

# **The Political and Military Dimensions of Countering Extremism in West Africa: A Study of Nigeria**

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**Ibrahim Ismail Lawal,<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Lawal Sanusi,<sup>2</sup>  
and Ibrahim Musa<sup>3</sup>**

## **Abstract**

This article examines Nigeria's military and political strategies in countering Boko Haram, a significant threat to national and regional security. The rise of Boko Haram has posed complex challenges, necessitating a multifaceted response that encompasses both military operations and political reforms. The military strategies employed include counterinsurgency operations, the establishment of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) for regional cooperation, and intelligence gathering through community engagement. While these efforts have led to territorial recovery and operational gains against Boko Haram, persistent violence and the group's resilience highlight critical shortcomings, including intelligence failures and troop morale

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1. Department of Political Science, Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna; [ibrahim.lawalismail@nda.edu.ng](mailto:ibrahim.lawalismail@nda.edu.ng); <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1439-0516>.
  2. Department of Political Science, Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna; [sanusilawal1967@gmail.com](mailto:sanusilawal1967@gmail.com); <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2009-7318>.
  3. Department of Political Science, Federal University, Dutsinma; [musaibrahim89@gmail.com](mailto:musaibrahim89@gmail.com); <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3410-066X>.

issues. On the political front, the Nigerian government has recognised the importance of governance reforms and humanitarian assistance in addressing the root causes of extremism. However, challenges such as corruption, inadequate humanitarian responses, and limited reintegration programmes for former combatants hinder effective implementation. This article argues that a holistic approach combining military action with meaningful political reforms is essential for sustainable counter-extremism efforts. Strengthening intelligence capabilities, improving military logistics, and fostering community trust are crucial steps toward enhancing operational effectiveness. Ultimately, achieving lasting peace and stability in Nigeria requires addressing both immediate security concerns and the socio-economic grievances that fuel radicalisation. This study contributes to the discourse on counter-terrorism in West Africa by providing insights into Nigeria's unique challenges and opportunities in combating violent extremism.

**Keywords:** Extremism, Boko Haram, Military Strategies, Political Strategies, Counterinsurgency.

### **Introduction**

The proliferation of violent extremism in West Africa poses a significant challenge to regional stability, socio-economic development, and governance. Nigeria, as the region's largest economy and most populous country, has become a focal point for counter-extremism efforts, particularly in the fight against Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). These extremist groups have perpetuated widespread violence, resulting in the loss of lives, displacement of millions, and disruption of economic activities, particularly in the northeastern region (Campbell & Harwood, 2018). Addressing this multifaceted crisis requires an integrated approach that combines both political and military strategies.

The political dimension of countering extremism encompasses the need for inclusive governance and the establishment of effective institutions that can respond to citizens' needs. Scholars argue that addressing corruption

and improving public service delivery are critical to undermining the appeal of extremist ideologies (Olowu & Raji, 2020). Conversely, the military dimension involves deploying security forces to combat insurgent groups, which has often led to allegations of human rights abuses and further alienation of local populations (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This case study will analyse the interplay between these dimensions, highlighting how military actions can complement political efforts or exacerbate tensions if not managed carefully. Politically, Nigeria's counter-extremism framework hinges on governance reforms, de-radicalisation programmes, and community engagement initiatives. The success of these programmes, however, has been impeded by corruption, weak institutions, and a lack of sustained political will (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2020). Militarily, Nigeria has deployed significant resources to combat extremism, often in collaboration with regional and international partners such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Despite these efforts, the insurgency persists, raising critical questions about the effectiveness of Nigeria's military strategies and the underlying socio-political factors fuelling extremism (Agbibo, 2021).

This article examines the political and military dimensions of countering extremism in Nigeria, analysing their interplay and effectiveness in addressing the root causes and manifestations of extremism. Using Nigeria as a case study, it seeks to provide insights into the broader regional dynamics of counter-extremism in West Africa, with implications for policy and practice.

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to interrogate the interplay between political and military dimensions in countering extremism in Nigeria. It seeks to identify the strategies, their efficiency and challenges. To this end, the research is guided by the following questions:

- i. What political and military strategies has Nigeria employed to combat extremism?
- ii. How effective are these strategies in addressing the root causes of extremism?
- iii. What challenges do Nigerian authorities face in combating extremism?

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a purely qualitative approach, utilising secondary data to explore the political and military dimensions of countering extremism in West Africa, with a focus on Nigeria. The study relies on a diverse range of secondary data sources, including scholarly articles, government publications, policy papers, reports from international organisations, and media coverage, which provide rich insights into the evolving landscape of counter-extremism efforts in Nigeria. These sources are carefully selected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the political and military strategies employed by the Nigerian government in its efforts to counter extremism, particularly in the context of Boko Haram and other extremist groups operating within the region. The data is analysed using thematic analysis.

### **Overview of Extremism in West Africa**

Extremism in West Africa, particularly in the Sahel region, has become a pressing security concern over the past decade. The proliferation of violent extremist organisations (VEOs) such as Boko Haram, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has significantly destabilised the region, leading to widespread violence, displacement, and humanitarian crises. This overview examines the evolution, drivers, major players and impacts of extremism in West Africa, with a focus on the Sahel and its spillover effects into coastal states.

The roots of extremism in West Africa can be traced to a combination of colonial legacies, ethnic and religious tensions, and socio-political marginalisation. Colonial boundaries disregarded pre-existing ethnic, cultural, and religious divisions, creating weak nation-states susceptible to internal divisions. Post-independence governance failures further exacerbated these divisions, as elites monopolised political and economic power, leaving many communities marginalised and disillusioned (Akinola et. al, 2015). Religious extremism, particularly Islamic extremism, gained prominence in the late 20th century, influenced by global factors such as the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Afghan jihad (1980s), and the spread of Wahhabism funded by Gulf states. These developments radicalised segments of West Africa's

Muslim population, particularly in the Sahel, where poverty and weak governance provided fertile ground for extremist ideologies (Thurston, 2017).

The 2011 Libyan civil war created a power vacuum that allowed arms and fighters to flow into the Sahel, exacerbating existing tensions (CFR, 2024). The subsequent Tuareg rebellion in Mali in 2012 further destabilised the region, leading to the emergence of several extremist groups that exploited local grievances and the weakened state authority (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2024). Since then, extremist activities have expanded from Mali into Burkina Faso and Niger, creating a tri-border zone characterised by high levels of violence. Reports indicate that attacks linked to militant Islamist groups have surged by over 250% in coastal West African countries in recent years (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2024). This trend underscores the interconnectedness of regional security issues and the potential for extremist ideologies to spread across borders.

#### **Drivers of Extremism**

Several factors contribute to the rise of extremism in West Africa; these include:

- a. **Political Instability:** Weak governance and political disenfranchisement have created fertile ground for extremist ideologies. Many communities feel marginalised by their governments, leading to a lack of trust in state institutions (UNOWAS, 2024).
- b. **Economic Challenges:** High levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education exacerbate grievances among youth populations. These socio-economic conditions make individuals more susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups (CFR, 2024).
- c. **Transnational Influences:** Extremist networks in West Africa are increasingly interconnected with global jihadist movements. Groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) provide funding, training, and ideological guidance to local affiliates, enhancing their operational capacity and reach (Harmon, 2020).
- d. **Social Fragmentation:** Ethnic tensions and historical grievances often fuel conflict within communities. Extremist groups exploit

these divisions to gain support and legitimacy (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2024).

- e. **Environmental Factors:** Climate change has exacerbated competition for scarce resources such as land and water, particularly in the Sahel. This has led to conflicts between farmers and herders, which extremist groups manipulate to expand their influence and recruit fighters (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019).

#### **Major Extremist Groups in West Africa**

- a. **Boko Haram and ISWAP (Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger):** Boko Haram emerged in Nigeria in the early 2000s, initially as a local Islamist movement advocating for Sharia law. Over time, it transformed into a violent insurgent group, responsible for mass killings, abductions, and displacement. In 2016, a faction of Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIS, forming ISWAP, which has since grown into a significant threat in the Lake Chad Basin (Campbell & Harwood, 2018).
- b. **Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) (Sahel):** JNIM is an al-Qaeda affiliate operating primarily in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It is a coalition of several groups, including Ansar Dine and the Macina Liberation Front. JNIM targets state institutions, civilians, and international peacekeepers, aiming to establish an Islamic state in the Sahel (Harmon, 2020).
- c. **Ansarul Islam (Burkina Faso):** Ansarul Islam emerged in northern Burkina Faso in 2016, led by a charismatic preacher who capitalised on local grievances, particularly among the Fulani ethnic group. The group operates in the Liptako-Gourma region, destabilising communities and challenging state authority (Thurston, 2017).
- d. **Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA):** MUJWA operates in northern Mali and the Sahel, engaging in kidnappings, drug trafficking, and attacks on state and international forces. It emerged as a splinter group from AQIM, advocating for a strict interpretation of Sharia law (International Crisis Group, 2016).

### **Nigeria's Military and Political Strategies against Boko Haram**

Nigeria's military and political strategies against Boko Haram have evolved over the years in response to the persistent threat posed by this extremist group. The strategies encompass military operations, regional cooperation, political reforms, and community engagement, aiming to address both the immediate security challenges and the underlying socio-political dynamics that fuel extremism.

#### ***Military Strategies***

- a. **Counterinsurgency Operations:** The Nigerian military has engaged in various counterinsurgency operations aimed at degrading Boko Haram's capabilities. Major offensives began in 2015, following a series of high-profile attacks, including the abduction of the Chibok girls in 2014. Major operations, such as *Operation Lafiya Dole* (meaning "peace by force"), have been launched to degrade Boko Haram's capabilities through direct combat and airstrikes. The military's approach has included direct engagements with Boko Haram fighters, recapturing territories previously held by the group, and establishing control over strategic locations in northeastern Nigeria (CFR, 2024). However, despite these efforts, Boko Haram has demonstrated resilience and adaptability, often employing guerrilla tactics and hit-and-run strategies to evade military forces (CSIS, 2024).
- b. **Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF):** Recognising the transnational nature of Boko Haram's operations, Nigeria has collaborated with neighbouring countries through the establishment of the MNJTF in 2015. This force includes troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, aimed at coordinating efforts to combat Boko Haram across borders (CFR, 2024). The MNJTF has facilitated joint military operations and intelligence sharing among member states, although operational challenges persist due to varying national interests and military strategies (CFR, 2024).
- c. **Intelligence and Community Engagement:** The Nigerian military has acknowledged the importance of intelligence gathering and community involvement in countering Boko Haram. Efforts to

collaborate with local actors, such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF)— a network of vigilante groups— have been crucial in providing intelligence on Boko Haram’s movements and tactics (ISS Africa, 2018). However, there is a need for deeper engagement with local communities to build trust and improve intelligence capabilities further.

- d. **Addressing Military Morale and Logistics:** The Nigerian military has faced criticism for issues related to troop morale and logistics. Reports indicate that soldiers often face delay in receiving supplies and equipment, which undermines their effectiveness on the battlefield (ISS Africa, 2018). Addressing these grievances is essential for maintaining troop morale and ensuring operational success against Boko Haram.

#### ***Political Strategies***

- a. **Political Reforms and Governance:** The Nigerian government recognises that military solutions alone are insufficient in countering Boko Haram effectively. Political reforms aimed at improving governance and addressing socio-economic grievances are critical components of Nigeria’s strategy (CSIS, 2024). Efforts to enhance local governance structures and provide basic services can help mitigate some of the factors that contribute to radicalisation.
- b. **Regional Cooperation:** In addition to military collaboration through the MNJTF, Nigeria’s political strategy involves engaging with international partners for support in combating extremism. This includes seeking assistance from Western nations for training and resources while also participating in regional initiatives aimed at stabilising affected areas (CFR, 2024)
- c. **Humanitarian Assistance and Stabilisation Efforts:** The Nigerian government has also focused on humanitarian assistance as part of its political strategy. Addressing the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict is vital for stabilising affected regions and preventing further recruitment into extremist groups (CSIS, 2024). International organisations have been involved in providing aid to displaced populations while promoting community resilience against violent extremism.



- d. **Deradicalisation and Rehabilitation:** The Nigerian government introduced deradicalisation programmes targeting captured or surrendered Boko Haram fighters. The *Operation Safe Corridor* initiative provides psychological counselling, vocational training, and reintegration support to repentant insurgents. Critics, however, argue that the programme lacks transparency and risks alienating victims and communities that feel justice is being overlooked.

### **Assessment of Effectiveness and Challenges**

Assessing the effectiveness of Nigeria's military and political strategies against Boko Haram reveals a complex landscape marked by both achievements and significant challenges. While military operations have recaptured territories and degraded Boko Haram's capabilities, persistent violence and operational difficulties highlight the limitations of these strategies.

#### ***Effectiveness of Military Strategies***

- a. **Territorial Recovery:** The Nigerian military, in collaboration with the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), has successfully recaptured several territories previously held by Boko Haram. This includes strategic locations in north-eastern Nigeria, which were vital for the group's operations (CFR, 2024). The establishment of the MNJTF has facilitated coordinated efforts among regional partners, enhancing operational effectiveness against cross-border movements of Boko Haram fighters (A Decade After Chibok, 2024).
- b. **Operational Gains:** Despite Boko Haram's ability to adapt and employ guerrilla tactics, Nigerian forces have demonstrated some success in conducting counterinsurgency operations that have disrupted the group's supply lines and recruitment efforts (CSIS, 2024). Reports indicate that military offensives have significantly reduced Boko Haram's capacity to carry out large-scale attacks compared to earlier years of the insurgency (A Decade After Chibok, 2024).

***Challenges Facing Military Strategies***

- a. **Persistent Violence and Resilience of Boko Haram:** Despite territorial gains, Boko Haram continues to execute sophisticated attacks against military targets and civilians. The group has shown remarkable resilience, adapting its tactics to exploit weaknesses in Nigerian military operations (Olojo, 2018). For instance, recent ambushes on military convoys demonstrate that Boko Haram retains operational capabilities despite ongoing counterinsurgency efforts (A Decade After Chibok, 2024).
- b. **Intelligence Failures:** A critical challenge for the Nigerian military is the inadequacy of intelligence operations. Reports indicate that there is insufficient collaboration with local communities that possess valuable insights into Boko Haram's movements. Intelligence leaks and a lack of reliable information have hindered effective military responses and allowed Boko Haram to maintain a tactical advantage (Oxford Academic, 2018).
- c. **Morale and Resource Issues:** Troop morale has been adversely affected by issues, such as inadequate supplies, delayed payments, and perceived neglect by military leadership (ISS Africa, 2018). Corruption within the military has further exacerbated these challenges, leading to inefficiencies in resource allocation and operational planning (Transparency International, 2020). Soldiers have expressed concerns about their safety and the lack of support during engagements with Boko Haram (Oxford Academic, 2018).

***Effectiveness of Political Strategies***

- a. **Political Reforms:** The Nigerian government has recognised the need for political reforms to address the root causes of extremism. Efforts to improve governance and public service delivery are essential for countering Boko Haram's appeal among disenfranchised populations (CSIS, 2024). Initiatives, aimed at fostering community engagement, have also been introduced to rebuild trust between civilians and state authorities.
- b. **Regional Cooperation:** Nigeria's regional strategy through the MNJTF has facilitated collaboration with neighbouring countries in

combating Boko Haram's transnational threats (A Decade After Chibok, 2024). This cooperation has allowed for shared intelligence and joint operations that enhance security across borders.

### ***Challenges Facing Political Strategies***

- a. **Humanitarian Crisis:** The ongoing humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict complicates political strategies. Millions remain displaced due to violence, with inadequate access to basic services exacerbating grievances against the government (CSIS, 2024). Efforts to provide humanitarian assistance must be integrated with security measures to avoid further alienation of affected communities.
- b. **Corruption and Governance Issues:** Corruption remains a significant barrier to effective governance in Nigeria. Allegations of misappropriation of funds intended for military operations undermine public trust and hinder effective implementation of counter-terrorism strategies (Transparency International, 2020). The lack of transparency in military funding exacerbates operational challenges and contributes to troop dissatisfaction.
- c. **Limited Reintegration Efforts:** While there are initiatives aimed at disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) for former combatants, these efforts have been criticised for their lack of scale and effectiveness (Carnegie Endowment, 2018). Many former fighters remain unrehabilitated due to insufficient resources and unclear criteria for reintegration programmes.

### **Conclusion**

The fight against Boko Haram represents one of Nigeria's most pressing challenges, requiring a multifaceted approach that combines military strength with political will and social inclusivity. The military strategies have succeeded in reclaiming territories and disrupting the insurgents' operations, yet the persistence of Boko Haram underscores the limitations of a purely militaristic approach. Addressing the root causes of extremism—such as poverty, unemployment, and governance deficits—remains critical to preventing the cycle of violence from perpetuating. The Nigerian government's political

strategies, including deradicalisation programmes and socio-economic interventions, highlight a growing recognition of the need for sustainable, non-military solutions. However, these efforts must be strengthened through transparency, accountability, and greater engagement with local communities. Regional and international partnerships are equally vital, as the transnational nature of Boko Haram requires a coordinated response that transcends national borders. In conclusion, defeating Boko Haram demands not only the deployment of force but also an enduring commitment to rebuilding trust, addressing systemic inequalities, and fostering inclusive development. By aligning military and political strategies with the aspirations of affected communities, Nigeria can pave the way for a more secure and resilient society. The lessons learned from this struggle also provide critical insights for countering extremism across the broader West African region.

### **Recommendations**

To effectively address the ongoing challenges posed by Boko Haram, the following targeted recommendations are proposed to enhance Nigeria's military and political strategies:

- a. Local governments and community leaders should foster partnerships to improve intelligence gathering and utilise advanced surveillance technology to enhance situational awareness.
- b. The Nigerian military command must streamline logistics for the timely delivery of supplies and conduct regular training programmes for personnel to adapt to evolving tactics.
- c. The Nigerian government should establish mechanisms for transparency and accountability in military funding while empowering local governments to effectively address regional grievances.
- d. Humanitarian organisations and the Nigerian government must coordinate aid with security operations to ensure safe delivery of assistance and develop livelihood programmes to reduce vulnerability to extremist recruitment.

- e. The Nigerian government should create comprehensive disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives that focus on vocational training and community engagement.
- f. The Nigerian government, in collaboration with regional partners, should increase funding for the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and establish formal channels for intelligence sharing among West African nations.

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