covered here	Nasir El-Rufai	Dahiru Bauchi	Sanusi Lamido Sanusi	Boko Haram

these overt alliances are relatively rare in Nigeria, I focus on the other four postures (Table 1).

The typology's core limitation is that it could inadvertently downplay the dynamism inherent in many sectarian triangles. Sectarian actors and third parties frequently change or subtly shift their stances within these relationships as each actor reacts to events and to other actors' changing stances. In particular, when conflicts escalate, neutrality often becomes less tenable.

It is tempting to make an independent variable out of sectarian actors' strategies for pressuring third parties, and then to make those third parties' reactions into a dependent variable. That approach would, however, be overly deterministic. Third parties have the latitude to weigh options, and their strategies are not always purely reactive. Just because a sectarian actor offers an alliance to a third party does not mean that the third party will accept, especially if there is a history of bad blood between one of the sectarian actors and the third party. There is even the potential for boomerang effects, where a third party's open favoritism toward one side leads to accusations that the third party is merely trying to overcompensate for past favoritism toward the other side. These dynamics reinforce many third parties' calculation that the most prudent course amid sectarian conflict is to keep one's position strategically ambiguous.

These case studies are based on qualitative analysis of key actors' public statements made in English, Arabic, and Hausa. These statements range from sectarian polemics to more ambiguous, often reactive statements made by third parties. Analyzing the statements requires not just unpacking their content but also placing them in the web of relationships and implied cross-references that structure their production and reception within a fractured public.

AN OVERVIEW OF POLITICS AND RELIGION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA, WITH EMPHASIS ON SALAFIS AND THE IMN

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with an estimated 200 million people. Formally, Nigeria is a secular, multi-party democracy with a presidential system. In practice, only one electoral upset has occurred at the presidential level, as a result of intra-elite shifts in the lead-up to the 2015 elections as well as widespread dissatisfaction with the ruling party's economic policies (Owen and Usman 2015; LeVan 2018).

Nigeria's 1999 constitution prohibits the establishment of a state religion (Section 10) and guarantees freedom of religion (Section 38.1-3). Yet religious rhetoric, identity, and mobilization feature prominently in electoral politics (Falola 1998; Obadare 2018). In Nigeria, as elsewhere in West Africa, religious entrepreneurs have adapted to democratic openings (Villalón 2015) and the neoliberal era (Soares 2006).

Nigeria's federalist system grants substantial powers to state governments. For example, invoking federalism, Muslim-majority northern states implemented a version of shari'a starting in 2000 (Lubeck 2011; Kendhammer 2016; Eltantawi 2017). Meanwhile, gubernatorial elections can be highly competitive, including in the north, where religious issues have contributed to gubernatorial upsets (Kogelmann 2006). In this environment, northern politicians seek to manage the trade-offs inherent in their relationships with different sectarian constituencies.

The religious landscape has changed dramatically in the postcolonial period. From the nineteenth century into the late twentieth century, the north's foremost religious voices were hereditary Muslim rulers and Sufi shaykhs. Those categories overlapped considerably. The traditional rulers, whose authority was bolstered but also circumscribed by colonial and postcolonial authorities, typically belonged to Sufi orders, namely the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya. These orders expanded during the twentieth century (Paden 1973). Yet the late colonial and postcolonial periods brought new challengers to the Sufis, as well as multiple crises for traditional rulers that they weathered only by adapting to politicians' growing power over them (Yakubu 1996).

In northern Nigeria, sectarian conflict between Salafis and Shi'is began when organized Salafi and Shi'i movements crystallized in parallel beginning in the late 1970s. In 1978, a strident Salafi movement emerged in northern Nigeria, proclaiming itself the true defender of Sunni Islam and declaring Sufis to be, at best, a corrupted form of Sunnism. Salafism is a global movement whose worldview has been defined

elsewhere (Wiktorowicz 2006; Haykel 2009; Brown 2015). In brief, Salafis are theological literalists who are sweepingly anti-Shi'i and argue that even other Sunni Muslims need profound correction; a minority of Salafis are violent "Salafi-jihadis" (Maher 2016).

Northern Nigeria's main Salafi movement is known as Izala—short for *Jama'at Izalat al-Bid'a wa-Iqamat al-Sunna*, "The Society for Removing Blameworthy Innovation and Establishing the Prophetic Norm." Izala grew through preaching and educational outreach, including to women (Renne 2012), and through alliances with businessmen and politicians (Kane 2003). From the movement's inception, Izala leaders cultivated relationships with elected politicians (Loimeier 1997). The 1980s and 1990s brought schisms within Izala (Ben Amara 2011; Rijiyar Lemo 2011), including when younger, Saudi-educated preachers stepped into leadership roles (Thurston 2016). These figures have sometimes tamped down Izala's hostility toward Sufism, but have simultaneously increased anti-Shi'ism, a feature of the curriculum in Saudi Arabia (Farquhar 2016).

In the 1980s, meanwhile, there arose a politically outspoken Shi'i organization, presently known as the Islamic Movement in Nigeria or IMN (Sulaiman 1998; Bunza 2005; Isa and Adam 2017). The IMN originated among student radicals inspired by the Iranian Revolution. Initially, the revolution invigorated various northern Nigerian Sunni activists who favored Islamizing the Nigerian state. Many of these figures had been disappointed by the process of drafting the Nigerian Constitution of 1979, where proposals to create a Federal Sharia Court of Appeal were defeated (Laitin 1982). Most of the Iranian Revolution's Nigerian admirers did not initially see it in sectarian terms, but rather as merely one of "various successful Islamic reform movements in history" (Barkindo 1993, 99–100). Yet the student radical Ibrahim al-Zakzaky (b. 1953), who would become the most controversial Shi'i leader in Nigeria, began traveling to Iran. He soon became recognizably Shi'i as a sectarian orientation. He denounced the Nigerian state in sweeping terms (Al-Zakzaky 1980; Ibrahim 2017). Between 1981 and 1998, al-Zakzaky spent a total of nine years in prison, and IMN supporters periodically perpetrated violence (Falola 1998). The conflict between the IMN and the Nigerian state is not a sectarian one, nor is it most productively understood as a conflict between the hardline Islamism of the IMN and the formally secular state; rather, the conflict stems primarily from the IMN's rejection, at times violent, of the state's authority, which has in turn frequently elicited provocative responses by authorities that then exacerbated conflict. Yet the state as a whole, and individual politicians in power, can be drawn into

sectarian triangles amid this power struggle between the state and the IMN, which has overlapped with the sectarian conflict between the Salafis and the IMN.

In 1999, when Nigeria returned to civilian multi-party rule and when northern states began to promulgate “full shari‘a codes” (see above), the IMN rejected the implementation of shari‘a outside the framework of a full Islamic state. (Nigerian Salafi-jihadis would later adopt that position as well, although they wanted to base such a state on Salafi theology, rather than Shi‘i doctrine.) In contrast, the mainstream of the Salafi movement cautiously embraced the shari‘a project (Adam 2000; Ben Amara 2013). Salafis served on government committees and associated themselves to varying degrees with elected politicians (Thurston 2015). Salafi scholars denounced the IMN as deviants who cared only about promoting Shi‘ism, and who were working to undermine shari‘a (Bunza 2005, 235).

In 2014, conflict resurged between the IMN and the Nigerian state. At the IMN’s “al-Quds (Jerusalem) Day” procession in Zaria, the IMN clashed with soldiers, who shot numerous IMN members, including three of al-Zakzaky’s sons. In December 2015, IMN members in Zaria blocked a convoy carrying Chief of Army Staff Tukur Buratai. The military treated the incident as an assassination attempt. A crackdown claimed over 300 people lives, and soldiers arrested al-Zakzaky (Kaduna State Judicial Commission of Inquiry 2016). At the time of writing, al-Zakzaky remains in detention. As in earlier phases of the conflict between the IMN and the state, this current phase has been driven by a cycle of provocations on both sides and in each party’s sense that the other is fundamentally illegitimate. The conflict has, meanwhile, generated and exacerbated multiple sectarian triangles.

Sectarian Triangle #1—Unacknowledged Alignment: Kaduna State Governor Nasir El-Rufai and Salafis against the IMN

This triangle features a Sunni politician, Nasir El-Rufai, who moved away from relative openness toward the Shi‘a and toward an unacknowledged alignment with Salafis, although each step in that process has been fraught with accusations and counter-accusations from multiple directions. Prior to the escalation of conflict between the IMN and the Federal Government in December 2015, El-Rufai’s immediate cost-benefit analysis vis-à-vis Salafi-IMN sectarianism in his state involved an effort at

benevolent neutrality or even a courting of the IMN. Yet as the IMN raised the costs for all politicians of maintaining a working relationship with them, El-Rufai cracked down on the IMN and implicitly (and perhaps between the scenes, explicitly) favored the Salafis. El-Rufai's pre-existing relationship with the IMN appeared to act as one check against him forming an overt alliance with the Salafis, however, especially because both the IMN and the Nigerian media accused him of being a fair-weather friend to all. Meanwhile, a desire to maintain multiple forms of credibility—both with other Sunni constituencies and within Nigeria's constitutional system, which formally prohibits constraining freedom of religion—also acted as a brake against overt sectarianism on El-Rufai's part. This case demonstrates some of the incentives that politicians have to pick sides in sectarian conflicts, but to do so without fully acknowledging their choices.

In 2015, El-Rufai was elected governor of Kaduna, where the IMN's headquarters, Zaria, is located. A former businessman and cabinet official, he is a leading member of President Muhammadu Buhari's All Progressives Congress (APC). At the time of the clashes in Zaria between the IMN and the Nigerian Army, El-Rufai had been in office just six months. In October 2016, Kaduna's government proscribed the IMN. Explaining the decision in an April 2017 television interview, El-Rufai said that his government was not acting against the Shi'a as a religious persuasion (which would contravene constitutional provisions relating to freedom of religion, as discussed above) but against the IMN as a political organization: "They do not recognize the Constitution of Nigeria. They do not recognize the president of Nigeria as sovereign. They do not recognize me as governor. Their allegiance is to another country. And their objective is to turn Nigeria into an Islamic Republic" (Channels Television 2017). Nevertheless, El-Rufai would have to answer recurring questions about his own relationship with the IMN and al-Zakzaky.

The Kaduna ban on the IMN expanded the potential for alignment between El-Rufai and the Salafis, especially the Izala movement. Shortly after El-Rufai announced the ban, Izala proclaimed its support for the decision. Whereas El-Rufai's government framed the ban as a maneuver connected to law and order, Izala's National Chairman Abdullahi Bala Lau couched the decision in sectarian terms (BBC Hausa 2016). This dynamic exemplifies how in a sectarian triangle, informal alignment can fall short of a full-blown alliance; actors may describe their worldviews and understandings in different ways even as they

converge on a course of action. Sectarian actors can associate themselves with a third party's decisions without necessarily being part of the decision-making.

The IMN portrayed El-Rufai's changing posture as a result of the collision of sectarianism, local electoral politics, and the alleged global machinations of Saudi Arabia and the United States. An IMN member wrote:

It would easily be recalled that El-Rufai condemned the Goodluck Jonathan's [sic] administration for killing the three sons of the IMN leader in an attack on the IMN where 34 members were killed by the Nigerian Army. He was quick at going to the Sheikh's Gyallesu residence in Zaria to condole him. It even caused a dent on his political image on the side of his now newly found allies the Wahabi inclined Izala sect of whom Boko Haram is an offshoot, who accused him of becoming a Shiite...A lot of those Izala sectarians did not vote for him but more IMN members went to vote in his favor for showing concern with the plight of their leader. On assuming power, for reasons best known to the Wahhabi APC government, they decided to clampdown on the IMN with the intention of killing the Leader, dispersing the members and banning the IMN...[After the clash between the IMN and the Nigerian military in Zaria in 2015,] the Izala sect went closer to El-Rufai to exploit the situation to buy him over. The Saudis were willing to part with millions of Dollars for any northern Nigerian governor that would buy into their plot of eliminating the Shiites they see as a threat to their influence and interest in Nigeria (Suleiman 2016).

To summarize, the IMN accused El-Rufai and the ruling APC coalition of allying with Izala and the government of Saudi Arabia in order to crush the IMN and halt the spread of Shi'ism. What I describe as alignment between El-Rufai and Salafis was, from the IMN's perspective, a *realignment* that reversed an earlier, tacit alliance between El-Rufai and the IMN.

The extent to which El-Rufai has aligned with Izala is debated in the Nigerian media. The charges of past support for Shi'ism, from the IMN and others, gained enough attention that El-Rufai felt compelled to address them, particularly the charge that he had solicited votes from the IMN when running for governor. In the above-mentioned April 2017 television interview, he framed his earlier condolence visit to al-Zakzaky as an empathetic human gesture, rather than vote-seeking (Channels Television 2017). Yet the fact that a broadcast journalist would raise the question, and that El-Rufai would feel compelled to answer it, shows how potent accusations of closet Shi'i sympathies can

be. Two years later, the 2019 election campaign brought fresh allegations that El-Rufai had donated vehicles to Izala in exchange for electoral support (Sahara Reporters 2019), and that Izala had secretly communicated conditions to El-Rufai before endorsing his campaign. Izala's demands allegedly included that El-Rufai would curtail Sufi activities in the state (Point Blank News 2019), highlighting once again how Sunni actors move not just against the Shi'a but against each other. Izala denied all this (Yaba 2019), but rumors of an alignment between El-Rufai and Izala gained traction. Even if El-Rufai and Izala have aligned (which is far from clear), both parties benefit from a bit of ambiguity around the situation. Just as El-Rufai does not wish to be seen as a pawn of the Salafis, neither do Salafis wish to lose their credibility as men (or women) of religion and become just another political constituency.

Sectarian Triangle #2—Rhetorical Preference: Dahiru Bauchi

In this triangle, a Sunni (Sufi) religious leader expresses a slight rhetorical preference for the IMN while remaining ostensibly neutral. This is a softer and more ambiguous posture than the informal alignment discussed in the previous section; on the whole, this leader's cost-benefit analysis still leans toward attempting to remain neutral or above the fray. Pre-existing relationships also come into play, namely the lingering effects of past bad blood between rival Sunni constituencies, which in this case constrain the possibilities for a pan-Sunni, anti-IMN alliance. Finally, showing too much openness toward the IMN could damage this particular Sunni leader's credibility, and so he has been at times cordial and at times critical toward the IMN.

This triangle is shaped by the longtime antagonism between Salafis and Sufis in northern Nigeria and around the world. Salafis allege that Sufis fall into *bid'a* (blameworthy religious innovation). Salafis denounce Sufi-infused celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*mawlid*) and the Sufi (and popular) practice of visiting shaykhs' graves. Sufis respond that their practices are a core part of the Sunni tradition.

Despite bad blood dating back to the 1970s in northern Nigeria (Gumi 1972; Loimeier 1997; Ahmad 2010), Northern Nigerian Salafis sometimes use anti-Shi'ism to reach out to Sufis, hoping to forge a pan-Sunni, anti-Shi'i alliance. At other times, Salafis use anti-Shi'ism as a rhetorical weapon against Sufis. These two modes sometimes operate nearly simultaneously in Salafi discourse: for example, one influential Salafi polemic

against the Shi'a was written "especially for our venerable fathers, the traditionalist scholars, to acquaint them with the evils of this sect" (Labdo 2010, 2), yet the book also attributed the IMN's growth in Nigeria to "the devastating failure of the scholars to lead the Muslim community and to guide individuals and groups" (46). Other Salafi authors are even more critical of what they see as the Sufis' overly accommodating attitude toward the Shi'a. One author lamented that anti-Shi'i efforts were undermined by what he saw as the willingness of Sufi shaykhs to participate in the Sunni-Shi'i "unity" initiatives that the IMN championed. At a "week of unity" organized by al-Zakzaky, the author complained, Sufi shaykhs had launched "insulting and abusive attacks against *Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama'a* [in this context, the author means Salafis], accusing them of being the insurmountable obstacle on the path of realizing unity among Muslims." Even as the IMN proclaimed an interest in unity, this Salafi author alleged, the Shi'a perennially camouflaged their intentions (Rijiyar Lemo 2014). Here, Salafis' multi-pronged strategy of accusation painted the Shi'a as deceitful and the Sufis as, at best, dupes.

Northern Nigerian Sufis view Shi'ism with concern but often reject and mistrust Salafis. Some prominent Sufis consider the Salafi movement a greater threat to themselves and to Nigerian society than the IMN. In a 2016 interview, the Sufi leader Dahiru Usman Bauchi flatly ruled out Sufi-Salafi cooperation against the Shi'a. Bauchi argued that Salafis' eagerness to pronounce *takfir* (anathematization of fellow Muslims) fostered instability in the north. He avowed that there was no fundamental difference between Izala and the militant organization Boko Haram—he classed the entire Salafist movement as extremists (Bauchi 2016). Incidentally, as noted above, the IMN also sometimes makes the same argument.

Dahiru Bauchi exemplifies one way the Salafi-Shi'i-Sufi triangle can play out in Nigeria. Amid his skepticism toward the Salafis, Bauchi has shown a degree of openness to the IMN that at times seems like the logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." For example, during Ramadan 2018, Bauchi received a delegation of al-Zakzaky's students who came with the express purpose of building a relationship (Yakubu 2018). The same year, Bauchi called on the Federal Government to release al-Zakzaky, saying that Nigeria was courting God's wrath by imprisoning the IMN leader (Bala 2018).

Some of Bauchi's public comments have been more neutral, with hints of attempted mediation. For example, in one newspaper interview he said, "I am calling on the government to be careful and exercise restraint on

people with extreme religious beliefs. I am also calling on such people to be moderate in their approach to things and avoid unnecessary confrontation with the government or any of its arms” (Sa’idu et al. 2018). In the same interview, Bauchi criticized Shi‘i theology: “Although the origin of Shi‘ism is very old and rooted in Islamic political history, it had, however, transformed into a pseudoreligious movement with some warped ideology which is slowly becoming violent in some way.” Bauchi went on to say, however, that he saw a possibility for intra-sectarian harmony in northern Nigeria: “They should unite with all other Muslims to live in peace. Although the practice is over 1,300 years old and may not be forgotten, they should not be so deviant” (Sa’idu et al. 2018).

This was not the kind of embrace the IMN might have hoped for—but it differed from the far-reaching anti-Shi‘ism often voiced by Salafis. On its website, the IMN has included neutral-to-positive coverage of Bauchi’s activities (e.g., Freezak 2018), treating the shaykh as a respected religious figure. This triangle is not the kind of informal alignment seen between El-Rufai and the Salafis—Bauchi has shown only rhetorical and symbolic openness toward the IMN, rather than any kind of direct favoritism to strengthen the IMN’s position—but the rhetorical openness is, if nothing else, a clear Sufi rejection of the Salafi effort to create a pan-Sunni, anti-Shi‘i front.

Sectarian Triangle #3—Attempted Neutrality: Sanusi Lamido Sanusi

This triangle exemplifies an effort at full neutrality, here on the part of one of northern Nigeria’s most prominent hereditary Muslim rulers. As noted above, hereditary rulers’ cost-benefit analysis often generates efforts at neutrality, because they theoretically exercise moral authority over all Muslims in their territories. This particular ruler’s position vis-à-vis Salafi–IMN sectarianism has been complicated by his past public sparring with the Salafis and by accusations that he sympathized with the IMN’s al-Zakzaky, a classmate of his, during the 1980s and even into the 2000s. Ironically, the need to rebut accusations of crypto-Shi‘ism and hence preserve Sunni credibility likely contributed to what the IMN, at least, regarded as this ruler’s abandonment of neutrality after the IMN crisis escalated in 2015. Finally, the ruler found himself caught in a web spun by politicians, reinforcing the idea that pre-existing relationships contribute strongly to shaping third parties’ response to sectarianism.

The third party in this triangle is the Emir of Kano Muhammadu Sanusi II (in office 2014–2020), better known as Sanusi Lamido Sanusi. Prior to taking the throne, Sanusi was governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (2009–2014). In an even earlier phase of his career, he wrote as a public Islamic intellectual in the 2000s. In that phase, he became one of the fiercest critics of Ja‘far Adam (1961/2–2007), the most prominent Nigerian Salafi preacher of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The polemics between Sanusi and Adam covered the implementation of shari‘a, the nature of religious authority in Islam, and the construction of northern Nigerian identity.

The question of Shi‘ism surfaced at several points in the debate. Sanusi expressed sympathy for elements of Shi‘i philosophical, ethical, and political thought, as well as for the positions of other sects outside the Sunni mainstream:

In theology, the ethical rationalism of the Mu‘tazilites and Shiites accounts for their emphasis on the principle of ‘Adl, or justice. Politically, this was reflected in their attitude toward unjust rulers... This was markedly different from the Sunni consensus against rebellion (Sanusi 2005).

Extending this line of political thought into the present, Sanusi argued that the solution to northern Nigeria’s problems lay not in implementing shari‘a but in orienting Islam toward social justice. He invoked, as inspirations, *Al-‘Adala al-Ijtima‘iyya fi’l-Islam* (Social Justice in Islam, 1949), by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood thinker Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), and the works of the Iranian Shi‘i intellectual ‘Ali Shari‘ati (1933–1977). Those authors, he said, had articulated “an ethically grounded conception of Islam and Shari‘ah” that he endorsed (Sanusi 2005).

Rather than proclaiming any particular sectarian identity, Sanusi argued that he grasped the Islamic tradition more broadly and deeply than did Adam or other Nigerian Salafis. Yet Sanusi’s words reawakened old accusations against him, namely that he was a former and/or secret Shi‘i. One of Adam’s online defenders wrote,

People can now distinguish between true Islamic scholars who adhere to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and tried to abide by it and societal chameleons who could be bankers today, political analysts tomorrow, economist the day after tomorrow and the next morning appear as malikis with a dose of shi’a doctrines in their cupboard (Yusha’u 2005).

The accusation has resurfaced periodically throughout Sanusi's career. Sanusi was an undergraduate at Ahmadu Bello University in the late 1970s, at the same time that al-Zakzaky attended. The two men were students in the same department—Economics—and they were both members of the Muslim Students Society. The acquaintance apparently continued afterwards. In 2017, a photograph circulated in Nigerian Internet forums purporting to show Sanusi and al-Zakzaky together in Sudan in the 1990s, when Sanusi was a student at the International African University.

As Emir, Sanusi's approach to sectarianism has foregrounded strategic ambiguity. Historically, Emirs of Kano have been strongly associated with the Tijaniyya Sufi order (Paden 1973). One might have expected Sanusi to take on the dual mantle of traditional ruler and Sufi shaykh, especially because Sanusi modeled himself on his grandfather the Emir Muhammadu Sanusu I (in office 1953–1963), who was not just a Tijani adherent but a *muqaddam* or designated leader within the order. Yet Sanusi has not publicly aligned himself with any sect, and he recruited advisers from diverse Sunni constituencies.

Some Nigerian Muslim observers have found Sanusi's intellectual eclecticism praiseworthy. One 2014 forum post was subtitled "The Emir of Kano Is Too Learned to Be Shiite Or Sunni in The Modern Political And Economic Garment of The Sects" (Barau 2014). For Sanusi's part, though, the decision to emphasize religious and cultural progressivism over sectarian particularism may reflect not just intellectual conviction but also a strategy for preserving the increasingly tenuous authority and credibility of the northern hereditary rulers (Last 2008; Suleiman 2012); for an "aristocracy in political crisis" in the twenty-first century just as it was in the independence era (Yakubu 1996), picking a sectarian side or even a particular Sunni affiliation may no longer be as viable as it was for previous generations.

For further context, Sanusi's tenure as emir was politicized to a degree that no other northern Nigerian hereditary ruler of his generation has experienced; much of that dynamic had nothing to do with sectarianism, but the politicization of the emirate ultimately reverberated in the sectarian arena. Leaving aside the full tumultuous history, what is relevant here is that Sanusi fell out sharply with Kano State Governor Abdullahi Umaru Ganduje (took office) toward the end of the latter's first term. After Ganduje concluded that Sanusi had tried to undermine Ganduje's 2019 re-election bid, Ganduje first broke up Sanusi's emirate and then had him dethroned.

The politicization surrounding Sanusi's tenure has reinforced his status as a polarizing figure and the subject of multiple accusations and conspiracy theories. The IMN, for example, has seen Sanusi—in his garb as emir—as a Sunni sectarian and a calculating politician whose choices are, in the IMN's view, broadly similar to El-Rufai's. As early as 2015, after the clashes between the IMN and the Nigerian Army in Zaria, pro-IMN voices accused Sanusi of siding with the Salafis (Elbinawi 2015). A 2019 IMN polemic argued, "The flamboyant Emir... was initially mislabeled a Shi'ite by his opponents at the initial stages of his tumultuous reign, and he appears to always try to distance himself from Shi'ah whenever he appears to be faced by potential revolt or challenges." The same polemic accused Sanusi of using anti-Shi'ism in an attempt to get back into Ganduje's good graces: "The latest outpour of malice may not be unconnected with his attempts to show that his loyalty is a hundred percent with a fellow culprit of Shia massacre, Governor Umaru Ganduje, after fall out of the state gubernatorial rerun election put a huge question mark on his loyalty to the cause to impose the crook Governor for a second term" (Freezakzaky 2019). Sanusi's strategic ambiguity has bolstered his image as a progressive and a constructive critic of northern society, but it has simultaneously left him open to accusations from multiple directions, accusations that reverberate powerfully within a rumor-laden media environment. Or, if one credits the IMN's account, Sanusi's case reveals an instance of a traditional ruler abandoning neutrality in favor of anti-Shi'ism only when he felt directly politically vulnerable.

Sectarian Triangle #4—Rejectionism: Boko Haram

This triangular relationship exemplifies an extremist third party who rejects, sweepingly, both of the other actors. In this case, the third party came to regard all other religious blocs as enemies and saw little benefit in forming an anti-IMN alliance with Salafis even though the extremists' own views are also strongly anti-Shi'i. Pre-existing relationships came into play, particularly bad blood with the Salafis, which reduced the chances for forming an anti-Shi'i front. Finally, the extremist group's credibility with their own followers could have been damaged by siding with either the Salafis or the IMN, given that the extremists staked out an uncompromising position where they declared themselves the exclusive possessors of religious truth; to form any religious alliance would implicitly undermine that argument.

The third party in this triangle is the Salafi-jihadist movement colloquially known as Boko Haram (“Western education is forbidden by Islam”). Constituted in the early 2000s as a hardline preaching movement opposed to democracy and Western-style education, Boko Haram launched an insurrection in northeastern Nigeria in 2009. It has been a clandestine terrorist movement ever since (Mustapha 2014; Pérouse de Montclos 2014; Matfess 2017; Kendhammer and McCain 2018; MacEachern 2018; Thurston 2018).

Boko Haram began as an offshoot of the mainstream Salafi movement in Nigeria. Yet after Boko Haram began to condemn Western-style education and secular government, the founder’s Salafi mentors across northern Nigeria distanced themselves from the group, denouncing Boko Haram’s stances against democracy, constitutionalism, and Western-style education (Anonymous 2012). In this atmosphere of tension between Boko Haram and the mainstream Salafis, the latter began to accuse the extremist group’s founder, Muhammad Yusuf (1970–2009), of being a closet or former Shi‘i. This accusation was just one arrow in a quiver of charges—mainstream Salafis also accused Yusuf of being the agent of foreign jihadists and/or southern Nigerian Christians—but the accusation of crypto-Shi‘ism was potent because it was the most plausible. Yusuf’s trajectory before 2001 remains murky, but many accounts suggest that he experimented with various allegiances, including the IMN and one of its offshoots, before settling on Salafism. For example, one of the most comprehensive Salafi polemics against Yusuf, delivered after Yusuf’s death, came from Muhammad Awwal Adam “Albani” Zaria (1960–2014). Albani Zaria was also a fierce opponent of the IMN in Zaria, hometown to both him and al-Zakzaky. In one lecture, Albani Zaria flatly stated: “Formerly, Muhammad Yusuf was a Shi‘i. He followed the preaching of al-Zakzaky. He came back, he repented, and he said he came back to the Sunna [i.e., the Salafis]” (Albani Zaria undated). Albani Zaria said that Yusuf had smuggled numerous deviant beliefs into the Nigerian Salafi milieu, using the “*taqiyya*” (dissimulation under duress) that Albani Zaria associated with the Shi‘a.

By the end of his life, Yusuf was aware that his Salafi critics were accusing him of closet Shi‘ism, and he was keen to defend his credibility as a kind of hyper-Salafi. In his 2009 manifesto, Yusuf disavowed any sympathy for the Shi‘a and other non-Sunni groups (Yusuf 2009, 4). Later in the book, Yusuf wrote, “We believe that exposing the creed of the Shi‘a, revealing their secrets, and disassociating [ourselves] from them is part of the core of the creed of *Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama‘a*”

(117). Yusuf tried to establish himself as an orthodox Salafi with nothing to hide.

After its decisive turn to violence in 2009, Boko Haram rejected both mainstream Salafis and the IMN. In fact, Boko Haram turned more of its firepower on mainstream Salafis, assassinating several Salafi critics of jihadism, including Albani Zaria. Meanwhile, Boko Haram and its offshoots have appeared to perpetrate several attacks targeting the IMN (International Crisis Group 2015). Boko Haram does not perceive itself as part of a sectarian triangle at all, but rather as a lone vanguard fighting a range of enemies; Boko Haram superimposes its own hyper-sectarian, rejectionist frame in a way that attempts to make other parties' rivalries irrelevant to what Boko Haram calls an all-or-nothing conflict between belief and unbelief.

For mainstream Salafis, though, the triangular, adversarial relationship with Boko Haram and the IMN has certain advantages. It allows the mainstream Salafis to, by criticizing both Boko Haram and the IMN and by rhetorically linking or even conflating the two sects, distance themselves from both enemies. The IMN also avers that things are not always what they seem. Amid "an economy of political panic" in northern Nigeria (Last 2007), the authorship of violence is a major point of contention between Salafis, the Shi'a, and the state. The assassinations of prominent Salafi clerics have elicited considerable debate and uncertainty. The IMN has suggested that such killings were false flag operations by the security services, designed to foment anti-Shi'ism and provoke crackdowns against the IMN (Giwa 2016). As sectarianism mounts, and as both the Salafis and the IMN accuse each other of allying covertly with the state, confidence in apparent realities is eroding.

CONCLUSION

The sectarian triangles found in northern Nigeria help illuminate drivers of sectarianization elsewhere. Sectarian conflicts, this paper has argued, place third parties in reactive positions, especially in non-authoritarian contexts. Yet third parties have the latitude to react in creative ways. Third parties respond to overtures, accusations, and hostility in different ways, whether by finding alignment with a sectarian actor, by rejecting one actor and leaning toward the other, or by cultivating strategy ambiguity about their own identities and intentions. More dramatically, third parties may completely reject the other members of a triangle, and even

target both of them with violence. Third parties' responses are shaped by short-term cost-benefit analyses, pre-existing relationships with the other parties, and a desire to maintain long-term credibility.

The observations from the Nigerian case roughly parallel evidence from other contexts. One example is Pakistan. Even as Pakistani Sunnis countered what they saw as a Shi'i threat after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Sunni reactions to Shi'ism were also "part of an internal Sunni struggle" regarding the political future of Pakistan (Fuchs 2019, 185). In short, "Majorities can have their own insecurities, perhaps never more so than on *becoming* a majority" (Zaman 2018, 164). A loosely similar dynamic may explain why northern Nigeria's Shi'a have produced such dramatic reactions from the Sunni community even though the Shi'a remain an ultra-minority. Issues connected with Shi'i sectarianism touch on sensitive divisions within the Sunni majority.

Sectarian triangles are marked by fluidity, mistrust, and even disagreement over fundamental realities. In democratic contexts, a further element of uncertainty is added as some sectarian actors—and the third parties their conflicts affect—calculate how different alignments may affect balances of power within and between elections. Analyzing sectarian triangles opens up important questions not just about processes of sectarianization and the mobilization of religious identities, but also about the impact of these identities on critical political junctures.

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