



Fighting Terrorism in Nigeria: A Critical Review of The Challenges

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Abstract

Terrorism remains one of the most pressing security challenges confronting Nigeria, with far reaching consequences for national stability, economic development, and social cohesion. Despite sustained military operations, legislative reforms, and regional cooperation, terrorist activities continue to persist, particularly in the North East and other vulnerable regions. This paper examines the major challenges undermining Nigeria's efforts to combat terrorism, arguing that the problem extends beyond the use of force to include deep structural, institutional, and governance deficits. Using a qualitative and analytical approach, the paper interrogates political, security, socio economic, and institutional factors that constrain effective counterterrorism. It identifies the politicization of the war on terror, inadequate skilled manpower, proliferation of small arms, religious and cultural complexities, weak law enforcement institutions, poverty, unemployment, corruption, poor intelligence coordination, and fund mismanagement as critical obstacles. These challenges interact in ways that weaken state capacity, reduce public trust, and enable terrorist groups to adapt, recruit, and sustain their operations. The paper further demonstrates that Nigeria's counterterrorism responses have often been reactive rather than preventive, with excessive emphasis on military solutions at the expense of intelligence driven operations, socio economic interventions, and institutional reforms. Weak governance structures and corruption have limited the effective utilization of security resources, while poverty and inequality have created fertile ground for radicalization, especially among unemployed youth. In addition, poor coordination among intelligence and security agencies has undermined early warning systems and rapid response capabilities. The study concludes that combating terrorism in Nigeria requires a holistic and integrated strategy that addresses both security and non-security dimensions of the problem. It emphasizes the need for depoliticized security governance, capacity building for security agencies, strengthened intelligence coordination, effective law enforcement, and inclusive socio-economic development. By highlighting these challenges, the paper contributes to policy and scholarly debates on how Nigeria can design more effective, sustainable, and accountable counterterrorism strategies.

Original Research Article

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Terrorism has emerged as one of the most persistent and complex security challenges confronting modern states, particularly in developing democracies. In Nigeria, the phenomenon has evolved from sporadic incidents of political violence into a sustained threat that undermines national security, economic stability, social cohesion, and democratic governance. Over the past two decades, terrorist activities linked mainly to Boko Haram and its splinter groups have resulted in widespread loss of lives, mass displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and deep humanitarian crises, especially in the North East region of the country. Despite sustained military campaigns and policy interventions,

terrorism continues to pose serious challenges to the Nigerian state, raising concerns about the effectiveness and sustainability of existing counterterrorism strategies (Akinwale, 2021).

Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts operate within a complex environment shaped by political, social, economic, and institutional constraints. While the state has demonstrated commitment through military operations, legislation, and regional cooperation, these efforts have not yielded a decisive end to terrorist violence. Instead, insurgent groups have shown resilience, adaptability, and the ability to exploit systemic weaknesses within the state structure (Onapajo and

Uzodike 2020). This situation suggests that the challenge of terrorism in Nigeria is not merely a security problem but a multi-dimensional issue deeply rooted in governance failures and structural vulnerabilities.

One of the defining features of terrorism in Nigeria is its entanglement with political interests and power struggles. The politicization of security responses has often weakened national consensus and undermined coherent policy implementation. Terrorism has at times been framed through ethnic, religious, or regional lenses, complicating collective action and fostering mistrust between the government and affected communities (Agbiboa, 2022). Such dynamics hinder effective coordination among political actors and weaken public support for counterterrorism initiatives.

Another critical challenge lies in the limited availability of skilled manpower within the security and intelligence sectors. Combating terrorism requires specialized training in intelligence analysis, counter insurgency operations, cyber surveillance, and community engagement. However, Nigeria continues to face shortages of well-trained personnel, poor welfare conditions for security agents, and inadequate access to modern technology (Eze, 2023). These deficiencies reduce operational effectiveness and expose security forces to high casualties, further weakening morale and institutional capacity.

The widespread proliferation of small arms and light weapons has also intensified the terrorism challenge. Nigeria's porous borders and weak border management systems have facilitated the illegal flow of weapons across the Sahel and Lake Chad regions. Terrorist groups have exploited this environment to acquire sophisticated arms, thereby increasing their operational capability and lethality (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2021). The uncontrolled circulation of weapons not only sustains terrorism but also fuels other forms of violent crime across the country.

Religion and cultural factors further complicate counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria. Extremist groups often manipulate religious sentiments and local grievances to justify violence and recruit followers. In deeply religious and culturally diverse societies, counterterrorism measures that are perceived as targeting specific groups can provoke resistance and deepen alienation (Mustapha, 2020). This underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches that engage religious and traditional leaders in prevention and peace building efforts.

Weak law enforcement institutions remain a major obstacle in the fight against terrorism. Challenges such as poor investigation capacity, slow judicial processes, and limited witness protection mechanisms undermine the prosecution of terrorism related cases. In many instances, suspects are detained without trial, while successful convictions remain low (Human Rights Watch, 2022). These weaknesses erode the credibility of the justice system and create opportunities for abuse and impunity.

Socioeconomic factors also play a central role in sustaining terrorism in Nigeria. High levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality, particularly among young people, create fertile ground for radicalization and recruitment. In regions where the state presence is minimal and economic opportunities are scarce; terrorist groups often provide financial incentives and a sense of belonging to marginalized populations (Okoli and Iortyer, 2021). Addressing these conditions is therefore essential for any long-term counterterrorism strategy.

Corruption and mismanagement of public funds further weaken Nigeria's capacity to combat terrorism. Resources allocated for security are often diverted, resulting in inadequate equipment, poor logistics, and compromised operations (Transparency International, 2023). Corruption also undermines trust between citizens and the state, reducing cooperation with security agencies and intelligence gathering efforts.

Closely linked to these challenges is the problem of weak intelligence coordination. Effective counterterrorism depends on timely and accurate intelligence sharing among security agencies. In Nigeria, rivalry, duplication of roles, and lack of a centralized intelligence framework have limited the effectiveness of intelligence led operations (Nwolise, 2022). These gaps have allowed terrorist attacks to occur despite prior warnings and intelligence indicators.

The problem this paper addresses is the persistent inability of Nigeria to decisively curb terrorism despite extensive military, legal, and policy interventions. The continued spread and adaptation of terrorist groups point to deep rooted challenges that go beyond battlefield engagements. Without a clear understanding of these challenges, counterterrorism responses risk remaining reactive, fragmented, and unsustainable.

The objective of this paper is to critically examine the major challenges confronting Nigeria in its efforts to combat terrorism. Specifically, the paper seeks to analyze political, institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural factors that undermine counterterrorism effectiveness and to highlight how these challenges interact to sustain insecurity. By doing so, the study aims to provide a clearer analytical foundation for improving policy and operational responses.

The significance of this paper lies in its contribution to ongoing academic and policy debates on terrorism and security governance in Nigeria. By adopting a holistic perspective, the paper offers insights that are relevant to policymakers, security practitioners, scholars, and development actors. Understanding the underlying challenges in combating terrorism is essential for designing strategies that are effective, accountable, and responsive to the realities on ground. Ultimately, the paper argues that addressing terrorism in Nigeria requires not only military strength but also institutional reform, good governance, and inclusive development.

2.0 CHALLENGES IN COMBATING TERRORISM IN NIGERIA

The pursuit of national security in Nigeria is currently hindered by a complex web of systemic challenges that transcend mere military shortcomings. A primary obstacle is the persistent politicization of the "War on Terror," where counterterrorism policies are frequently viewed through a partisan lens, leading to a lack of national consensus and friction between federal and regional authorities (Agbibo, 2022). This political instability is exacerbated by a critical lack of skilled manpower within the security sector; although the Nigerian Armed Forces possess significant combat experience, there remains a deficit in specialized expertise regarding forensic investigation, cyber-intelligence, and psychological de-radicalization strategies (Eze, 2023). These human resource gaps are further complicated by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons flowing through porous borders from the volatile Sahel region, providing insurgent groups like ISWAP and Boko Haram with the firepower necessary to sustain a prolonged asymmetrical conflict.

Deep-seated religious and cultural barriers also stifle progress, as extremist groups often manipulate faith-based narratives to recruit disenfranchised youths, effectively portraying state intervention as a secular assault on religious identity (Mustapha, 2020). This ideological struggle is anchored in harsh socio-economic realities, where chronic poverty, high unemployment, and systemic inequality create a fertile environment for radicalization. Without addressing these root causes, military gains remain fragile, as the state fails to provide a viable alternative to the financial and social incentives offered by insurgent networks. Furthermore, the integrity of the mission is frequently compromised by corruption and fund mismanagement. Transparency International (2023) notes that the diversion of defense budgets into private pockets leaves frontline troops under-equipped and demoralized, stalling the acquisition of critical surveillance technologies.

The lack of a unified command structure results in weak intelligence coordination. Inter-agency rivalry between the Department of State Services (DSS), the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), and military intelligence often leads to "intelligence hoarding," which prevents the proactive disruption of terror plots (Nwolise, 2022). This fragmented approach, combined with poor law enforcement standards at the grassroots level, ensures that the state remains largely reactive. For Nigeria to achieve lasting peace, it must move beyond a purely kinetic approach to foster an integrated strategy that harmonizes intelligence sharing, professionalizes law enforcement, and eliminates the socio-economic grievances that sustain violent extremism.

2.1 Politicizing the War on Terror

The politicization of counterterrorism in Nigeria is a significant barrier to a coordinated national response. In a

governance structure characterized by ethno-religious divisions and patronage, security efforts are often manipulated for electoral advantage rather than objective threat analysis. Successive administrations have utilized counterterrorism narratives for political legitimization, frequently discrediting opposition parties as unsympathetic to security needs (Akinwale, 2022). This partisanship leads to selective attention; for instance, while Islamist insurgencies in the North East receive high-level priority, violence in the Middle Belt is often downplayed as "communal clashes" due to political sensitivity (Adesoji, 2021).

Financially, the "War on Terror" has become a lucrative political economy. Widespread allegations of corruption involve the diversion of defense funds into private pockets through substandard procurement deals dictated by political patronage (Transparency International, 2022). Furthermore, security leadership appointments are frequently based on ethnic or political loyalty rather than merit, eroding institutional morale and intelligence sharing. This blending of political and criminal networks erodes state moral authority and reinforces the perception of elite complicity (Alao, 2021). Consequently, repressive security measures intended to "project toughness" often result in human rights violations, alienating affected communities and complicating international partnerships (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

2.2 Lack of Skilled Manpower

Nigeria's counterterrorism architecture suffers from a chronic deficit in specialized human resources. Effective response requires proficiency in asymmetric warfare, digital forensics, and psychological rehabilitation—areas where the Nigerian security sector remains underdeveloped. Most military personnel are trained for conventional territorial defense, leaving them ill-equipped for the guerrilla tactics and improvised explosive devices used by Boko Haram and ISWAP (Okoli, 2021). Similarly, the Nigeria Police Force lacks the forensic and investigative technology required for modern counter-radicalization and cyber-tracking (Onuoha & George, 2019).

This skill gap extends to the judiciary and correctional systems. A shortage of judges and prosecutors versed in national security law leads to procedural delays and a high rate of case dismissals in terrorism trials. Within the correctional system, the lack of trained psychologists and religious scholars hampers the effectiveness of programs like *Operation Safe Corridor*, increasing the risk of recidivism among ex-combatants (Ali, 2022). Nigeria's reliance on foreign technical assistance is a temporary solution that highlights the absence of robust internal training in forensic science and cybersecurity (UNODC, 2022). Ultimately, politicized recruitment processes prioritize patronage over competence, leading to a "brain drain" of qualified officers and a structural impediment to sustainable national security.

2.3 Proliferation of Weapons

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) is a fundamental driver of instability in Nigeria. The unrestrained flow of arms has enabled groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP, and various bandit militias to challenge the state's monopoly on force. Externally, the 2011 collapse of Libya triggered a massive outflow of weapons across the Sahara into Nigeria's northern territories (Edeko, 2021). This is exacerbated by more than 4,000 kilometers of porous, poorly patrolled borders that facilitate the movement of illicit goods and foreign fighters.

Internally, systemic corruption within regulatory bodies and the rise of clandestine local fabrication workshops, particularly in states like Kaduna and Anambra, amplify the crisis (Okoli & Orinya, 2019). Furthermore, structural insecurity has led many communities in the Middle Belt to resort to self-armament, creating a cycle where proliferation is both a cause and consequence of conflict. The legal framework remains a major hurdle; the Firearms Act of 1959 is outdated and lacks modern provisions for tracing and marking weapons (Ewi, 2021). This imbalance allows insurgents to utilize advanced weaponry, such as rocket-propelled grenades and anti-aircraft guns, forcing the military into defensive postures. Effective resolution requires reforming arms control laws and strengthening regional coordination through the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons.

2.4 Religion and Cultural Barriers

Religion and culture are potent forces that both complicate and offer potential solutions to Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts. Groups like Boko Haram have manipulated religious narratives to reject secular governance and Western education, framing their violence as a divine mission (Walker, 2012). This exploitation is particularly effective in regions where historical grievances and socio-economic inequalities make extremist ideologies resonate with disillusioned youth.

Cultural factors further impede security operations; in many northern communities, traditional authority structures carry more weight than formal state institutions. Terrorists often exploit cultural codes of loyalty or silence, which stifles intelligence gathering (Okoli & Iortyer, 2014). Furthermore, gender norms are weaponized, as seen in the use of female suicide bombers to exploit cultural assumptions of female innocence to evade detection (Bloom & Matfess, 2016). A significant challenge is the perception among some communities that counterterrorism is a "war against Islam," fueled by reports of extrajudicial killings and profiling (Amnesty International, 2018). Addressing these barriers requires a shift toward people-centered strategies, including theological engagement by credible scholars to debunk

extremist interpretations and the integration of traditional justice mechanisms into post-conflict reconciliation.

2.5 Poor Law Enforcement

The efficacy of Nigeria's counterterrorism framework is fundamentally undermined by the systemic weaknesses of its law enforcement institutions. Shaped by colonial legacies that prioritized regime protection over citizen welfare, agencies like the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and Department of State Services (DSS) remain reactive and militarized, often alienated from the communities they serve (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2000). This institutional disconnect creates a vacuum of grassroots intelligence that extremist groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP exploit to evade detection.

Corruption remains a primary impediment, manifesting as the diversion of security funds and even the sale of intelligence to criminal elements, which erodes public trust and compromises operational integrity (Transparency International, 2020). Furthermore, poor interagency coordination and bureaucratic "turf wars" lead to fragmented responses and information hoarding among competing agencies (Oche, 2019). Beyond structural issues, a culture of impunity, characterized by extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detentions, alienates local populations, providing propaganda for terrorist recruitment (Amnesty International, 2016). Effective policing requires a shift from brute force toward community-based models and modern forensic training, ensuring that law enforcement acts as a service-oriented pillar of national security rather than a source of communal grievance.

2.6 Poverty, Unemployment, and Inequality

Terrorism in Nigeria is as much a development crisis as it is a security threat. Poverty, unemployment, and inequality form an "interlocking triad" that fosters radicalization. With over 133 million Nigerians living in multidimensional poverty, the state's failure to provide basic welfare allows extremist groups to present themselves as alternative providers of justice and social support (Olojo, 2021). Desperation functions as a "push factor," while promises of material reward act as a "pull factor" for recruitment.

Unemployment, particularly among the youth, creates a large pool of disillusioned individuals susceptible to indoctrination (NBS, 2021). This is exacerbated by regional inequality, where the North East lags significantly behind in human development indicators, fueling a sense of marginalization that extremist narratives utilize to delegitimize the state. This environment represents a form of "structural violence," where systemic inequities perpetuate chronic deprivation (Galtung, 1969). While the state has launched various empowerment programs, they are often marred by politicization and mismanagement. A sustainable counterterrorism strategy must therefore move beyond kinetic military operations to incorporate inclusive governance, educational reform (addressing the *almajiri* system), and community-driven

economic empowerment to address the root drivers of violent extremism.

2.7 Corruption and Fund Mismanagement

Corruption and fund mismanagement are among the most formidable obstacles to Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts. Despite massive budgetary allocations, the Nigerian state continues to struggle with insecurity due to a pervasive culture of misappropriation. A landmark example is the 2015 "Dasukigate" scandal, where over \$2 billion meant for arms procurement was allegedly diverted through the Office of the National Security Adviser (EFCC, 2016). This diversion deprived frontline soldiers of modern equipment, forcing them to confront insurgents with obsolete weaponry and contributing to high casualty rates and low morale.

Beyond procurement fraud, corruption infiltrates personnel welfare, where the embezzlement of allowances by senior officers has historically led to mutinies and desertions (Amadi & Alapiki, 2020). Transparency International (2021) also notes that humanitarian and reconstruction funds, such as those managed by the North East Development Commission (NEDC), have faced allegations of diversion, prolonging the socio-economic conditions that fuel extremism. The classification of defense spending as "security confidential" further shields these expenditures from the oversight of the Auditor General and civil society. Without institutional integrity and the removal of the patronage system in security appointments, military strength will continue to be undermined from within by the very resources meant to sustain it.

2.8 Weak Intelligence Coordination

The success of counterterrorism is predicated on the seamless coordination of intelligence, yet Nigeria's intelligence community remains fragmented. Agencies such as the DSS, DIA, and NIA often operate in silos, driven by institutional rivalries and competition for political recognition rather than collective security outcomes (Ezirim, 2016). This lack of a unified coordination mechanism has led to catastrophic failures, such as the 2014 Chibok abduction, where prior warnings were reportedly ignored or poorly communicated across the security chain.

Structurally, the National Security Agencies Act of 1986 fails to outline clear protocols for inter-agency data integration, allowing agencies to hoard information (Omoyibo, 2020). This is compounded by the politicization of intelligence, where reports are sometimes suppressed or manipulated to serve the interests of power blocs rather than national safety (Ibekwe, 2021). Furthermore, the disconnect between formal security agencies and community-based intelligence systems, such as local informants and traditional leaders, creates operational blind spots. To be effective, Nigeria must adopt technology-driven solutions, such as centralized intelligence fusion centers, while fostering a cultural shift from institutional competition to strategic collaboration.

3.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the major challenges confronting Nigeria in its efforts to combat terrorism and has shown that the persistence of insecurity is not simply a consequence of inadequate military action. Rather, it is the product of deep rooted political, institutional, social, and economic weaknesses that continue to undermine counterterrorism effectiveness. Terrorism in Nigeria thrives within an environment shaped by poor governance, weak institutions, and limited state capacity, making purely force based responses insufficient. The analysis reveals that the politicization of counterterrorism has weakened national unity and policy coherence, while shortages of skilled manpower and inadequate training have constrained the operational capacity of security agencies. The unchecked proliferation of small arms, porous borders, and weak law enforcement structures have further empowered terrorist groups and complicated security operations. In addition, religious and cultural sensitivities, when poorly managed, have created mistrust between the state and local communities, reducing cooperation that is vital for intelligence gathering and early warning. Socio economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality have also emerged as critical drivers of radicalization and recruitment. These conditions, combined with corruption and mismanagement of security funds, have eroded public confidence and deprived security institutions of the resources needed to function effectively. Weak intelligence coordination and rivalry among agencies have further limited Nigeria's ability to prevent attacks and respond proactively to threats. Overall, the challenges identified in this paper demonstrate that terrorism in Nigeria is sustained by interconnected structural failures rather than isolated security lapses. Addressing these challenges therefore requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that combines effective security operations with institutional reform, good governance, accountability, and inclusive development. Without confronting these underlying obstacles, counterterrorism efforts are likely to remain reactive and fragmented. Nigeria's struggle against terrorism highlights the urgent need to rethink existing strategies and prioritize long term solutions. Combating terrorism successfully will depend on the state's ability to strengthen institutions, restore public trust, reduce socio economic vulnerabilities, and ensure coordinated, professional, and lawful security responses. Only through such a holistic approach can sustainable peace and national stability be achieved.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria's approach to combating terrorism should be holistic, coordinated, and firmly rooted in good governance. First, counterterrorism must be depoliticized. Security decisions should be driven by national interest rather than ethnic, religious, or partisan considerations. A unified national framework with bipartisan support will strengthen policy consistency and public trust.

Second, there is an urgent need to invest in skilled manpower. Security and intelligence agencies should receive continuous training in counterterrorism operations, intelligence analysis, cyber surveillance, and community engagement. Improved welfare, motivation, and professionalism of security personnel are essential for enhancing operational effectiveness and reducing vulnerability.

Third, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons must be addressed through stronger border management, improved customs surveillance, and regional cooperation. Nigeria should intensify collaboration with neighboring states to curb arms trafficking and dismantle transnational criminal networks that supply terrorist groups.

Fourth, law enforcement and the justice system require significant reform. Investigative capacity should be strengthened, prosecution of terrorism cases accelerated, and judicial independence protected. Respect for due process will enhance legitimacy and encourage public cooperation with security agencies.

Fifth, government must address the socio-economic roots of terrorism. Targeted poverty reduction, youth employment programs, education, and social inclusion initiatives are critical to reducing radicalization and recruitment. Development interventions should focus on communities most affected by terrorism.

Sixth, corruption and mismanagement of security funds must be decisively tackled. Transparent budgeting, strict oversight, and accountability mechanisms should be enforced to ensure that resources meant for security are properly utilized.

Finally, intelligence coordination should be strengthened through improved information sharing, clear delineation of agency roles, and the establishment of an effective centralized intelligence framework. Enhanced cooperation among security agencies will improve early warning systems and preventive capacity.

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