

Assessment of Nigeria's Security Policy and Counter-Radicalization Strategies Against Boko Haram Insurgency

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Abstract

This study critically examines Nigeria's security policy and counter-radicalization strategies in addressing the Boko Haram insurgency between 2015 and 2025. The insurgency, which has devastated Nigeria's northeast and spilled across the Lake Chad Basin, prompted a hybrid security response that combines military offensives with deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration initiatives. Drawing upon qualitative research, including key informant interviews with security officials, civil society leaders, religious figures, and community members, as well as secondary analysis of government reports, scholarly literature, and international publications, the study evaluates the extent to which these measures have been effective. The research employs Securitization Theory, Counterinsurgency Theory, and State Fragility perspectives to interrogate how Boko Haram has been framed as an existential threat, how military and political solutions have been balanced, and how governance has shaped counter-radicalization outcomes. Findings reveal that while the Nigerian military successfully disrupted Boko Haram's centralized command and reclaimed lost territories, the insurgency remains resilient through asymmetric attacks and ideological entrenchment. Programs such as Operation Safe Corridor and the Sulhu Initiative introduced innovative non-military approaches, but they face legitimacy crises due to opacity, inadequate funding, community resentment, and the absence of victim-centered restitution. The study concludes that Nigeria's strategy achieved tactical gains but fell short of achieving strategic stability. It recommends stronger community engagement, transparent evaluation of reintegration programs, improved inter-agency collaboration, and sustained investment in socio-economic reforms as key to breaking the insurgency's cyclical resilience.

Keywords: Security Policy, Counter-Radicalization Strategies, Boko Haram Insurgency

Introduction

The Boko Haram insurgency represents one of the most profound challenges to Nigeria's national security since independence. Emerging in the early 2000s as a Salafi-jihadist movement under Mohammed Yusuf, the group initially rejected Western education and state authority. Following Yusuf's extrajudicial killing in 2009, Boko Haram transformed into a violent insurgency, escalating its tactics from local skirmishes to coordinated bombings, mass abductions, and territorial occupation. The humanitarian toll has been devastating. Estimates suggest that more than 20,000 to 30,000 people have been killed since 2009, while more than 3 million have been displaced across Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. Beyond physical violence, the insurgency has crippled education, destroyed health infrastructure, and eroded governance capacity in Nigeria's northeast, particularly Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States (Zenn, 2020; UNHCR, 2022).

In response to this complex threat, Nigeria's governments adopted a range of counterinsurgency strategies. President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in the northeast and deployed heavy military force, but human rights abuses and corruption undermined his efforts. President Muhammadu Buhari, elected in 2015 on a promise to defeat Boko Haram, prioritized kinetic military action under "Operation Lafiya Dole" while simultaneously introducing rehabilitation and deradicalization programs such as Operation Safe Corridor. More recently, President Bola Tinubu inherited both the enduring insurgency and the task of reforming security governance to address structural weaknesses. These approaches represent a shift from reliance on hard power alone to a hybrid model that includes soft strategies of counter-radicalization and community engagement.

Despite these measures, Boko Haram and its splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), remain potent threats. The persistence of violence raises questions about the efficacy of Nigeria's counter-radicalization policies and the extent to which security policies have addressed or exacerbated underlying drivers of extremism. This article therefore evaluates Nigeria's security policy and counter-radicalization strategies between 2015 and 2025. It interrogates how these policies were conceptualized and implemented, their impacts on Boko Haram's insurgency, and the challenges that undermined their effectiveness. By situating Nigeria's response within theoretical debates on securitization, counterinsurgency, and state fragility, the study contributes to broader discussions on the effectiveness of hybrid security strategies in fragile democratic contexts.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Boko Haram insurgency has generated a vast body of literature that explores its origins, strategies, and the state's response. Scholars such as Thurston (2017) and Zenn (2020) trace the movement's radicalization to socio-economic marginalization, corruption, and abuses by security forces. Boko Haram's evolution from a religious movement into a full-scale insurgency underscores the importance of governance failures in facilitating extremist mobilization. Its campaign of violence including the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls' abduction, suicide bombings, and attacks on villages has cemented its reputation as one of the world's most lethal terrorist organizations.

Nigeria's security policy is formally articulated in the National Security Strategy of 2014, which outlines a holistic approach encompassing military, political, social, and economic dimensions. However, scholars such as Alli (2012) and Oyewole (2021) argue that Nigerian governments often rely disproportionately on military force, with non-military measures underfunded and inconsistently applied. This over-securitized approach has produced mixed results, allowing short-term territorial recovery but failing to address the deeper causes of radicalization.

Counter-radicalization in Nigeria has taken shape through programs such as Operation Safe Corridor and the Sulhu Initiative. Operation Safe Corridor, launched in 2016, focuses on rehabilitating low-risk Boko Haram defectors through religious counseling, vocational training, and civic education. It is situated in Mallam Sidi, Gombe State, and has processed hundreds of participants. The Sulhu Initiative, on the other hand, emerged around 2019 as a clandestine negotiation strategy led by the intelligence services. It targets senior Boko Haram commanders for negotiated surrender, offering stipends, housing, and reintegration support in exchange for abandoning violence (Mustapha & Umar, 2021; Olojo, 2020).

While these programs demonstrate Nigeria's willingness to adopt non-military approaches, their effectiveness is contested. Community resentment is high, as victims often perceive defectors as rewarded while they remain in displacement camps without restitution. Scholars such as MacEachern (2020) and International Crisis Group (2021) highlight the opacity of these programs, the absence of evaluation mechanisms, and the risk of recidivism. These critiques resonate with wider debates in counterinsurgency studies, which emphasize that military force alone is insufficient and that durable peace requires legitimacy, justice, and governance reforms (Kilcullen, 2009).

The theoretical framework for this study integrates three perspectives. Securitization Theory, developed by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), explains how Boko Haram has been framed as an existential threat by Nigerian authorities, thereby justifying extraordinary measures such as emergency rule, mass surveillance, and military crackdowns. Counterinsurgency Theory provides a second lens, emphasizing the dual necessity of kinetic action and non-kinetic solutions to defeat insurgencies (Petraeus, 2006; Kilcullen, 2009). Finally, the State Fragility framework situated

Boko Haram within Nigeria's weak governance structures, where corruption, poverty, and limited state capacity undermine legitimacy and fuel radicalization (Rotberg, 2004). Together, these theories underscore the tension between securitized state responses and the need for inclusive governance reforms to achieve sustainable peace.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for understanding the complex social and political dynamics surrounding Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategies. Data collection combined key informant interviews with secondary documentary analysis. Thirty-one interviews were conducted with stakeholders including military officers, policymakers, civil society actors, and community leaders in Borno State. The unstructured format of these interviews provided space for respondents to reflect deeply on their experiences and perceptions (Oranga & Ma-tere, 2023).

Secondary sources included government policy documents such as the National Security Strategy and the National Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism, as well as reports from the United Nations, international NGOs, and scholarly research. These materials provided context and allowed triangulation of primary data. Purposive sampling was adopted to ensure that interviewees were individuals with direct knowledge or experience of Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts. While this method strengthened the richness of the data, it also introduced the risk of researcher bias, which was mitigated through careful triangulation and validation. Data were analyzed thematically, with recurring themes such as "community distrust," "military success and failures," and "program opacity" emerging across interviews and documents. Ethical considerations were central to the study. Given the sensitivity of insurgency-related issues, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality were strictly maintained. Special care was taken to avoid retraumatization of interviewees who had direct exposure to violence or displacement.

Nigeria's Security Policy and Counter-Radicalization Strategies

Nigeria's approach to the Boko Haram insurgency between 2015 and 2025 demonstrates a hybrid strategy that combines military offensives with deradicalization initiatives. Under President Goodluck Jonathan, emergency rule was declared in the northeast, telecommunications were suspended, and heavy crackdowns were carried out by the Joint Task Force. Although these measures reclaimed some territories, they alienated communities through widespread human rights abuses, arbitrary detentions, and extrajudicial killings (Felbab-Brown, 2018).

When Muhammadu Buhari assumed office in 2015, he placed counterinsurgency at the center of his administration's agenda. "Operation Lafiya Dole" was launched, and the Nigerian military successfully recaptured major territories previously controlled by Boko Haram. Yet, these military gains were not matched by improvements in civilian governance, humanitarian response, or justice

mechanisms. Recognizing the limitations of a military-first strategy, Buhari's administration introduced Operation Safe Corridor in 2016 to rehabilitate repentant fighters. The National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism also signaled a broader attempt to balance kinetic and non-kinetic responses. Nevertheless, both initiatives faced chronic underfunding, lack of transparency, and community rejection (Kingimi, 2025).

Bola Tinubu inherited the insurgency in 2023, at a time when Boko Haram had fragmented into factions and shifted toward asymmetric warfare. Tinubu's government has continued military operations while showing interest in scaling reintegration programs. However, without reforms to governance structures, socio-economic investment, and community dialogue, Tinubu's strategies remain constrained by the same institutional weaknesses that plagued his predecessors.

The Nigerian military, assisted by regional forces under the Multinational Joint Task Force, achieved notable tactical successes, including reclaiming highways and towns once under insurgent control. Yet, reliance on vigilante groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force raised concerns about accountability and sustainability. While local faith-based initiatives attempted to build resilience, they lacked state support and remained marginal to national policy. In sum, Nigeria's hybrid security policy succeeded in reclaiming territory and degrading Boko Haram's centralized command but failed to eliminate the insurgency's structural roots.

The Sulhu Programme

Nigeria's counter-radicalization efforts, the Sulhu Programme stands out for its secrecy and controversy. Initiated discreetly around 2019, Sulhu targeted senior Boko Haram and ISWAP commanders, offering them negotiated surrender in exchange for resettlement, stipends, and economic opportunities. By incentivizing high-profile defections, the program aimed to weaken insurgent command structures and encourage broader waves of surrender (Murtada & Ardo, 2022).

While Sulhu yielded successes by securing the defection of mid- and high-ranking commanders, it provoked backlash among victims' communities. Many Nigerians viewed it as unjust to reward perpetrators while neglecting victims languishing in internally displaced persons' camps. Human rights groups criticized its secrecy, arguing that the lack of transparency and absence of victim restitution fostered impunity (Kingimi, 2025). By prioritizing tactical defections over accountability, Sulhu risked undermining public trust in state institutions. Nevertheless, it reflected Nigeria's pragmatic recognition that military force alone could not end the insurgency, and that negotiated exits offered an alternative path to weakening Boko Haram's grip.

Victims Neglected, Perpetrators Rewarded

The Nigerian government has poured resources into rehabilitating ex-insurgents while many Boko Haram victims remain unsupported. Amnesty International reports that girls and women who escaped Boko Haram “are still being left to fend for themselves (Amnesty International, 2025). Analysts note that reintegration efforts like *Operation Safe Corridor* have largely focused on former fighters – over 51,000 militants and their families surrendered by 2022 (Obiezu, 2023) even as local communities bear deep scars. Vivian Bellonwu of Social Action Nigeria observes that “rehabilitation attention has mostly been focused on the rebels themselves, whereas the communities also suffered very far-reaching trauma” (Obiezu, 2023). She notes women were raped and children witnessed parents slaughtered, yet these victims “have a way of having a lasting impact” without support.

NGOs and victims’ groups say displaced residents, abductees and victims of abuses have received little help. For example, former abducted schoolgirls report no access to the promised counselling, education or jobs, and still live in poverty (Amnesty International, 2025). Many widows and families of slain soldiers say they saw no adequate compensation or rebuilding aid. By contrast, authorities have graduated thousands of repented fighters. Between 2021–2022, Nigerian officials reported some 51,000 militants and relatives surrendered and were processed (Onuoha, 2024). Local leaders even question this policy: as one critic put it, the government’s “soft approach” of reintegrating Boko Haram fighters “has backfired” (Obiezu, 2023)). Borno’s Governor Babagana Zulum himself warned in 2021 that some ex-combatants use amnesty to “spy on communities and then rejoin” the insurgent ranks. Furthermore, victims and advocates find this imbalance unjust. Borno’s security commissioner acknowledged the dilemma: “If we over-resource the insurgents, the victims will say: what about us?” (Africanews, 2025). Even ex-commanders like “Ali” (not his real name) confess bitterness: after surrendering under the amnesty deal he was left with “no food, no job,” so he vowed to return to fighting “so we can eat and feed our families”. This sentiment victims seeing perpetrators gain while they suffer embodies the stated “ethics of justice” concern.

Dual Obligations and Insider Threats to National Security

Nigeria’s post-conflict policy faces *dual obligations*: neglecting victims and rehabilitating former militants. In practice, critics argue the pendulum has swung toward pardon, undermining security. As reintegrated fighters join communities and in some cases security units, analysts warn of an “insider threat” risk. For example, authorities acknowledge that only “*low-risk*” repentants are admitted to the army, yet even they can prove dangerous. In one reported incident, a former Boko Haram member enlisted under the program allegedly committed a violent crime in a barracks the Army had to clarify it enlists only reformed militants (Obiezu, 2023). Such cases amplify fears that intelligence on ex-insurgents may be incomplete or misapplied.

The surge in ambushes on troops and convoys suggests intelligence gaps. In 2025 alone, dozens of soldiers were killed in sudden attacks. On Jan 4, 2025, militants ambushed soldiers returning to base in Sabon Gari (Borno), killing 6 troops (Eboh, 2025). In mid-May 2025, coordinated strikes hit multiple bases: Boko Haram/ISWAP fighters killed 5 soldiers at a Marte garrison and 5 more at a Rann (Kala Balge) outpost (Kingimi, 2025). These brazen attacks—sometimes involving drones for surveillance occurred shortly after the reintegration program, stoking accusations that “*tactical improvements*” by insurgents exploit insider knowledge. Morestil, community leaders had warned the government’s leniency would erode trust. One security expert asked: “*Imagine seeing the same people who terrorized your village suddenly walking free. How do you rebuild trust?*” (Obiezu, 2023). Meanwhile, official casualty reports highlight the trend: Nigeria’s own rights commission noted over 2,266 Nigerians killed by insurgents and bandits in just the first half of 2025, a figure surpassing all of 2024 (Global Centre for Responsibility to Protect, 2024). Critics see a connection: with many ex-combatants in circulation, the military must balance its obligation to protect citizens with its commitment to forgiven fighters. As Borno’s Commissioner bluntly said: “We have the victims to deal with”, implying that overstretched support to ex-insurgents risks alienating those victims..

Data Table: Ambush Incidents and Insider Risk

The following table summarizes recent ambushes on Nigerian troops and convoys illustrating the rise in deadly attacks. These data have been compiled from news reports and show sharp spikes in casualties after reintegration efforts:

Date	Location (State)	Incident (Troops/Convoy Ambushed)	Nigerian Soldiers Killed
Jan 4, 2025	Sabon Gari, Borno	Boko Haram/ISWAP militants ambush troops returning to base	6
Apr 22, 2024	Karaga (Shiroro), Niger	Patrol on fighting mission ambushed by armed bandits	6
May 12, 2025	Marte town, Borno	ISWAP militants capture Marte, seizing soldiers (not reported dead)	Several (soldiers abducted)
May 12, 2025	Marte (153 Bde Base), Borno	Drone-reconnaissance attack on 153 Battalion base; insurgents ambush Nigerian troops	5
May 13, 2025	Rann (Kala-Balge), Borno	Insurgents attack 3rd Battalion base (trucks with machine guns); mine-resistant vehicle destroyed	5
Jun 24, 2025	Kwanar Dutse (Mariga), Niger	Gunmen storm forward base(s) in Niger state (Mariga, Boka); surprise ambush	17

Source: Compiled by author

These incidents underscore the challenges: despite government claims of “productive” reintegration (Obiezu, 2023), insurgent attacks have intensified. Observers attribute this partly to insider knowledge and weak intelligence. For example, the use of drones and coordinated assaults implies tactical planning that some analysts suggest could exploit information from released fighters (Kingimi, 2025). In sum, the data-driven picture is stark: as ex-Boko Haram fighters were pardoned and enrolled in society (and even security forces), ambushes on troops rose dramatically, highlighting both justice concerns and practical security failures.

Impacts and Challenges of Counter-Terrorism Strategies

Nigeria’s counterinsurgency and counter-radicalization policies produced a mix of successes and failures. On the one hand, military offensives disrupted Boko Haram’s control over territory, and programs like Operation Safe Corridor and Sulhu encouraged some defections. The temporary stabilization of certain areas allowed a number of displaced persons to return to their communities (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2024). Yet these successes were overshadowed by deep challenges. Community distrust emerged as a central theme, with many citizens perceiving reintegration programs as rewarding perpetrators while victims remained neglected (*International Crisis Group*, 2020). Human rights abuses by the Nigerian military, including arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, and sexual violence, alienated the very populations whose support was vital for counterinsurgency success. Deradicalization programs also suffered from underfunding, poor monitoring, and weak reintegration mechanisms, leading to cases of recidivism (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, and poor governance continued to fuel radicalization. Despite temporary military victories, the lack of socio-economic reforms meant that conditions conducive to extremism persisted. Institutional weaknesses including inter-agency rivalry, corruption, and inadequate coordination further undermined the effectiveness of Nigeria’s security policy. Consequently, Boko Haram and ISWAP adapted, shifting from centralized territorial control to asymmetric guerrilla tactics and clandestine attacks, ensuring the insurgency’s persistence despite state efforts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that Nigeria’s security policy and counter-radicalization strategies between 2015 and 2025 embodied a hybrid model that combined hard and soft approaches. While the military reclaimed lost territories and disrupted Boko Haram’s organizational command, these tactical victories did not translate into strategic stability. Programs such as Operation Safe Corridor

and Sulhu represented innovative attempts at rehabilitation and negotiated defections, yet their opacity, lack of accountability, and community resentment undermined their legitimacy.

For Nigeria to overcome the resilience of Boko Haram and ISWAP, a recalibration of policy is necessary. Reintegration must be community-centered, with participatory dialogue and victim restitution mechanisms that build trust and promote reconciliation. Transparency and accountability should define both Operation Safe Corridor and Sulhu, with regular evaluations and inclusion of civil society oversight. Inter-agency coordination must be strengthened to harmonize efforts across the military, intelligence services, and civilian agencies. Beyond security measures, Nigeria must invest in socio-economic development, addressing poverty, unemployment, and educational deficits that sustain radicalization. Finally, adherence to human rights norms in military operations is essential to restore legitimacy and win community support.

The persistence of Boko Haram after two decades underscores that counterinsurgency is not merely a military challenge but a political and governance struggle. Nigeria's experience between 2015 and 2025 reveals the limitations of securitization and the urgent need for governance reforms and inclusive policies. Only by addressing both the symptoms and the root causes of insurgency can Nigeria hope to achieve sustainable peace and security.

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