



Exploring Realistic Strategies for Result-Oriented Counter-Terrorism Operations in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria's ongoing counter-terrorism measure against terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) predominantly in the Northern region has not been able to achieve sustainable peace and security in the affected region. This study examines the current strategies employed by the Nigerian government, such as the kinetic approach which include military operations, such as the "Operation Lafiya Dole, and the Operation HADIN KAI" which have reclaimed territories but have not completely neutralized terrorist activities. It further examines the effectiveness of other soft approaches like the deradicalization programs, socio-economic interventions, and international collaborations. The study adopts Frustration-Aggression Theory as its framework and supports it with Routine Activity Theory. The paper uses the qualitative method by sourcing secondary data from journals, and government white papers for the literature review. Findings from the study reveals that kinetic approach has been counter-productive and other approaches like the Deradicalization programs of "Operation Safe Corridor", the socio-economic approach incorporated through the North-East Development Commission (NEDC), and international collaborations, including the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) as well. Thus, the paper concludes that Nigeria should adopts more realistic approaches like strengthening intelligence and technological surveillance, community-based counter-terrorism and empowerment, military reform and coordination, as well as regional and international collaboration addressing the socio-economic and security drivers of terrorism.

Key words: *Terrorism, Counter Terrorism, Realistic Strategies, Result-Oriented Counter Terrorism*



1. Introduction

Nigerian Democratic landscape since the return of democracy in 1999 has been plagued with pressing security challenges by different sects. Predominantly among these sects is particularly with the rise of violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram with its offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). These groups thrive in widespread attacks, leading to significant loss of life, displacement, economic disruption, and insecurity, especially in the northern regions of the country. Several factors elicited terrorism attacks in Nigeria which include but not limited to deep-seated socioeconomic inequalities, weak governance structures, religious extremism, political instability, and poor security architecture.

Despite efforts by the Nigerian government and international allies to curb terrorism, the challenge remains persistent. Military operations, such as the use of joint task forces and targeted strikes, have produced some success; yet, these efforts alone have not been able to fully eliminate the threat. Many scholars argue that the reliance on military tactics, without adequate attention to the root causes of terrorism, has limited the effectiveness of counter-terrorism efforts. Their claims remains that the military regardless of their skills in wading off violent beings, are not equipped in disassembling deep-seated resentments, psychological trauma, and explosive emotions that triggers the cycle of violence (Wadlow, 2013; Obatomi & Ahupa, 2026). As a result, there has been growing recognition of the need for more comprehensive, multi-dimensional, and result-oriented strategies that go beyond the use of force.

The failure of solely military-driven counter-terrorism strategies has underscored the importance of addressing terrorism as a multifaceted problem. Factors that breed terrorism have



been linked to impact of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and political disenfranchisement on the people. Oyefusi (2008) demonstrated how the economic disenfranchisement of young people contributes to the rise of insurgency, especially in Nigeria's northern regions. The lack of employment opportunities, coupled with poor governance and weak infrastructure, provides fertile ground for terrorist recruitment. Addressing these structural issues is critical to any successful counter-terrorism strategy as radical ideologies find fertile ground in areas marked by illiteracy, economic deprivation and poor governance in executing their agenda. Therefore, it is pertinent for an effective counter-terrorism strategy to integrate both military efforts and non-military approaches and address the underlying socio-political and economic conditions.

In light of these realities, this paper proposes a realistic, result-oriented counter-terrorism framework for Nigeria, focusing on improving intelligence capabilities, strengthening community engagement, addressing socioeconomic disparities, and improving coordination among security agencies. The paper argues that a holistic approach, which includes military action, intelligence gathering, community involvement, deradicalization, monitoring and evaluation of the implementations of the strategy and socioeconomic development, will provide a more sustainable solution to the terrorism crisis in Nigeria.

1.1 The Rise of Boko Haram and ISWAP in Nigeria

Boko Haram is an Islamist militant group founded in the early 2000s, which became infamous in 2009 after launching violent insurgencies against the Nigerian state. Its name loosely translates to "Western education is forbidden," reflecting its ideological opposition to Western-style education and governance. Boko Haram's violent tactics include bombings, suicide attacks, and kidnappings, targeting civilians, military personnel, and government



infrastructure.

The roots of terrorism in Nigeria can be traced to a combination of economic, political, and social factors. Historically, group such as Boko Haram emerged out of a deep sense of marginalization and disenfranchisement, particularly among northern youths. As pointed out by Adesoji (2010), Boko Haram's rise was linked to the failure of the Nigerian state to provide social services and opportunities for economic advancement, particularly in northern Nigeria, which remains one of the poorest regions in the country.

According to Walker (2012), Boko Haram's ideology is rooted in the desire to impose strict Sharia law across northern Nigeria, and it draws support from marginalized northern populations. The group has capitalized on the region's high levels of poverty, unemployment, and political marginalization, recruiting disillusioned youths to its cause. In 2016, Boko Haram splintered into two factions: the original Boko Haram and ISWAP, which aligned itself with the global Islamic State (IS). ISWAP has since grown in prominence, expanding its operations across West Africa and gaining more sophisticated military capabilities (Zenn, 2019).

Both Boko Haram and ISWAP have taken advantage of the weak governance structures in northern Nigeria, exploiting corruption, poor infrastructure, and the lack of basic services to gain support among local populations. The Nigerian government's inability to provide adequate security and development in the region has allowed these groups to thrive, turning the northeastern part of the country into a war zone. Scholars like Onuoha (2014) emphasize the need for a multifaceted approach to addressing the insurgency, which should include both military operations and efforts to improve the socioeconomic conditions in the affected areas.



Military Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Northern Region

To tackle terrorism, Nigeria has predominantly relied on military strategies especially in its northern regions. The creation of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which includes forces from Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, has led to important territorial gains against Boko Haram and ISWAP. This joint effort has drastically reduced Boko Harams territorial control there by leading to the Nigerian Army been able to recapture territories previously controlled by Boko Haram thereby reducing their influence and ability to launch attack. Additionally, the kinetic approach of Nigerian military has captured and killed several terrorists including high ranking commanders, which has weakened the group's leadership and operational capacity. More so, the military operations have led to improved security in many parts of the country allowing civilians to return to their homes and resume their normal activities. The army has further increased cooperation with regional forces to combat terrorism in the region. However, as noted by Campbell & Harwood (2018), these military gains have not been sufficient to dismantle the groups or to prevent them from adapting to changing circumstances. The limited success of military operations suggests that a more nuanced, multi-sectoral approach is needed to achieve long-term peace.

While the Nigerian military has made notable progress in combating terrorism, especially through the recapture of territories formerly held by Boko Haram, these successes have been undermined by several challenges. These include corruption within the security sector, human rights abuses committed by soldiers, and lack of coordination among various security agencies. As Aghedo and Osumah (2015) argue, the over-reliance on military tactics has, in some cases,



alienated local populations, further complicating the counter-terrorism efforts. Additionally, inadequate investment in intelligence gathering and surveillance technology has hampered the military's ability to effectively preempt attacks.

Successful counter-terrorism strategies need the involvement local communities. Native populations often possess valuable local intelligent knowledge about the movements and activities of terrorist groups. However, mistrust between the military and local civilians, particularly in the northeastern part of Nigeria, has limited the effectiveness of community-based intelligence. Thus, Abimbola and Adesote (2012) emphasized the importance of fostering strong partnerships between security forces and local communities to gather actionable intelligence and build trust.

Socioeconomic and Political Drivers of Terrorism

From scholarly examinations, socioeconomic and political factors greatly contribute to the rise of terrorism in Nigeria. One of the key drivers is the high level of poverty and unemployment, particularly in the northern region. Nigeria is characterized by stark economic disparities between the northern and southern regions, with the north experiencing higher levels of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment. This economic inequality has been cited as a major factor that drives young people to join terrorist groups like Boko Haram. Oyefusi (2008) notes that unemployment and lack of economic opportunities are critical push factors for youth participation in violent insurgencies.

In addition to economic factors, political exclusion and poor governance have played a significant role in the growth of terrorism in Nigeria. According to Agbiboa (2013), northern



Nigeria has long been politically marginalized, with the central government failing to invest in the region's development or provide adequate political representation. This has led to widespread disillusionment with the state, creating a fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take root. Boko Haram has capitalized on these grievances by positioning itself as an alternative to the corrupt political establishment, promising justice and equality under Sharia law.

Another factor that contributes to terrorism in Nigeria is the poor state of education, particularly in the northern regions. Boko Haram's opposition to Western education resonates with many young people who feel that the formal education system has failed to provide them with economic opportunities. According to Adesoji (2010), the inadequacy of the educational system, combined with the lack of employment opportunities for graduates, has driven many young people to join insurgent groups. These groups offer a sense of purpose and belonging that is often lacking in the formal structures of the state.

The literature suggests that addressing the root causes of terrorism in Nigeria requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond military operations. Scholars like Forest (2012) and Abimbola & Adesote (2012) argue that counter-terrorism strategies must include economic development, improved governance, and education reform. Forest (2012) emphasizes the importance of addressing the underlying socioeconomic and political conditions that enable terrorism to thrive, while Abimbola & Adesote (2012) highlight the need for community engagement and deradicalization programs to prevent further radicalization.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding realistic strategies for result-oriented counter-terrorism in Nigeria draws upon several interrelated theories: Frustration-Aggression Theory and Routine



Activity Theory. This framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of terrorism in Nigeria and outlines strategic responses that can be employed to mitigate these threats effectively.

Frustration-Aggression Theory

This theory, developed by Dollard et al. (1939), posits that individuals or groups resort to aggression when they experience frustration in achieving their goals. In the context of Nigeria, widespread poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic inequality-especially in the northern regions-create frustration, which extremist groups exploit to recruit individuals into their ranks. Its strengths include explaining the psychological and socio-economic drivers of terrorism and highlighting the role of deprivation and inequality in fostering radicalization. The theory have oversimplifies the causal link between frustration and aggression, neglecting factors like ideology and external influences (e.g. global jihadist networks) and its does not account for why only a fraction of frustrated individuals resort to terrorism.

Routine Activity Theory

Proposed by Cohen and Felson (1979), this theory suggests that crime (or terrorism) occurs when three elements converge: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians. In Nigeria, factors such as porous borders, inadequate policing, and poorly protected infrastructure make the country a suitable target for terrorism. It provides a structural understanding of how vulnerabilities facilitate terrorist activities and also emphasizes the role of situational prevention, such as improving surveillance and law enforcement. The theory was assumes rational behaviour by offenders, which may not apply to ideologically driven terrorists. Again, it does not consider the socio-economic and political contexts that create



motivated offenders.

The paper adopted both the Frustration aggression theory and Routine activity theory since these theories best describe the usefulness in designing socio-economic interventions, such as job creation and poverty alleviation, which address the root causes of frustration and reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies and the designing operational counter-terrorism strategies, such as enhancing border security, deploying surveillance technologies, and increasing police presence in vulnerable areas respectively.

1.4 Methodology:

This study uses a simple study design of qualitative research method to analyse the discussed the critical issues of the research. Data for the study are derived from primary and secondary sources from policy documents, reliable journals, government white papers and reputable media reports. The data from these sources were focused on counter-terrorism operational documents in Nigeria between 2010 and 2026 subject to critical analysis and thematic interpretation for the validity of the study.

1.5 Current Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Nigeria: An Overview

Counter-terrorism in Nigeria has evolved over the past decade as the country has grappled with the rise of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The Nigerian government's response to these threats has involved a combination of military, legal, and socio-economic measures aimed at dismantling terrorist networks and addressing the root causes of extremism. This paper explores the current counter-terrorism strategies employed in Nigeria, including military operations, international collaborations,



deradicalization programs, and socio-economic interventions. It also assesses the effectiveness of these strategies and highlights the challenges faced in implementing them.

Military Operations and the Role of Security Forces

The Nigerian government has relied heavily on military operations as a primary means of combating terrorism, particularly in the northeastern part of the country where Boko Haram and ISWAP operate. The military strategy has involved large-scale deployments of the Nigerian Armed Forces, often in collaboration with regional and international forces such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which includes troops from Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. The MNJTF was established to coordinate cross-border military operations aimed at degrading the capacity of Boko Haram and ISWAP and limiting their movements across Nigeria's borders.

Military operations in Nigeria have included aerial bombardments, ground assaults, and intelligence-driven strikes on terrorist hideouts. One of the key strategies has been the "Operation Lafiya Dole," which was launched in 2015 to reclaim territories occupied by Boko Haram and restore security to affected areas in the northeastern region (Abubakar, 2016). While these operations have resulted in the recapture of some territories, they have not completely eradicated the threat posed by Boko Haram and ISWAP, which continue to carry out sporadic attacks, including bombings, kidnappings, and ambushes on military personnel.

However, the heavy reliance on military force has been criticized for its limited effectiveness in achieving long-term peace. Scholars like Aghedo and Osumah (2015) argue that the military-centric approach has led to temporary gains, but it has failed to address the socio-economic and



political grievances that fuel terrorism. In addition, the Nigerian military has faced allegations of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and torture, which have undermined public trust and hindered community cooperation with security forces. Amnesty International (2015) documented widespread abuses by security forces, including unlawful detentions, which have contributed to the radicalization of individuals and communities.

Deradicalization and Rehabilitation Programs

In addition to military efforts, Nigeria has implemented a non kinetic approach via deradicalization and rehabilitation programs aimed at reintegrating former Boko Haram members and preventing further radicalization. One of the most prominent initiatives is the Operation Safe Corridor program, which was launched in 2016 to provide a pathway for repentant Boko Haram fighters to surrender and undergo rehabilitation. The program offers vocational training, psychological counseling, and religious re-education to former militants, with the aim of reintegrating them into society as law-abiding citizens (Mustapha & Mbonu, 2020).

The deradicalization program is part of a broader “soft” (non-kinetic) approach to counter-terrorism that seeks to address the ideological foundations of terrorism. This strategy acknowledges that military force alone cannot solve the problem and that efforts must be made to deconstruct extremist ideologies and provide alternatives to violence. Participants in the Operation Safe Corridor program are subjected to intensive rehabilitation that focuses on changing their mindsets, correcting their misconceptions about Islam, and equipping them with the skills needed to lead productive lives.



However, the deradicalization program has faced several challenges, including skepticism from communities affected by Boko Haram violence. Many victims of terrorism are wary of reintegrating former militants into society, fearing that they may relapse into violence. Moreover, the effectiveness of the program has been questioned due to the lack of comprehensive follow-up mechanisms to monitor participants after their release. According to Onyulo (2020), there is limited evidence to suggest that rehabilitated militants have been successfully reintegrated into society, and some reports indicate that recidivism rates are high.

Despite these challenges, deradicalization remains a critical component of Nigeria's counter-terrorism strategy. Scholars like Horgan and Braddock (2010) have emphasized the importance of psychological interventions and ideological re-education in preventing the spread of violent extremism. They argue that programs like Operation Safe Corridor offer a way to break the cycle of violence by providing former militants with the tools to disengage from terrorism and reintegrate into society.

Socio-Economic and Developmental Approaches

Beyond military and deradicalization efforts, the Nigerian government has recognized the need for socio-economic interventions as part of its counter-terrorism strategy. Poverty, unemployment, and political exclusion are often cited as major factors contributing to the rise of terrorism in Nigeria, particularly in the northeastern region where Boko Haram operates. Several studies have highlighted the link between economic deprivation and the recruitment of young people into terrorist organizations. For instance, Oyefusi (2008) argues that the lack of economic opportunities in the northern region has pushed many young people toward extremism as an alternative means of survival.



In response to these challenges, the Nigerian government has launched various socio-economic programs aimed at alleviating poverty and addressing the root causes of terrorism. One such initiative is the North-East Development Commission (NEDC), which was established in 2017 to coordinate the rebuilding of infrastructure and the provision of basic services in states affected by Boko Haram insurgency (Adeleke, 2019). The NEDC is tasked with addressing the humanitarian crisis in the region, providing support to displaced persons, and promoting economic development through vocational training and job creation programs.

While these socio-economic initiatives are critical to addressing the root causes of terrorism, their implementation has been slow and often hampered by corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and a lack of resources. According to Onuoha (2014), many of the government's development programs have failed to reach the most vulnerable populations, leaving them marginalized and susceptible to recruitment by terrorist groups. In addition, there is a lack of coordination between the military's counter-terrorism operations and the government's developmental efforts, which has limited the overall effectiveness of these strategies.

International Collaboration and Support

Nigeria has also sought international support and collaboration in its counter-terrorism efforts, particularly through partnerships with neighboring countries, international organizations, and global powers. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which includes troops from Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, has played a critical role in coordinating regional military operations against Boko Haram and ISWAP. In addition, Nigeria has received military assistance from countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, which have provided training, intelligence, and logistical support to Nigerian forces.



Moreover, Nigeria has worked with international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) to address the humanitarian and developmental aspects of counter-terrorism. The UN has supported Nigeria's efforts through initiatives such as the UNDP Regional Stabilization Facility, which aims to restore peace and security in the Lake Chad Basin region by promoting socio-economic recovery and rebuilding communities affected by terrorism (UNDP, 2020).

However, despite these international efforts, challenges remain. The Nigerian government's counter-terrorism strategy has been criticized for its lack of coordination with international partners, as well as its failure to fully integrate international support into its domestic strategies. According to Campbell (2018), Nigeria needs to do more to leverage international expertise and resources to enhance the effectiveness of its counter-terrorism efforts. Presently, the current sporadic cases of terrorism across the nation which has gone beyond the north and extending to the south-western even involving school toddlers is enough reason to partner with willing and trusted international partners to douse the

1.6 Propose Realistic Strategies for result - oriented Counter-Terrorism operations in Nigeria.

Intelligence-Driven Operations

In the age of high innovative technological world, initiating effective counter-terrorism operations strives with robust intelligence capabilities. Nigeria cannot afford to rely on oblate intelligence surveillance but must invest in advanced surveillance systems, including satellite imagery and artificial intelligence (AI), to monitor terrorist activities in real time. Enhanced



inter-agency collaboration is also critical for sharing actionable intelligence. Deliberate efforts towards Strengthening the existing centralized intelligence agency that integrates data from military, police, and border security forces is necessary.

Community-Based Counter-Terrorism

Local communities play a crucial role in detecting and preventing terrorist activities. Building trust between communities and security agencies is essential for effective information sharing.

Action Plan: Create local Security Council's comprising community leaders, religious figures, and law enforcement representatives. Provide incentives to community members for reporting suspicious activities as a way for motivation.

Leveraging Technology

Modern counter-terrorism relies heavily on technology, including drones for surveillance, biometric systems for identification, GPS for monitoring/tracking of sensitive materials that can be deployed for explosives and cyber security measures to counter online radicalization. Thus, government should invest in drones' procurement for monitoring insurgent hideouts and implement biometric registration for all citizens to track movements of suspected terrorists.

Socio-Economic Development

Addressing the socio-economic disparities that fuel terrorism is vital. Improving access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities in vulnerable regions can reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies and other structural factors are important.



Action Plan: Launch government-led job creation programs in the country especially in conflict prone areas like the Northeast and invest in skill acquisition centers to empower youth.

Regional and International Collaboration

Terrorism in Nigeria often involves cross-border activities. Strengthening regional alliances through organizations like the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and securing international support can enhance operational capacity.

Action Plan: Host annual security summits with neighboring countries to discuss strategies for combating cross-border terrorism.

Enhance Border Security

Establish surveillance hubs along porous borders with advanced technology such as thermal imaging cameras and motion sensors.

Action Plan: Re-activate the tripartite border security covering Nigeria border with Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin up to the gulf of Guinea.

Increase Defense Funding:

With the persistent inflation of commodities globally, it is pertinent that an increase in budgetary allocation for defense and security matters be proportionally increased. This will enable adequate funding to acquire advanced technology and aid training of security personnel. The current spate insecurity endangering lives calls for a swift establishment of SWAT team with ultramodern surveillance equipment, helicopters, and drones in every local government



of the six geopolitical zones. This special force must be well trained to utilize the ultramodern equipment and they should be well remunerated and insured for life.

Improve Legal Frameworks

Effectively implement the Terrorism Prevention and Prohibition Act of 2022 which covers provisions for tackling cyber terrorism and financing of terrorist organizations and the Chemical, Biological Radiological, Nuclear and Explosives offences.

Action Plan: Implement and prosecute all cases related to terrorism with stringent punitive measures.

Human Rights Compliance

Ensure that counter-terrorism operations adhere to human rights standards. Training security personnel on the importance of protecting civilians and establishing mechanisms for accountability will enhance the legitimacy of state actions.

Action Plan: Training MDAs on human right compliance to avoid Amnesty International and other international partners' issues.

1.7 Conclusion and Recommendation

Terrorism continues to threaten the stability and development of Nigeria and approaches to tackle it has been a national discourse. Musicians, dramatists, novelists from the humanities have raised their voices on this pandemic that bedevil our human existence, all to no avail. While military approaches remain important, they are insufficient to achieve sustainable peace.



A result-oriented counter-terrorism strategy must incorporate a multifaceted approach that addresses socioeconomic inequalities, strengthens intelligence, and actively engages local communities. By combining military action with socioeconomic reforms and deradicalization efforts, Nigeria can move toward a more peaceful and secure future. Therefore, the study recommendations are as follows:

1. Strengthening Intelligence and Surveillance:

Effective counter-terrorism requires accurate and timely intelligence. The National Counter Terrorism Centre in the Office of the National Security Adviser should invest in technology-driven intelligence-gathering systems, including drones, satellites, and enhanced surveillance infrastructure. Synergy between the military, police, and local communities is also essential for accurate on-ground intelligence.

2. Community Engagement and Empowerment:

Communities in northern Nigeria, where terrorism is most prevalent, must be actively involved in counter-terrorism efforts. This includes establishing community-based intelligence networks, empowering local leaders, and promoting trust between security forces and the civilian population.

3. Economic Development and Employment Generation:

Poverty and unemployment are key drivers of terrorism, particularly in the northern region. The Federal government through the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) must prioritize economic development initiatives that provide employment and economic opportunities for youth. Special focus should be placed on education, vocational training, and entrepreneurship programs in areas most affected by terrorism.

4. Rehabilitation and Deradicalization Programs:



Terrorism in Nigeria is often fueled by radical ideologies. Effective rehabilitation and deradicalization programs are essential to reintegrate former militants and prevent the spread of extremist views. These programs should focus on education, religious re-orientation, psychological counseling, and vocational training. The National Counter Terrorism Centre/The Nigeria Correctional Service and concerns MDA should be empowered with financial well without needed to effectively implement this project.

5. Military Reform and Coordination:

The Armed Forces should undergo reforms to enhance its operational efficiency, accountability, and coordination with other security agencies. Special attention should be given to improving soldier welfare, training in counter-terrorism operations, and maintaining high morale.

6. Regional Cooperation

Given the transnational nature of terrorist groups like Boko Haram, regional cooperation with neighboring countries such as Chad, Niger, and Cameroon is crucial. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) should be strengthened, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms should be improved. The FGN should strengthen the bilateral relationship through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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