



## Leadership and Counterinsurgency: Balancing Combat and Human Rights in Nigeria

### Abstract

This study is titled leadership and counter insurgency, a study of balancing combat and human rights in Nigeria. The study examines the intricate balance between effective counterinsurgency (COIN) operations and the protection of human rights in north-eastern Nigeria, focusing on the Nigerian military's campaigns against Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) between 2015 and 2024. The study had some basic research objectives that includes; to examine the relationship between balancing combat and human rights violations in combat situations, and to explain the role of military leadership in ensuring the balancing of combat situations and human rights in counterinsurgency operations. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research integrates interviews with military leaders, NGO personnel, and conflict-affected civilians, alongside focus group discussions and secondary data analysis. The study adopted the human security theory which is aimed at seeing security from the state centric aspect to a more humanistic aspect. Key findings revealed that military leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping operational outcomes, with ethical decision-making, accountability, and community engagement critical to minimizing harm. Conclusively, the study affirmed that Nigeria's quest for sustainable peace in the face of insurgency depend not only on military strength but on the **capacity of leadership to uphold the rule of law, ensure human rights compliance, and build inclusive security structures**. Recommendations include enhanced leadership training in human rights compliance, robust oversight mechanisms, and partnerships with civil society to rebuild trust.

**Keywords:** Counterinsurgency, Military Leadership, Human Rights, Boko Haram, Nigeria, Human Security



## 1. Introduction

Insurgency has become one of the most troubling security concerns in the contemporary world, affecting peace, order, and development. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, its presence has grown steadily across continents, turning it into a global challenge. West Africa stands out as one of the regions most affected, with countries facing persistent instability, ranging from civil conflicts and cross-border disputes to maritime crime and weak state institutions (Akani, 2019). Although West African states differ in culture, ethnicity, and language, they share recurring insecurity linked to poverty, under-development and criminal activity. Recent years have also shown an increase in insurgent groups driven by fundamentalist ideologies across Africa (Agu & Agboeze, 2019).

These groups carry out attacks with a level of brutality that often overwhelms national security agencies. Lives are lost, communities destroyed, and thousands of people are displaced. Such conditions worsen poverty and human suffering. While poverty alone may not automatically trigger insurgency, historical evidence shows that marginalized groups often serve as a recruitment pool for insurgent movements (Paul, 2022). Nigeria has experienced many forms of unrest, ranging from ethnic and political violence to banditry, kidnapping, and religious extremism. Long-standing issues such as corruption, inequality, injustice and intolerance have contributed to the emergence of violent organizations. Insurgency has therefore become one of the most demanding challenges facing the Nigerian state, particularly in the activities of Boko Haram and ISWAP (Akanni & Ege, 2024).

The Lake Chad region has been deeply affected by terrorism, cutting across Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Boko Haram, which started in Borno and Yobe, moved from an ideological movement into a violent insurgent group after the July 2009 clashes in Borno and Bauchi (Abubakar, 2020; Burchard & Burgess, 2019). Its activities have pushed Nigeria into a prolonged irregular conflict for which the country was not adequately prepared (Felbab-Brown, 2019). The group's attacks have led to thousands of deaths, large-scale displacement, and destruction of property. Since 2009, over 100,000 people have been killed, more than 2.5 million displaced, and infrastructure worth billions of dollars destroyed (Onuoha & Oyewole, 2018; Punch, 2021; GTI, 2021). By 2014, Boko Haram had become the deadliest terrorist organisation in the world (GTI, 2015) and contributed to Nigeria ranking among the most



terror-affected states globally (GTI, 2019).

Nigeria's response has relied largely on kinetic military strategies, which focus on direct use of force. This approach dominated the early years of the conflict between 2010 and 2015. Although military force was combined with other methods, the attacks continued, which prompted discussions on the need for international support. For more than fifteen years (2009–2024), Nigeria has searched for more suitable strategies to counter insurgency. In this period, the military launched several operations, including Operation Restore Order, *Boyona*, *Zaman Lafiya*, *Lafiya Dole*, Last Hold, and currently *Hadin Kai*. Countries in the Lake Chad Basin also created the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Within Nigeria, voluntary groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), the Hunters Association, Pulaaku Brigade and the Vigilante Group of Nigeria have played important roles (Aguwa, 2020). However, the resurgence of attacks shows that the conflict is far from resolved. This creates the need to examine the nature and outcomes of military responses and identify factors affecting their success.

The global war on terror after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States placed the issue of insurgency at the centre of international debate. The United Nations Security Council passed several resolutions urging countries to work together against terrorism. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that the consequences of insurgency are now felt worldwide. African states took early steps to address the problem through the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and later the African Union (AU). The 1992 Resolution on Cooperation among African States and the 1994 Declaration on a Code of Conduct for Inter-African Relations laid the initial foundation. The 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania revealed the seriousness of insurgency on the continent, leading to the adoption of the 1999 AU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism. In 2004, an additional Protocol required states to take necessary measures to protect their populations.

Nigeria's prolonged fight against Boko Haram and ISWAP has, however, raised serious concerns about human rights violations during counterinsurgency operations. Reports include extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual abuse, and forced displacement. Boko Haram's violence has killed about 35,000 civilians and displaced more than 2.5 million people since 2009 (ACLED, 2023). The MNJTF intensified operations after 2015, when President



Muhammadu Buhari stated his aim of defeating Boko Haram (ICG, 2020). However, detainees have reported harsh treatment including beatings, suffocation and electric shocks. A 2021 Reuters investigation exposed secret detention facilities where suspects were kept without trial, starved, and forced to confess (Reuters, 2021). The CJTF has also been accused of executions and torture (ICG, 2021). Entire communities have been destroyed during military operations; in 2016, Akira and Bukarti villages in Borno were razed, displacing thousands (Reuters, 2021).

The International Criminal Court (ICC) opened a preliminary examination into these allegations in 2018, although no charges have been filed (ICC, 2023). Nigeria's foreign military partners have been criticized for inconsistent responses. In 2020, the United States suspended a \$500 million arms deal on human rights grounds but resumed support in 2022 (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The Leahy Law, introduced in 1997 to prevent American support to foreign units involved in abuses, became especially relevant in Nigeria after 2014. The law requires vetting of all units that receive U.S. assistance. In 2014, the U.S. blocked the sale of Cobra helicopters after reports of 640 detainees killed in Giwa Barracks (AI, 2015). Similar concerns led to the suspension of another major arms deal in 2020. Although intended to push for better human rights practices, the law's effect has been limited, partly because Nigeria shifted to other suppliers like Russia and China (ICG, 2022).

Leadership plays an important role in these developments. Effective counterinsurgency requires leaders who understand the political, social and military dimensions of the conflict. Strategic decisions, the welfare of troops, civilian protection, intelligence coordination and cooperation with international partners all depend on leadership capacity. Nigeria's experience shows that military responses alone cannot resolve insurgency. Leadership therefore becomes vital in shaping policies that combine security actions with development, community relations, and respect for human rights.

Against this background, this study examines the counterinsurgency operations of the Nigerian military, the challenges encountered, and the leadership decisions that have influenced successes and failures. The aim is to provide clarity on Nigeria's efforts and contribute to discussions on improving national and regional security.



## 1.2 Statement of the Research Problem

In the context of ongoing counter-insurgency operations in Nigeria, particularly against groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), there exists a critical tension between the necessity of effective military action and the imperatives of upholding human rights. While military leadership is tasked with ensuring national security, the tactics employed in counter-insurgency often lead to civilian casualties, displacement, and violations of human rights, undermining the legitimacy of the state and exacerbating grievances that fuel insurgency, this problem is exacerbated by factors such as insufficient training in human rights for military personnel, lack of accountability for abuses, and the inadequate integration of civilian perspectives in military operations.

Nigerian security forces have repeatedly been accused of indiscriminate killings during raids on suspected insurgent enclaves. In 2017, a Nigerian Air Force jet bombarded a displaced persons camp in Rann, Borno State, killing 112 civilians, including aid workers, in what the military termed a “mistake” (Amnesty International [AI], 2017). Similar incidents occurred in 2021, when soldiers reportedly executed 19 civilians in Damboa after accusing them of aiding ISWAP (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2022).

Women and girls in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps face systemic sexual exploitation by soldiers and militia members. A 2019 HRW report documented cases where women were coerced into sexual acts in exchange for food and medicine (HRW, 2019). In 2023, the Nigerian Army court-martialled 15 personnel for raping IDPs in Borno, but activists argue such prosecutions remain rare (Premium Times, 2023).

The protracted counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in northeastern Nigeria, aimed at neutralizing Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have been marked by a critical paradox: the imperative to ensure national security through military force and the obligation to uphold human rights and international humanitarian law. Despite over a decade of intensified military campaigns, insurgent activities persist, exacerbating a humanitarian crisis characterized by mass displacement, civilian casualties, and systemic human rights violations. The Nigerian military’s reliance on kinetic strategies (such as aerial bombardments, scorched-earth policies, and arbitrary detentions) has repeatedly resulted in extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, and destruction of civilian property. These actions, often justified as collateral damage in asymmetric warfare, have eroded public trust,



alienated local communities, and fueled grievances that insurgents exploit for recruitment and legitimacy (Premium Times, 2023).

Compounding this issue is the military leadership's struggle to reconcile operational effectiveness with ethical and legal obligations. Reports of abuses by state-backed militias like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), the Giwa Barracks detention scandals, and recurrent airstrikes on civilian targets (e.g., the 2017 Rann bombing) underscore systemic failures in accountability, training, and oversight. While international frameworks like the Leahy Law have sought to condition military aid on human rights compliance, inconsistent enforcement and reliance on alternative arms suppliers weaken their impact. Furthermore, the collapse of the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism and the Nigerian judiciary's limited independence perpetuate a culture of impunity.

This study confronts the urgent need to address the disconnect between Nigeria's counterinsurgency objectives and its human rights obligations. It investigates how military leadership can mediate these competing demands, ensuring operational success while safeguarding civilian dignity, rebuilding community trust, and adhering to international legal standards. Without resolving this tension, Nigeria risks entrenching cycles of violence, undermining long-term stability, and perpetuating a crisis that defies both military and moral resolution.

In countering insurgency in Nigeria, security operatives have unleashed brutal revenge attacks on innocent civilians and insurgents who are according to the Nigerian Constitution are presumed innocent until proven otherwise. Citizens suffer constant human rights violations most times there is a countering operation by the security. These violations include right to life, right to freedom of movement and others. States have an obligation to respect and protect the right to life of individuals under their jurisdiction from attacks by armed groups. Such an obligation includes taking measures to prevent the commission of offences, investigating human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations promptly, thoroughly and independently and prosecuting those found responsible, providing adequate and effective remedies, and preventing the recurrence of violations (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019). This inquiry aims to illuminate the challenges and propose strategies for effective leadership in counter-insurgency that respects human rights, thereby promoting both security and justice within the Nigerian context.



### 1.3 Conceptual Clarifications

#### Concept of Leadership

Leadership, is defined as the ability of an individual, group, or organization to "lead", influence, or guide other individuals, teams, or organizations.

"Leadership" is a contested term. Specialist literature debates various viewpoints on the concept, sometimes contrasting Eastern and Western approaches to leadership, and also between North American versus European approaches.

Some U.S. academic environments define leadership as "a process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common and ethical task". In other words, leadership is an influential power-relationship in which the power of one party (the "leader") promotes movement/change in others (the "followers"). Some have challenged the more traditional managerial views of leadership which portray leadership as something possessed or owned by one individual due to their role or authority, and instead advocate the complex nature of leadership which is found at all levels of institutions, both within formal and informal roles. Leadership, in its core, is the process of influencing and guiding others towards a common goal, often within an organization or team. It involves inspiring, motivating, and enabling individuals to contribute effectively to a shared vision. Effective leadership encompasses various qualities and skills, including strong communication, decision-making, and the ability to inspire and build trust.

Studies of leadership have produced theories involving for example traits, situational interaction, function, behavior, power, vision, values, charisma and intelligence among others.

Leadership styles vary widely, encompassing approaches from highly directive to more collaborative. Some common styles include autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, transactional, and transformational. Each style has its own advantages and disadvantages, making the most effective choice situation-dependent. Some of the leadership styles include:

- **Autocratic:** This style involves the leader making decisions independently, with minimal input from team members. While it can be effective in crisis situations or with a highly experienced team, it may stifle creativity and morale.



- **Democratic:** In this style, the leader encourages participation and input from team members in decision-making. This approach can boost morale and foster a sense of ownership, but it may also be slower in decision-making and require a collaborative team culture.
- **Laissez-faire:** This style involves minimal direction or supervision from the leader, allowing the team to make decisions independently. It can be effective with highly skilled and self-motivated teams but may lead to a lack of direction and productivity issues in some situations.
- **Transactional:** This style focuses on clear expectations, performance goals, and rewards for achieving those goals. It's effective in situations where clear structure and accountability are needed, but it may not be as motivating as other styles.
- **Transformational:** This style involves inspiring and motivating others to achieve a shared vision. It can be highly effective in creating a sense of purpose and driving innovation, but it requires strong communication and charisma.
- **Other styles:** There are also other less common, but still important, styles, such as servant leadership, which prioritizes the needs of others, and pacesetter leadership, which focuses on setting a high standard of performance.

Factors influencing leadership style choice, the most effective leadership style depends on several factors, including:

- **The nature of the task:** Some tasks require a more structured approach (e.g., transactional), while others benefit from collaboration (e.g., democratic).
- **The skills and experience of the team:** A team with high experience may be better suited for a laissez-faire approach, while a team with less experience may benefit from a more directive style.
- **The organizational culture:** Some organizations have a more hierarchical structure and favor autocratic leadership, while others are more collaborative and value democratic leadership.
- **The situation:** Crisis situations may call for a more autocratic approach, while routine tasks may be handled better with a more democratic or laissez-faire approach



Military leadership involves making critical decisions, often in high-pressure situations with consequential risks. Effective military leaders ask the right questions and think strategically in making well-informed conclusions upon which that they can act.

### **Concept of Combat**

Combat is often defined as "a violent confrontation between armed forces, typically with the goal of achieving military objectives" (Smith, 2015). This definition emphasizes the physical and strategic nature of combat, where the primary aim is to secure a victory through direct engagement. In a broader social and psychological context, combat refers to "a stressful, life-threatening experience that involves direct physical confrontation, where individuals or groups seek to harm or defend themselves" (Johnson & Lee, 2018). This definition highlights not only the physical aspects of combat but also its emotional and psychological dimensions.

Combat is sometimes defined in terms of its tactical or operational purpose: "a structured series of engagements between opposing forces with the aim of achieving tactical, operational, or strategic advantages" (Harris, 2017). This definition places combat within a broader military strategy framework, focusing on the planning and coordination of engagements.

Combat can be viewed as a morally charged activity where decisions about the justification of force and the rules of engagement are deeply tied to political ideologies and international laws" (Adams, 2021).

Balancing combat in military terms refers to the process of "ensuring the right distribution of force, resources, and tactical approaches to achieve strategic objectives without overextending capabilities or resources" (Williams, 2017). This definition emphasizes the strategic consideration of how forces are deployed and engaged in combat scenarios, maintaining a balance between offensive and defensive operations. Balancing combat is described as "the careful navigation of rules of engagement and moral imperatives, where military forces must balance the necessity of using force with the ethical implications of civilian harm and collateral damage" (Adams, 2021). This reflects the need for military forces to maintain a balance between effective action and adherence to international law and ethical standards.

Balancing combat as part of a broader conflict resolution strategy. In this context, it is defined as "the need to balance military action with diplomatic efforts, ensuring that combat does not undermine long-term peacebuilding and stability" (Miller, 2018). In the modern military



context, balancing combat is frequently framed as the integration of advanced technologies with traditional combat tactics. According to Jones and White (2020), "the balance between leveraging new technologies, such as drones and cyber warfare, with conventional combat forces is a critical element in modern warfare strategy".

Balancing combat from an organizational perspective involves "the efficient allocation of resources, logistics, and manpower to ensure sustained operational capacity during prolonged engagements" (Thompson, 2016). This perspective highlights the importance of logistical support and resource management in maintaining a sustainable balance during combat operations.

Balancing combat is often described as the "deliberate allocation and adjustment of force in response to changing battlefield conditions and threats, ensuring neither overuse nor underuse of available resources" (Clausewitz, 1976). This definition emphasizes the critical role of maintaining flexibility in the distribution of military resources to prevent both overextension and ineffective use of force in combat scenarios.

Balancing combat is framed as "the calculated decision-making process by military commanders to achieve a favourable outcome while minimizing unnecessary casualties, collateral damage, and long-term strategic costs" (Biddle, 2004). Here, balancing combat involves managing the inherent risks associated with warfare, particularly in terms of human, material, and moral costs, while striving to achieve strategic goals.

This critical perspective stresses the importance of military force as a tool of diplomacy but cautions against the risks of allowing combat to overshadow the potential for peaceful resolution.

In asymmetric warfare, balancing combat refers to "the challenge of conventional forces adjusting their tactics and strategy to counter non-state actors, insurgents, or guerrilla groups, while preventing the erosion of public support and maintaining effective operations" (Hoffman, 2006). Balancing combat is described as "the coordination and management of military units, ensuring that leadership maintains control, morale, and operational efficiency across various components of a force, balancing combat readiness with the need for rest and recovery" (Weick, 2001).



## Concept of Human Rights

Human rights constitute a set of norms governing the treatment of individuals and groups by states and non-state actors on the basis of ethical principles regarding what society considers fundamental to a decent life. These norms are incorporated into national and international legal systems, which specify mechanisms and procedures to hold the duty-bearers accountable and provide redress for alleged victims of human rights violations (Marks, 2016). Human rights are rights that every human being has by virtue of his or her human dignity. Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings. They define relationships between individuals and power structures, especially the State. Human rights delimit State power and, at the same time, require States to take positive measures ensuring an environment that enables all people to enjoy their human rights (UN, 2016).

Hill (2006), affirms that human rights are based on social contract theories and their conception of natural rights. According to Forsythe (2000), human rights refer to the supposed basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled. Murray (2006), explained human rights as a condition in which person's ownership rights to his body and legitimate property rights are neither invaded nor aggressed against by person, group of persons, or government. In a domestic sense, the concept of human right refers to safeguards for the individual against arbitrary use of power by the government in relation to the following:

- i. The well-being of individuals;
- ii. The freedom and autonomy of individuals; and
- iii. The representation of the human interest in government. In addition, the concept of human rights deals with small subset of values that should be available for implementation by individual, other individuals, or government. These values are clearly stated in the constitution and are based on the legal and political traditions of every country including Nigeria.

According to Wright (2006), these rights include the right of life, the right to an adequate standard of living, freedom from torture and other maltreatment freedom of religion and of expression, freedom of movement, the right to self-determination, the right to education, and the right to participation in cultural and political life.

Human rights encompass a wide variety of political, economic, and social areas. Human rights define needs but also present a set of rights for each individual, no matter where that individual



resides. The concept of human rights can generally be defined as follows:

Human rights are those rights, which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings. Human rights and fundamental freedoms allow us to fully develop and use our human qualities, our intelligence, our talents and our conscience and to satisfy our spiritual and other needs (United Nations, 1987).

Durga Das Basu (1999), defines Human rights are those minimal rights, which every individual must have against the State, or other public authority, by virtue of his being a ‘member of human family’ irrespective of any consideration. Human rights are important because no one should be harassed or discriminated against, and because everyone should have the opportunity to develop their skills. Unfortunately, many people around the world do not have these basic rights and freedoms. Any crime against humanity can be a violation of human rights, including murder, torture, forced eviction, imprisonment, racism, or any other crime that targets human dignity. As Human Rights Watch states: Every day, in homes, schools, on the streets, and in the workplace, women, men, girls, and boys are being exploited and exploited because of their differences. Rights are never given to people by their governments. The goals of democracy, equality, and justice are rights themselves (Edwards, 2021).

These rights are the foundation of all democracy, and governments that ignore, violate, or violate human rights are not democratic. Human rights abuses can happen in many ways (Edwards, 2021). Human rights provide an ethical language we can all recognize and sign up to a language which doesn’t belong to any particular group or creed but to all of us. One that is based on the principles of common humanity (Straw, 1999).

Human rights are universal values and legal guarantees that protect individuals and groups against actions and omissions primarily by State agents that interfere with fundamental freedoms, entitlements and human dignity. The full spectrum of human rights involves respect for and protection and fulfilment of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, as well as the right to development. Human rights are universal— in other words, they belong inherently to all human beings—and are interdependent and indivisible (United Nations, 2007). Human rights are in general terms, “rights” which all human beings, by virtue of their humanity possess, and include the right to life, personal liberty, fair hearing, and dignity of human person, freedom of thought, conscience and religion. These “rights” provide common standards of behavior among humanity and are natural, inviolable, rational and unalterable, as their



deprivations would constitute grave offenses to the citizens' sense of justice (Onwuazombe, 2017).

Nickel (2019) highlights that these rights are familiar from historic bills of rights such as the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789) and the U.S. Bill of Rights (1791, with subsequent amendments). Contemporary sources include the first 21 Articles of the Universal Declaration, and treaties such as the European Convention, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights, and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

### **Concept of Counterinsurgency**

According to Kilcullen (2006), insurgency is a struggle to control a contested political space, between a state or a group of states or occupying powers, and one or more popularly based, non-state challengers. Nonetheless, Kilcullen drew a line between classical and contemporary insurgencies. He said while the latter seek to replace the existing order, the former sometimes strive for the expulsion of foreign invaders from their territory or seek to fill an existing power vacuum. Colonel Drew (1988), defined it as an insurgency is nothing more than an armed revolution against the established political order. He went to further to add that insurgencies are internal affairs and the insurgents are self-sustaining.

According to Obafemi and Galadima (2013) insurgency is a strategy adopted by groups, which cannot attain their political objectives through conventional means, but by protracted, asymmetric violence, ambiguity, the use of complex terrain (jungles, mountains, and urban areas), psychological warfare, and political mobilization, it is fast becoming a means of expressing perceived discontents among groups in the country. Its ultimate desire is to subvert and alter the balance of power in their favour.

According to the US Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24), insurgency as an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control. Insurgency has been defined as an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict (Haviland, 2012).

The Counter-Insurgency Initiative (2009) has defined insurgency as the organized use of



subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. Insurgents seek to subvert or displace the government and completely or partially control the resources and population of a given territory. They do so through the use of force (including guerrilla warfare, terrorism, coercion or intimidation, propaganda, subversion, and political mobilization).

The United States Department of Defence (2007) defines insurgency as organized movement that has the aim of overthrowing a constituted government through subversive means and armed conflict (Hellesten, 2008). This definition suggests that insurgent groups employ unlawful means towards achieving an end, which could be political, religious, social or even ideological. The goal of insurgency is to confront and overthrow an existing government for the control of power, resources or for power sharing (Siegel, 2007).

Insurgency is part of a wider set of irregular activities and threats to a secure and stable environment. Irregular activity may be defined as: “behaviour that attempts to effect or prevent change through the illegal use, or threat, of violence, conducted by ideologically or criminally motivated non-regular forces, groups or individuals, as a challenge to authority (Army Terminology Panel, 2007).

Moore (n.d), opines that an insurgency is a protracted violent conflict, in which one or more groups seek to overthrow or fundamentally change the political or social ordering in a state or region through the use of sustained violence, subversion, social disruption, and political action. He further maintains that insurgency seeks radical change to the existing political and social orders through the use of sustained violence and political disruption. It is a long-term form of warfare in which military actions are carried out by guerilla attacks and terrorism often as one of its basic elements, targeting civilian infrastructures (Moore, nd). In addition, O’Neill (1990:13) argues that as an organized movement, it usually involves a struggle between a non-ruling group and the ruling authorities in which the non-ruling group consciously uses political resources (e.g., organizational expertise, propaganda, and demonstrations) and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics.

Counterinsurgency (COIN) is just the opposite of insurgency. COIN involves a combination of measures undertaken by the legitimate government of a country to curb or suppress an insurgency taken up against it. So, while insurgents for instance try to erase or overthrow the existing political authority in order to establish theirs, the counter-insurgent forces try to



reinstate the existing political structures as well as reduce or annihilate the usurping authority of the insurgents (Liolio, 2013). The US Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24) defines counterinsurgency as a “military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency (David & James, 2006).

The 2009 Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency Operations, defines COIN as a “comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances (Liolio, 2013). Furthermore, it noted that “COIN is primarily political and incorporates a wide range of activities, of which security is only one.” While this new definition included a key point of addressing core insurgents’ grievances; it fails to reflect the different facets of COIN operations.

Counter-insurgency is those military, paramilitary, economic, psychological and civil actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency. In a counter-insurgency, host Nation forces and partners operate to defeat armed resistance, reduce passive opposition, and establish or re-establish the legitimacy of the Host Nation's government. Counter-insurgency is a proactive approach involving all elements of national power; even down to the tactical level. COIN operations strive to achieve unity of effort amongst many joint, inter-agency, inter-governmental, and multinational organizations. COIN includes tactical planning; intelligence development and analysis; training; material, technical, organizational assistance; advice; infrastructure development; tactical level operations; and information engagement. US forces often lead the US government’s counter-insurgency efforts because the US military can quickly project a counter-insurgent force and sustain not only its force but also other agencies (George, 2009).

COIN strategy has two core objectives, firstly, involves seeking the mutual assistance of the state towards the end goal of crippling terrorism, and second, using actors within the population who would become useful and critical partners in undermining terrorists ideology (Gingell, 2021, p129). In view of this, Curtis (2020) maintains that COIN strategy focuses on political or ideological mobilization, as the protracted violence requires a wide range of social, economic, informational, political and military initiatives. No single government initiative is sufficient, particularly, when the insurgents are able to bind political and ideological goals with genuine public grievances in mobilizing popular support.



Basically, there are two major approaches to COIN namely: (i) Enemy Centric: this is an army contest between the COIN security forces and insurgents, and emphasizes defeating the enemy as its primary goal, and all else follows; and (ii) Population Centric: this focuses on maintaining or recovering the support of the population, while direct military action against the insurgents organization is sustained. Thus, preaches ' first protect and the support the population, and all else will follow (Kilcullen and Porter, 2009, P14). In a similar vein, Galula cited in Oberoi, (2011, p6) argues that population centric COIN is essentially a military operation, but its success is not determined by the number of enemies killed, but by the shielding of the civilian population. It considers population as the most important centre of gravity and focuses on protecting them, even at the cost of military, thus requires patience on the part of the administration running the war. However, in reality, COIN campaign will rarely be purely enemy-centric or population-centric, but generally include elements of both, with relative balance changing over time (Kilcullen and Porter, 2009, P15).

#### 1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the **Human Security Theory** as its analytical framework. Human security shifts the focus of security studies from the protection of the state to the protection of individuals. Unlike traditional security approaches that prioritize territorial integrity and military power, human security emphasizes freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the protection of human dignity.

The human security perspective argues that national security cannot be achieved if individuals remain vulnerable to violence, poverty, and human rights abuses. In the context of counterinsurgency operations, this theory suggests that protecting civilian populations should be a central objective of military strategy.

By applying the human security framework, this study examines how military leadership can integrate human rights considerations into counterinsurgency operations without compromising operational effectiveness.

#### 1.5 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach. Data were collected through interviews with military personnel, focus group discussions with civilians in conflict-affected communities,



and analysis of secondary sources such as academic publications, government reports, and human rights documentation.

Participants included military officers involved in counterinsurgency operations, local community leaders, and individuals affected by the conflict. The use of multiple sources of data allowed the study to triangulate findings and improve reliability.

Data analysis involved thematic interpretation of interview responses and documentary evidence to identify patterns related to leadership practices, operational challenges, and human rights issues in counterinsurgency operations.

## 1.6 Findings and Discussion

### **Relationship Between Combat Operations and Human Rights Violations**

The findings indicate that counterinsurgency operations often create environments where the risk of human rights violations is high. Military operations conducted in densely populated areas increase the likelihood of civilian casualties and property destruction. Respondents emphasized that excessive use of force and poor intelligence sometimes lead to the targeting of innocent civilians.

Such incidents not only violate human rights but also damage the credibility of the military among local communities. When civilians perceive security forces as a threat rather than a source of protection, they may become less willing to cooperate with authorities.

### **Role of Military Leadership**

The study revealed that military leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the conduct of counterinsurgency operations. Leaders determine operational strategies, enforce discipline among troops, and establish the rules of engagement that guide military actions.

Ethical leadership was identified as a key factor in reducing human rights violations. Leaders who emphasize accountability, professionalism, and respect for international law are more likely to ensure that military operations are conducted responsibly.

Additionally, effective communication between military leaders and local communities helps



build trust and facilitates the gathering of intelligence necessary for successful operations.

### 1.7 Challenges Facing Military Leadership

Several challenges complicate the task of balancing combat operations with human rights protection. These include:

1. Difficulty distinguishing insurgents from civilians.
2. Pressure from political authorities to achieve rapid military success.
3. Limited training in human rights and international humanitarian law.
4. Weak accountability mechanisms within security institutions.

These challenges create situations where operational priorities may overshadow human rights considerations.

### 1.8 Strategies for Improving Counterinsurgency Operations

The study identified several strategies that can help strengthen counterinsurgency operations while minimizing human rights violations:

- Improved intelligence gathering through community collaboration.
- Human rights training for military personnel.
- Transparent investigation of alleged abuses.
- Greater integration of non-military approaches such as development and reconciliation programs.

Such measures can help build trust between the military and local populations while enhancing the effectiveness of counterinsurgency operations.

### 1.9 Summary of Findings

The study arrived at some basic findings which include;

- i. The study affirmed that COIN operations require military leaders to shift from traditional, hierarchical command structures and rigid operational procedures to a more flexible, collaborative approach that takes into account political, social, and cultural factors.



- ii. The study also arrived at the findings that military leadership play an important role in ensuring that combat is balanced and human rights are respected effectively. This can be achieved through training of personnel on the various rules of engagement in combat.
- iii. The study also arrived at the findings which was affirmed by various respondents that the military should play roles of humanitarian response and conflict mediators and cement the relationship between the military and the people that are inhabitants of this area.
- iv. The study also arrived at the findings that most of the respondents agree that there is need for an independent body, such as a civilian oversight committee, that regularly monitors the activities of the military. This body should be empowered to investigate allegations of human rights violations and recommend actions, which will deter military personnel from acting outside the law.

### **1.10 Conclusion**

This study examined the role of leadership in balancing combat operations and human rights protection during Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign against Boko Haram and ISWAP. The findings demonstrate that while military force is necessary to combat insurgent groups, excessive reliance on kinetic strategies can undermine long-term stability.

Effective military leadership is therefore essential for ensuring that counterinsurgency operations are conducted in a manner consistent with human rights principles. Leaders must adopt strategies that combine military action with community engagement, development initiatives, and institutional accountability.

Ultimately, Nigeria's success in defeating insurgency will depend not only on battlefield victories but also on the ability of the state to win the trust and confidence of its citizens.

### **1.11 Recommendations**

In theory, Nigeria's counter-insurgency strategy largely reflects global best practices in countering insurgency through soft approach. However, what is practically on ground is antithetical to the content of the document; particularly because counter-insurgency in Nigeria is still largely shaped by hard approach. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:



- i. Army commanders should adopt suitable leadership style that suit the dynamics in COIN operations environment, not to be stereotyped to military effort that focuses solely on capturing and killing high value targets.
- ii. NA should maintain a functional security sector for COIN in Nigeria through specialized training and adequate and timely release of funds for maintenance of men, materials and equipment to improve morale.
- iii. The use of intelligence must be deepened by the Nigerian Army commanders to include closer collaboration with local community actors who are familiar with the terrain.
- iv. The Nigerian Army should use both Kinetic (physical war) and the non-kinetic (deradicalization, cutting of all forms of supplies to the insurgents) to bring the insurgency to its knees.

#### References:

Adams, R. (2021). *Ethics of war and combat*. Cambridge University Press.

Adibe, J. (2020). *Negotiating the Nigerian nation: Essays on state, governance and development*. Adonis & Abbey.

Agu, C. F., & Agboeze, D. U. (2019). Poverty, insecurity and extremism in West African sub-region: Analytical perspective. *Caritas International Journal of Political Studies and International Relations*, 1(1).

Akani, N. K. (2019). Comparative analysis of insurgency and counter-insurgency approaches in Nigeria and other jurisdictions. Rivers State University.

Akanni, E. O., & Ege, O. N. (2024). Beyond security failures: The complexities of addressing Boko Haram in Nigeria. *World Journal of African and Regional Research*, 4(2), 1–16.

Amnesty International. (2023). *The state of the world's human rights: Nigeria report*.

Biddle, S. (2004). *Military power: Explaining victory and defeat in modern battle*. Princeton University Press.



Berlingozzi, L., & Stoddard, E. (2020). Assessing misaligned counterinsurgency practice in Niger and Nigeria. *The International Spectator*, 55(4), 11–28.

Hoffman, F. G. (2006). *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars*. Potomac Books.

Johnson, M., & Lee, S. (2018). The social impact of combat. *American Sociological Review*, 83(4), 99–108.

Jones, T., & White, D. (2020). Technological warfare: Balancing old and new combat strategies. *Technology and Security*, 29(1), 50–60.

Kilcullen, D. (2006). Three pillars of counterinsurgency. Paper presented at the Government Counterinsurgency Conference, Washington, DC.

Liolio, S. E. (2013). *Rethinking counterinsurgency: A case study of Boko Haram in Nigeria*. European Peace University.

Okoli, C., & Iortyer, P. (2014). Insurgency and human crisis in Nigeria. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science*, 14(1), 39–50.

Onuoha, F., & Oyewole, S. (2018). Boko Haram and the evolving insurgency in Nigeria.

Johnson, M., & Lee, S. (2018). The social impact of combat. *American Sociological Review*, 83(4), 99–108.

Jones, T., & White, D. (2020). Technological warfare: Balancing old and new combat strategies. *Technology and Security*, 29(1), 50–60.

Kilcullen, D. (2006). Three pillars of counterinsurgency. Paper presented at the Government Counterinsurgency Conference, Washington, D.C., USA.

Krepinevich, A. F. (2018). *The Pentagon and the sword: A study of military strategy*. Harvard University Press.

Lerum, B. (2020). *Impact of Boko Haram insurgency on development in north-eastern Nigeria* (Master's dissertation). University of Maiduguri, Nigeria.