



Insurgency and National Security in Nigeria: A Study of Boko Haram Operations in the Northeast, 2015–2024

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Abstract

The Boko Haram insurgency has remained one of the most persistent threats to Nigeria's national security since its violent transformation in 2009. Although significant military gains were recorded between 2015 and 2024, the insurgency continued to challenge state authority, disrupt socioeconomic activities, and undermine regional stability. This article examines the nature of Boko Haram operations in Northeastern Nigeria between 2015 and 2024 and evaluates their implications for national security. Drawing on secondary data from scholarly literature, policy reports, and security studies, the article employs Fragile State Theory to explain the persistence of insurgent violence despite sustained counterinsurgency efforts. The study argues that Boko Haram's resilience is rooted in a combination of structural governance deficits, socioeconomic deprivation, ideological radicalization, and the adaptive capacity of insurgent networks. The findings reveal that while military operations significantly weakened the group's territorial control, insurgents successfully adopted asymmetric tactics such as ambushes, kidnappings, improvised explosive device attacks, and raids on civilian and military targets. The article concludes that national security in Nigeria cannot be guaranteed through military force alone and recommends a multidimensional strategy that integrates security operations, economic development, political inclusion, community participation, and regional cooperation.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Insurgency, National Security, Counterinsurgency, Terrorism, Northeast Nigeria.



1. Introduction

National security remains one of the most important responsibilities of every sovereign state. The survival, stability, and development of any nation depend largely on its ability to protect its territorial integrity, political institutions, economic resources, and citizens from internal and external threats (UNDP, 2023). Traditionally, national security was associated primarily with military defence against foreign aggression. However, the changing nature of global security has broadened the concept to include non-traditional threats such as terrorism, insurgency, organized crime, cyber insecurity, environmental degradation, and humanitarian crises (Nye & Welch, 2017).

The origins of Boko Haram can be traced to the early 2000s when Mohammed Yusuf established a religious movement in Maiduguri, Borno State (Walker, 2012; Thurston, 2017). Initially, the movement focused on preaching against Western education, secular governance, and perceived moral corruption in Nigerian society. Yusuf attracted a large following, particularly among unemployed youths, students, and individuals who felt marginalized by the political and economic system. The movement's popularity reflected broader frustrations associated with poverty, unemployment, corruption, and ineffective governance in Northern Nigeria (Onuoha, 2014).

The relationship between the movement and the Nigerian state deteriorated significantly following confrontations with security agencies. The killing of Mohammed Yusuf in police custody in 2009 marked a turning point in the group's evolution (Walker, 2012). Under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram transformed from a relatively localized religious movement into a violent insurgent organization capable of conducting sophisticated attacks



against state institutions and civilian populations (Thurston, 2017). The group increasingly employed suicide bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, and armed assaults against military installations, government facilities, schools, churches, mosques, and markets.

Between 2015 and 2024, Boko Haram evolved into a more decentralized insurgent movement. Internal disagreements led to the emergence of factions, particularly Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (International Crisis Group, 2019; Zenn, 2020). Although both factions shared ideological similarities, they adopted different operational strategies and organizational structures. This fragmentation complicated counterinsurgency efforts and contributed to the persistence of insecurity in the region.

The insurgency has had profound implications for Nigeria's national security. Beyond the immediate loss of lives and property, Boko Haram's activities have undermined governance, weakened economic productivity, disrupted education, and generated one of Africa's largest humanitarian crises (UNDP, 2023). Millions of people have been displaced from their homes, creating enormous pressure on humanitarian agencies and government institutions. Agricultural production has declined in many affected communities, while infrastructure development has been severely constrained by insecurity.

The economic consequences of the insurgency have been particularly severe. Northeastern Nigeria, which serves as an important agricultural region, has experienced significant disruptions in farming activities due to attacks on rural communities and restrictions on movement (International Crisis Group, 2019). Trade routes have been affected, investment has declined, and businesses have been forced to relocate or close operations. These developments



have exacerbated poverty and unemployment, creating conditions that may facilitate further recruitment into extremist organizations (Kassim & Uke, 2024).

The insurgency transcends national boundaries and affects security across the Lake Chad Basin. Cross-border movement by insurgents, arms trafficking, and transnational criminal networks have complicated efforts to combat the threat (Assanvo et al., 2016). Consequently, regional cooperation has become an essential component of counterinsurgency strategy. The establishment of the Multinational Joint Task Force reflects recognition that Boko Haram represents not only a Nigerian problem but also a regional security challenge.

To achieve this objective, the article examines the evolution of Boko Haram operations between 2015 and 2024, analyses their impact on national security, evaluates government counterinsurgency responses, and identifies the challenges that continue to undermine peace and stability in Northeastern Nigeria. Through this analysis, the article contributes to broader debates on insurgency, terrorism, and national security in contemporary Africa.

1.2 Conceptual Clarifications

i. Insurgency

Generally, insurgency refers to an organized political and military movement that seeks to challenge, weaken, or overthrow an established government through the use of armed violence and political mobilization (O'Neill, 2015). Unlike conventional warfare, insurgencies are usually conducted by non-state actors who employ irregular military tactics such as guerrilla warfare, terrorism, sabotage, propaganda, ambushes, and other forms of asymmetric conflict to achieve their objectives. Insurgencies differ from ordinary criminal activities because they are primarily motivated by political, ideological, religious, or ethnic objectives rather than



economic gain (Sampson, 2013). According to O'Neill (2015), insurgent groups seek to alter existing political arrangements, challenge state authority, or establish alternative systems of governance. In many developing countries, insurgencies emerge in environments characterized by weak governance, poverty, social exclusion, political marginalization, and limited state presence. The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria exemplifies these characteristics because it combines ideological motivations with violent opposition to state institutions and established political structures (Thurston, 2017).

ii. National Security

National security is one of the most important concepts in security studies and public policy. It refers to the capacity of a state to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity, political institutions, economic resources, and citizens from internal and external threats. Traditionally, national security focused primarily on military defence against external aggression. However, contemporary security studies recognize that security threats extend beyond military concerns to include terrorism, insurgency, organized crime, environmental degradation, cyber threats, food insecurity, pandemics, and humanitarian crises (Nye & Welch, 2017).

Modern scholars increasingly emphasize the relationship between state security and human security. State security focuses on the protection of governmental institutions and territorial sovereignty, while human security emphasizes the protection of individuals from violence, poverty, disease, and social vulnerability (UNDP, 2023). Consequently, contemporary national security frameworks acknowledge that threats such as Boko Haram insurgency can undermine both state stability and human welfare simultaneously (International Crisis Group, 2019).



iii. **Boko Haram**

Boko Haram is one of the most prominent insurgent and terrorist organizations in contemporary Africa (Thurston, 2017). The group officially identifies itself as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, meaning “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad” (Mohammed, 2014). However, it became popularly known as Boko Haram, a phrase commonly interpreted as “Western education is forbidden” (Walker, 2012).

The movement was founded in the early 2000s by Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria (Loimeier, 2012). Initially, Boko Haram functioned as a religious movement that focused on preaching, social mobilization, and criticism of corruption, inequality, and perceived moral decay in Nigerian society (Mohammed, 2014). Following Yusuf's death in police custody in 2009, the group transformed into a violent insurgent organization under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau.

Since then, Boko Haram has conducted numerous attacks against civilians, security forces, government institutions, educational facilities, and religious centres across Northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region (Zenn, 2020). The group later fragmented into different factions, most notably Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), both of which continue to pose significant security challenges in the region (International Crisis Group, 2019).

1.3 **Theoretical Framework**

Fragile State Theory

This study adopts Fragile State Theory to explain the persistence of Boko Haram insurgency



in Northeastern Nigeria. The theory argues that states become fragile when they are unable to perform essential functions such as maintaining security, providing public services, promoting economic development, and ensuring political stability (Fukuyama, 2014). Under such conditions, non-state actors often exploit governance deficiencies to challenge state authority.

Rotberg (2010) argues that the primary responsibility of the state is the provision of security and public goods. When governments fail to fulfil these obligations, citizens may lose confidence in state institutions and become susceptible to alternative sources of authority. In Northeastern Nigeria, widespread poverty, unemployment, weak infrastructure, and inadequate social services created conditions that facilitated the emergence and expansion of Boko Haram (Onuoha, 2014).

The theory is relevant because Boko Haram exploited governance failures, socioeconomic inequalities, and limited state presence to recruit members and establish operational networks (Thurston, 2017). However, critics argue that Fragile State Theory often places excessive emphasis on internal weaknesses while underestimating external influences such as transnational terrorism, arms trafficking, and regional instability. Despite this criticism, the theory remains useful in explaining the relationship between governance deficiencies and insurgent violence in Nigeria.

1.4 Effects of Boko Haram Insurgency on National Security

Boko Haram insurgency has had profound and far-reaching effects on Nigeria's national security. Its effects extend beyond military concerns and encompass humanitarian, economic, social, educational, political, and regional dimensions. Many victims continue to experience trauma, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges associated with prolonged



exposure to violence. These psychological consequences represent an often-overlooked aspect of national security because they affect social cohesion, community resilience, and post-conflict recovery.

One of the most significant consequences of the insurgency has been its challenge to Nigeria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. At the height of its operations between 2013 and 2015, Boko Haram controlled substantial portions of territory in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States. In several communities, the group established alternative systems of authority and attempted to impose its own interpretation of religious and political governance. This development directly challenged the legitimacy of the Nigerian state and raised concerns regarding the government's ability to exercise effective control over its territory.

The insurgency has also exposed the changing nature of contemporary security threats. Traditionally, national security focused primarily on interstate conflicts and military invasions. However, Boko Haram demonstrates how non-state actors can threaten national stability without possessing the conventional military capabilities associated with sovereign states. Through the use of guerrilla warfare, suicide bombings, kidnappings, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and targeted assassinations, the group has inflicted significant damage on communities and institutions (UNDP, 2023).

Another important dimension of the conflict is its impact on human security. Human security emphasizes the protection of individuals from violence, fear, hunger, disease, and deprivation. The Boko Haram insurgency has severely affected human security in Northeastern Nigeria. Thousands of people have lost their lives, while millions have been displaced from their homes. Many communities continue to face difficulties in accessing food, healthcare, education, and



livelihood opportunities due to persistent insecurity. The conflict has also generated serious socioeconomic consequences. Economic activities in many parts of Northeastern Nigeria have been disrupted by violence and instability. Agricultural production, which constitutes a major source of livelihood in the region, has been negatively affected by attacks on farming communities and restrictions on movement. Markets have been destroyed, trade routes disrupted, and private investments discouraged. Consequently, poverty and unemployment have increased in many affected communities.

The educational sector has similarly experienced significant setbacks. Boko Haram's ideological opposition to Western education has made schools frequent targets of attack. Numerous educational institutions have been destroyed, teachers have been killed or displaced, and students have been forced to abandon their studies. The abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014 and subsequent kidnappings of students in other parts of Northern Nigeria highlighted the vulnerability of educational institutions in conflict zones. These developments have negatively affected human capital development and future economic prospects (Kassim & Uke, 2024).

The insurgency has further placed enormous pressure on Nigeria's security architecture. The military, police, intelligence agencies, and other security organizations have devoted substantial resources to counterinsurgency operations. Prolonged deployments, logistical challenges, and the financial costs associated with military operations have strained national resources (Kassim & Uke, 2024). Although security forces have achieved important successes against insurgent groups, the persistence of attacks demonstrates the complexity of combating modern insurgencies.



Beyond Nigeria, the conflict has affected regional stability within the Lake Chad Basin. Boko Haram's operations have extended into neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Cross-border attacks, refugee flows, arms trafficking, and transnational criminal activities have created additional security challenges for these states. Consequently, regional cooperation has become an essential component of efforts to address the insurgency (Sampson, 2013).

1.5 Counterinsurgency Measures and Government Responses

The Boko Haram insurgency has compelled the Nigerian government to adopt a broad range of counterinsurgency measures aimed at restoring security, protecting citizens, and preserving national stability. Since the escalation of the conflict in 2009, successive administrations have combined military operations, intelligence activities, regional cooperation, deradicalization programmes, community participation, and humanitarian interventions to combat the insurgency. These measures reflect the recognition that modern insurgencies cannot be defeated through military force alone but require a comprehensive strategy that addresses both security and developmental challenges.

i. Military Operations

Military operations have remained the cornerstone of Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategy. Following the intensification of Boko Haram attacks, the Nigerian Armed Forces launched numerous offensives designed to dismantle insurgent strongholds, recover occupied territories, rescue hostages, and neutralize key commanders. One of the most significant developments occurred after 2015 when the government intensified military operations across the Northeast. Several territories previously controlled by Boko Haram were recaptured, including



communities in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States. Operations such as Operation Lafiya Dole, Operation Hadin Kai, and other coordinated campaigns targeted insurgent camps in Sambisa Forest, the Mandara Mountains, and the Lake Chad Basin (Assanvo et al., 2016).

ii. Intelligence Gathering and Surveillance

Effective intelligence is essential for successful counterinsurgency operations. Recognizing this reality, the Nigerian government invested significantly in intelligence collection, analysis, and surveillance capabilities. Security agencies improved cooperation in identifying insurgent networks, monitoring movements, and disrupting planned attacks. The Department of State Services (DSS), Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Intelligence Agency (NIA), military intelligence units, and police intelligence departments worked together to gather actionable intelligence on insurgent activities (Onuoha et al., 2024). Intelligence-driven operations became increasingly important as Boko Haram shifted from conventional territorial control to asymmetric tactics.

iii. Regional Cooperation and the Multinational Joint Task Force

The transnational nature of the Boko Haram insurgency made regional cooperation an essential component of counterinsurgency strategy. Boko Haram's operations frequently extended beyond Nigeria's borders into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Insurgents exploited porous borders to move personnel, weapons, supplies, and financial resources across the Lake Chad Basin. In response, regional governments strengthened the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), comprising Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin Republic. The MNJTF was established to coordinate military operations, enhance intelligence sharing, and improve collective responses to insurgent threats. Joint military operations conducted under the framework of the



MNJTF produced notable successes (Assanvo et al., 2016).

iv. Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and Community Participation

Community participation became another critical element of counterinsurgency efforts. Local populations often possess valuable knowledge about their environment, including information regarding suspicious activities, insurgent movements, and potential threats. The emergence of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) significantly enhanced community involvement in security operations. Initially formed in Borno State, the CJTF consisted of local volunteers who supported security forces in identifying insurgent members and gathering intelligence. Their familiarity with local languages, cultures, and terrain improved the effectiveness of military operations. Members of the CJTF assisted security agencies by conducting surveillance, manning checkpoints, and providing information about insurgent activities. In several communities, their contributions helped prevent attacks and facilitated the arrest of suspected insurgents.

v. Deradicalization and Rehabilitation Programmes

As the conflict evolved, policymakers increasingly recognized that military measures alone could not eliminate violent extremism. Consequently, the government introduced deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration programmes aimed at addressing the ideological dimensions of the insurgency. One of the most prominent initiatives is Operation Safe Corridor. Established to rehabilitate and reintegrate repentant insurgents, the programme provides psychological counseling, vocational training, religious reorientation, education, and civic instruction. The objective is to transform former fighters into productive members of society and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. Participants undergo structured rehabilitation



processes designed to challenge extremist beliefs and encourage peaceful coexistence. Vocational training programmes equip beneficiaries with skills that can facilitate economic reintegration after completion of the programme.

1.6 Challenges of Counterinsurgency Operations

Despite notable successes, several challenges continue to hinder counterinsurgency operations in Northeastern Nigeria.

First, the difficult terrain of the region, including Sambisa Forest and the Lake Chad Basin, provides insurgents with safe havens and operational flexibility (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Second, porous borders facilitate the movement of fighters, weapons, and supplies across neighbouring countries, thereby complicating military operations (Assanvo et al., 2016).

Third, persistent poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion continue to create conditions conducive to recruitment by extremist groups (UNDP, 2023).

Fourth, intelligence gathering remains difficult because insurgents often blend into local populations and exploit community networks to conceal their activities (Onuoha et al., 2024).

Finally, Boko Haram and ISWAP have demonstrated remarkable adaptability by continuously modifying their tactics and operational structures in response to military pressure (Zenn, 2020).

1.7 Recommendations

To strengthen national security and address the continuing threat of Boko Haram, the following recommendations are proposed:



The government should strengthen intelligence-driven operations through improved inter-agency coordination and investment in modern surveillance technologies.

Border security should be enhanced through greater regional cooperation and stronger implementation of MNJTF operations.

Increased investment in education, healthcare, agriculture, and infrastructure should be prioritized to address the socioeconomic conditions that facilitate radicalization.

Community participation in security initiatives should be strengthened through support for local peacebuilding and early-warning mechanisms.

Deradicalization and reintegration programmes should receive adequate funding and institutional support.

Government institutions should promote transparency, accountability, and effective service delivery to strengthen public confidence and legitimacy.

Humanitarian assistance and reconstruction efforts should be sustained to facilitate recovery in conflict-affected communities.

1.8. Conclusion

The Boko Haram insurgency remains one of the most serious threats to Nigeria's national security. Although significant military gains were achieved between 2015 and 2024, the insurgency continues to evolve through the adoption of asymmetric tactics and decentralized organizational structures (Zenn, 2020).

The study demonstrates that Boko Haram's activities have undermined governance, disrupted economic development, generated humanitarian crises, weakened educational institutions, and



threatened regional stability. These consequences highlight the multidimensional nature of contemporary security challenges.

The findings further indicate that military force alone cannot permanently eliminate insurgency. Sustainable peace requires a comprehensive strategy that combines security operations with socioeconomic development, good governance, community participation, deradicalization initiatives, and regional cooperation. Such an approach will strengthen national security and promote long-term stability in Northeastern Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin region.

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