

# Public Perceptions of Military Strategy and Fighting of the Boko Haram Conflict in Borno State

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## Abstract

*This study investigates public perceptions of military strategies employed in countering the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno State, Nigeria, with a focus on understanding the factors influencing the effectiveness of counterinsurgency efforts. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected through questionnaires administered to 240 respondents comprising internally displaced persons (IDPs), security officials, and National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) personnel across selected camps. Descriptive statistics and a four-point Likert scale were employed to analyse respondents' socioeconomic characteristics, views on the major causes of military ineffectiveness, mechanisms for addressing insurgency, and government efforts toward resolving the conflict. Findings reveal that excessive bureaucracy (43.3%) and poor institutional support (38.3%) are perceived as the most significant factors undermining military operations. Respondents further identified dialogue (WMS=3.6), granting amnesty (WMS=3.2), increased military operations (WMS=3.2), and insurgent rehabilitation (WMS=3.1) as the most viable mechanisms for addressing root causes of insurgency. Additionally, amnesty and rehabilitation programmes (30.0%), peace-building committees (18.8%), and support from international development partners (15.8%) were viewed as the most impactful government interventions. The study concludes that although numerous military and non-military strategies have been deployed, counterinsurgency efforts remain constrained by governance deficiencies, poverty, political exclusion, infrastructural gaps, and evolving insurgent tactics. It recommends a multidimensional counterinsurgency framework that strengthens civil-military relations, integrates community-driven solutions, addresses structural drivers of extremism, and enhances institutional capacity to achieve sustainable peace in Borno State.*

**Keywords:** *Military Approach, Fighting, Boko Haram, Borno State*

## Introduction

The Boko Haram insurgency has remained one of the most devastating security challenges confronting Nigeria, particularly in the northeast region where Borno State has endured the brunt of the violent conflict for more than a decade. Since the group embraced full-scale violent extremism in 2009, more than 35,000 people have been killed, while over 2.5 million have been displaced across Nigeria and neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023). Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) further indicates that Boko Haram has executed more than 4,000 violent attacks targeting both civilian populations and security formations, culminating in widespread humanitarian crises across Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States (ACLED, 2023).

In response to the persistent insecurity, the Nigerian government has deployed various military strategies aimed at degrading the operational capacity of Boko Haram. These strategies have evolved over time—from conventional military operations to the introduction of special joint task forces, establishment of civil-military cooperation mechanisms, and coordinated regional efforts under the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) (Akinfala & Akinwale, 2020). Notably, the Nigerian military launched major operations such as Operation Lafiya Dole (2015–2021) and its successor Operation Hadin Kai (2021–present), both focused on reclaiming territories, neutralizing insurgents, and restoring governmental authority in affected communities (Ministry of Defence Nigeria, 2022). These military responses have been complemented by intelligence-driven operations, aerial bombardments, community-based surveillance, and collaboration with local vigilante groups known as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

Despite these efforts, the insurgency persists with shifting tactics including ambushes, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and targeted attacks, raising critical questions about the effectiveness, acceptability, and sustainability of existing military strategies. While a range of studies have examined the operational dynamics of Nigeria's counterinsurgency responses, many have focused narrowly on security outcomes, tactical deficiencies, or regional coordination challenges (Adebajo, 2021; Agbiboa, 2015). However, limited attention has been given to how local populations in Borno State—those most affected by the conflict—perceive and evaluate the military strategies used against Boko Haram. Community perspectives are crucial for understanding legitimacy, civil-military relations, trust, and the broader social impact of counterinsurgency measures.

Existing literature such as that of Idris (2022), which analyzed Nigeria's counterinsurgency through a national security lens, and Okoli and Ugwu (2019), which assessed military-civilian cooperation, did not fully explore community perceptions within specific high-impact areas such as Maiduguri, Konduga, or Bama. This creates a significant empirical gap regarding localized civilian opinions on military strategies, operational conduct, and the overall war effort. As public opinion shapes the success of counterinsurgency—especially in contexts where intelligence gathering, community trust, and cooperation are indispensable—understanding residents' perceptions becomes critical.

This study therefore conducts an opinion survey on military strategy and the fight against Boko Haram conflict in Borno State, evaluating how residents perceive the effectiveness, challenges, and prospects of military operations in restoring sustainable peace. This assessment is essential for generating evidence-based insights capable of informing strategic adjustments, enhancing civil-military relations, and strengthening security interventions aimed at stabilizing one of the most conflict-affected regions in Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **Boko Haram Insurgency**

Boko Haram remains one of the most violent and destructive insurgent movements in the Lake Chad Basin affecting northeast Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon for more than a decade (Thurston, 2016; Comolli, 2010; Barkindo, 2020). Established in the early 2000s by Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Borno State, the group initially operated as a religious movement advocating for puritanical Islamic teachings before evolving into a full-scale armed

insurgency following the extrajudicial killing of its founder in 2009 (Okpe, 2023). The term “Boko Haram,” loosely interpreted as “Western education is forbidden,” reflects the group’s rejection of Western-style governance, secular education, and democratic institutions (Agbiboa, 2015).

Since 2009, Boko Haram violence has led to the death of more than 35,000 individuals, displaced over 2.2 million people, and created one of the worst humanitarian crises in Africa, with millions requiring urgent assistance across Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States (UNDP, 2021; UNHCR, 2023). The insurgency has undermined community safety, destroyed social cohesion, and crippled economic activities in areas such as Maiduguri, Konduga, and Bama. These devastating consequences necessitated sustained military interventions aimed at restoring stability and safeguarding communities in Borno State.

### **Military Strategy**

Military strategy refers to structured and coordinated security approaches adopted by state armed forces to counter threats, degrade enemy capabilities, and protect national territories. In Nigeria’s northeast, military strategy encompasses a wide range of actions including kinetic operations, air bombardments, intelligence-driven raids, counter-terrorism surveillance, and civil-military cooperation (Akinfala & Akinwale, 2020). Nigeria’s counterinsurgency strategies have evolved over time, transitioning from conventional operations to more specialized frameworks such as Operation Lafiya Dole and Operation Hadin Kai, both designed to neutralize Boko Haram fighters, reclaim occupied territories, and secure local communities (Ministry of Defence Nigeria, 2022).

These strategies also involve collaboration with regional forces under the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), as well as community-based security formations such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), which support intelligence gathering and local patrols (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). Despite notable achievements, challenges such as inadequate equipment, intelligence gaps, operational overstretch, and evolving insurgent tactics continue to affect the effectiveness of military operations in Borno State.

### **Civil-Military Relations**

Civil-military relations refer to the interactions and levels of trust, cooperation, and legitimacy between civilian populations and military forces operating in a given area. In conflict-affected regions such as Borno State, the success of counterinsurgency operations depends heavily on the willingness of local communities to provide intelligence, support military operations, and perceive the armed forces as protectors rather than threats (Adebajo, 2021). Poor civil-military relations manifested through fear, mistrust, or perceptions of excessive force can undermine the effectiveness of military strategy and bolster insurgent resilience.

In many communities in Borno State, experiences of displacement, trauma, or collateral damage resulting from military operations have influenced public attitudes towards the Nigerian armed forces (Idris, 2022). As such, assessing civilian perceptions is essential in determining the operational acceptability, legitimacy, and sustainability of military interventions against Boko Haram.

## **Opinion Survey**

An opinion survey is a systematic tool used to collect perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of individuals regarding specific policies, events, or interventions. In conflict contexts, opinion surveys help capture community-level views about military actions, security operations, or the presence of armed forces (Bryman, 2016). Within Borno State, an opinion survey offers a critical method for understanding how residents evaluate the effectiveness, challenges, and outcomes of Nigeria's military strategies against Boko Haram.

Public perceptions gathered through surveys provide insights into issues such as trust in the military, perceived security improvements, community cooperation with armed forces, and expectations regarding future stability. Such data are vital because community acceptance and confidence significantly influence the success of counterinsurgency operations (Akinola & Adibe, 2022).

## **Fight Against Boko Haram**

The "fight against Boko Haram" refers to multi-layered counterinsurgency efforts led by the Nigerian military and supported by regional and local actors aimed at eliminating Boko Haram's operational capacity and restoring peace in affected communities. This includes ground offensives, air campaigns, special reconnaissance operations, intelligence sharing, border security, and destruction of terrorist hideouts (Ministry of Defence Nigeria, 2022). The fight also involves non-kinetic actions such as psychological operations, stabilization efforts in liberated communities, and humanitarian support to displaced populations (USIP, 2021).

Despite substantial progress in degrading Boko Haram's territorial control, the group remains capable of asymmetric attacks—including ambushes, IEDs, and targeted raids—making the conflict dynamic and requiring continuous strategic reassessment (Agbibo, 2015). As such, understanding how communities perceive ongoing military interventions is essential for refining operational tactics and fostering long-term stability.

## **Military Strategy and Peace Sustainability**

Effective military strategy is a foundational pillar for achieving long-term peace in insurgency-affected environments. Sustainable peace implies not only the cessation of violence but also the creation of conditions that prevent relapse into conflict through strong security institutions, community resilience, and trust in state authority (UNPS, 2017). Military strategy that is inclusive, community-sensitive, and well-coordinated enhances confidence in state protection, reduces insurgent recruitment, and promotes conditions necessary for stability (USIP, 2021).

However, poorly designed or overly forceful strategies may fuel grievances, deepen mistrust, or inadvertently strengthen insurgent propaganda (Kaplan & Nussio, 2018). Studies highlight that peace sustainability in conflict-affected communities such as Borno State depends on a combination of security effectiveness, protection of civilian rights, and robust civil-military relations (Olojo, 2021). Economic stability, justice mechanisms, and social cohesion also reinforce the long-term success of military operations and reduce the likelihood of renewed violence.

The relationship between military strategy and peace sustainability underscores the importance of aligning security interventions with community needs, perceptions, and experiences.

Understanding public opinion through surveys therefore provides essential guidance for improving counterinsurgency responses and achieving lasting peace in Borno State.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Study Area**

The study was conducted in Borno State, Nigeria. The state is located in the North eastern part of Nigeria and lies between latitudes  $11^{\circ} 54^1$  to  $11^{\circ} 45^1$  N and longitudes  $13^{\circ} 08^1$  to  $13^{\circ} 14^1$  E of the equator (GEONET Cast Unimaid, 2023). The state shares an international border to the north with the Republic of Niger, Chad and Cameroon and state boundaries with Yobe to the North, Gombe and Adamawa to the southwest (Fig. 3). Maiduguri has a population of 732,696 and 2024 projected population estimate of 1,291,690 based on 3.2% population growth rate (NPC, 2006).

The climate of the area is dry savannah belt with hot and dry seasons for most of the year, except in the southern part of the state which has a mild climate. The annual temperature of the state ranges from  $35^{\circ}\text{C}$  -  $45^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The area experiences 647mm of annual rainfall. The period of rainy season in the state varies from place to place, but generally lasts for about 120 days (i.e. June to September) in the north and more than 140 days (May to October) in the south (Lake Chad Research Institute, 2017).

### **Research Design**

The study was adopting a descriptive design which involves a systematic collection, presentation and analysis of data on the causes of the ineffectiveness of the Nigerian military approach to counterinsurgency, mechanisms to addressing the root causes of insurgency, and various efforts of the government at finding solution to the insurgency that can be used to address the shortfall in the approaches adopted to fight insurgency in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. The study employed a quantitative research method which implies collection of data through the administration of questionnaire.

### **Population of the study**

The study population includes, internally displaced persons (IDPs), security officials and National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) officials. A total of 220 respondents was identified based on the fact that some of them were direct victims and beneficiaries of soothing programs of the government and NGOs while some have adequate knowledge of the Boko Haram insurgency, while others were selected because of their management activity relating to the victims of insurgency.

### **Sampling Techniques**

The Dalori and camps were purposively selected on the basis of a relatively secured environment to conduct the survey. Considering the total number of IDPs in Nigeria which the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) puts at 2.2 million, and using the position of Krejcie and Morgan (1970) on sampling, a total number of 240 IDPs, officials of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and security agents were selected equally between the two (2) camps for questionnaire administration using simple random sampling techniques. Specifically, 100 IDPs, 10 NEMA officials and 10 security personnel was selected in each camp.

## Sources of Data

The study employed both primary and secondary sources of data collection. Secondary data was obtained through survey of extant literature on the subject matter under investigation from texts, journal articles, informed opinions in newspapers, magazines, and official documents. The selection processes are mainly scientific involving careful scrutiny of the reliability of items and the timely of the works. Also, primary data sourced through the administration of questionnaire and interviews in 2024. The interviews conducted with the key informants that include security personnel's, NGOs, and IDPs.

## Data Analysis

The data collected was subjected to descriptive statistics and likert type scale. The descriptive statistics employed in this study are the use of simple frequencies, score count, percentage, tables and bar charts which waw used to analyzed objective.

A four-point Likert type scale with options and score values; strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1) used to determine the mechanisms to addressing the root causes of insurgency in the study area. The values were added and divided by 4 to give 2.50, which serves as the decision rule. The Likert formula ( $X_s$ ) is expressed as follows:

$$\dots \quad (ii) \quad X_s = \frac{\sum fn}{Nr}$$

Where,

$X_s$  = Mean score

$\sum$  = Summation

F = Frequency of each (i.e. the value 4, 3, 2, 1 option)

n = Likert numerical or nominal values (responses of the respondents)

Nr = Number of respondents to each response category (total number of respondents). The Decision rule was obtained from four-point Likert type scale expressed as follows;

## Results and Discussion

### Socio-economic Characteristics of the Respondents

The socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents studied are age, sex, marital status, education background, occupation, annual income. The distributions of the respondents based on their socioeconomic characteristics are presented on Table 4.1.

### Age of the Respondents, Sex, Marital Status, Educational Background, Occupation and Annual Income

The empirical result on Table 4.1 indicate that majority (43.3%) of the sampled households were within the ages of 26-40 while the smallest number, (11.3%) of the respondents were found to be  $\leq 25$  years. The implication of this finding to the study is that the respondents were still in their economically active age. The respondents were males (61.7%). This showed that majority of the insurgents in the study area were dominated by males. This implies that the culture and religion of the areas have placed male as head of households. Despite the dominance, 38.3% of the respondents were females. The descriptive analysis of marital status of the result indicate that majority (50.8%) of the respondents were married while 8.3% were

single. This showed that a large proportion of the respondents were married. This result implies that married people were mostly affected by the fight against insurgents because their urge to satisfy their family demand cannot be overemphasizing. The result (46.3%) of respondents had no formal education while 9.2% had tertiary education. This indicates that most of the respondents had low level of literacy and thus unable to acquire and understand the approaches in the fight against insurgents. The implication of this study showed that the respondents in the study area had limited educational background which will deprive them from accessing information, intervention and other amicable opportunities in the war against terrorism. The length of years the respondents had been involved in their respective activities. The findings indicate that most (45.0%) of the respondents have been engaged in farming followed by business (25.0%) and civil servants (21.7%) respectively. Majority (86.3%) of the respondents earned  $\leq 100,000$  per annum while 2 (0.8%) earned above ₦500, 001 per annum. The mean annual income of the respondents was ₦176, 923.87. The variation in the annual income may be due to difference in their occupation and effect of the insurgents on their livelihood activities. This is because most of the respondents were small scale farmers whose farms were destroyed leaving them in IDPs camp with nowhere to hold onto.

Variables	Frequency (f)	Percentages (%)
<b>Age (Years)</b>		
$\leq 25$	27	11.3
26-40	104	43.3
41-55	71	29.6
$\geq 55$	38	15.8
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	148	61.7
Female	92	38.3
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	122	50.8
Single	20	8.3
Divorced	31	12.9
Widow	25	10.4
Separated	42	17.5
<b>Educational Background</b>		
No Formal Education	111	46.3
Primary Education	31	12.9
Secondary Education	76	31.6
Tertiary Education	22	9.2
<b>Occupation</b>		
Civil Servant	52	21.7
Security Agent	20	8.3
Business	60	25.0
Farming	108	45.0
<b>Annual Farm Income (₦)</b>		
$\leq 100,000$	207	86.3
100,001 - 300,000	20	8.3
300,001 - 500,000	11	4.6
$\geq 500,001$	2	0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2025

### The Major Causes of the Ineffectiveness of the Nigerian Military Approach to Counterinsurgency in the Study Area

The distributions on the major causes of the ineffectiveness of the Nigerian military approach to counterinsurgency in the study area are presented on Table 4.2. The findings indicate that too much bureaucracy (43.3%), and poor support (38.3%) are the most predominant causes of the ineffectiveness of the military approaches to halt the insurgency and fighting in Nigeria particularly in the study area.

**Table 4.2 Distribution of the Respondents on the Major Causes of the Ineffectiveness of the Nigerian Military Approach to Counterinsurgency**

Variables	Frequency (f)	Percentages (%)
Corruption	00	00
Lack of coordination	27	11.3
Too much bureaucracy	104	43.3
Quest for political power	71	29.6
Religion ideology/fanatism	38	15.8
Poor support	92	38.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2025

### The Mechanisms to Addressing the Root Causes of Insurgency in the Study Area

Table 4.3 showed the distribution of the respondents on the most effective mechanisms to addressing the root causes of insurgency in the study area. Dialogue, granting amnesty, increased military operation and rehabilitation of the insurgents were the most perceived mechanisms to address the insurgency by the respondents with a Weighted Mean Score (WMS) of 3.6, 3.2 each and 3.1 respectively. This finding implies that most of the respondents in the study area have better understanding of the fight against the insurgents and

we're hoping for peace to reign as no nation will ever develop when insurgency ravaged the whole country. These findings were supported by the works of Itumoa and Nwobashi (2016).

**Table 4.3: Distribution of the Respondents According to the Mechanisms to Addressing the Root Causes of Insurgency in the Study Area**

Variable	S.A	A	D	S.D	Total	WM S	Rank
Dialogue	59(45.4)	52(40.0)	18(13.8)	1(0.8)	465	3.6	1
Granting Amnesty	63(48.5)	41(31.5)	18(13.6)	8(6.2)	419	3.2	2
Increased Military Operation	61(46.9)	44(33.8)	12(9.2)	13(10.0)	413	3.2	2
Rehabilitation of the Insurgents	8(36.9)	56(43.1)	19(14.6)	7(5.4)	405	3.1	3
Border Closure/Limitations	40(30.8)	49(37.5)	28(21.5)	13(10.0)	376	2.9	4
Detection and Killing of Sponsors	47(36.2)	37(28.5)	30(23.1)	16(12.3)	375	2.9	4

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Strongly Agreed ‘ ‘ SA’ ’ scored 4 point Agreed ‘ ‘ A’ ’ scored 3 Point

Disagreed ‘ ‘ D’ ’ scored 2 point Strongly Disagreed ‘ ‘ SD’ ’ scored 1 point

Decision Rule: Any score  $\geq 2.5$  is regarded as severe constraints while any score  $< 2.5$  is regarded not severe.

Figures in parentheses are percentage (%)

### The Various Efforts of the Government at Finding Solution to the Insurgency

The result of the analysis on Table 4.4 indicates the percentage distribution on the various efforts of the government at finding solution to the insurgency in the study area. The result showed that amnesty/rehabilitation (30.0%), peace building committee (18.8%) and support from international development organizations (15.8%) were the most relevant government effort perceived by the respondents at finding long lasting solutions to insurgency in the study area. These results were in agreement with the findings of Omodunbi *et al.* (2021) which indicated that peace building committee and amnesty/rehabilitation are among the most vital government efforts aimed at curtailing the effect of insurgency in Nigeria.

**Table 4.4 Distribution of the Respondents on the Various Efforts of the Government at Finding Solution to the Insurgency**

Variables	Frequency (f)	Percentages (%)
Peace Building Committees	45	18.8
Support from International Development Organization	38	15.8
State of Emergency	30	12.5
Network Outage	41	17.1
Provision of Almajiri School	14	5.8
Amnesty/Rehabilitation	72	30.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2025

### Conclusion

Despite the various military strategies used to combat insurgency in Nigeria, the study found that the methods used by insurgent groups to carry out their crimes and destruction in various conflicts have completely shifted away from the well-known conventional or standard war tactics. Numerous measures have been implemented by the Nigerian government to combat and eradicate terrorism and insurgency in the nation; yet, more work remains to address the underlying causes of these issues. The study concludes by arguing that military operations involving hard power have failed to put an end to insurgency and terror activities. Other non-coercive measures have also been unsuccessful in putting an end to the scourge of terror, although they have occasionally decreased insurgent activity in particular regions of the nation, but has not succeeded in ending the scourge of terror. And dialogue which is usually fundamental to conflict resolution has failed to work in solving insurgency and terrorism. It is therefore necessary for the military to devise a means through which different counterinsurgency mechanisms should be employed by the support of the government to end

insurgency in Nigeria. The inability of the Nigerian government to tackle the rising poverty, bad governance, political exclusion, marginalization, provision of infrastructures such as schools in the study area has largely contributed to the insurgency and is still affecting the military fight to counter terrorism.

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