

VIOLENT EXTREMISM, TERRORISM AND SECURITY: GLOBAL TRENDS, AFRICAN REALITIES AND THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the global rise of violent extremism and terrorism, its structural drivers, and its profound implications for security and development, with a particular focus on the African continent and Nigeria. Beginning with an exploration of global trends, the study analyzes the evolution of terrorism from ideologically driven and hierarchical networks to more decentralized, transnational, and technologically sophisticated formations. It identifies core drivers such as ideological radicalization, political repression, socio-economic marginalization, and the use of digital platforms for recruitment and propaganda. The paper then contextualizes these dynamics within Africa, highlighting regional vulnerabilities including weak governance, porous borders, environmental stressors, and fragile institutions. Particular attention is given to terrorist hotspots such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Lake Chad Basin; Nigeria is examined in depth as a case study, exploring the rise of Boko Haram and ISWAP, the state's military and non-military responses, and the broader socio-political and humanitarian consequences of protracted insurgency. Through an evidence-based policy framework, the paper presents actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing regional cooperation, socioeconomic resilience, counter-radicalization, community engagement, justice sector reform, and gender-inclusive peace-building. The study concludes that a sustainable response to violent extremism must move beyond military containment toward a holistic strategy that addresses root causes, rebuilds trust in public institutions, and empowers affected communities.

Introduction

The global discourse on peace and conflict in the 21st century has been increasingly dominated by terms such as violent extremism, terrorism, and security. These concepts, while interrelated, possess distinct meanings and implications for policy, security, and governance. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of violent extremism and terrorism by exploring three interlinked levels of analysis: global trends, African realities, and the Nigerian experience. At the global level, the paper will identify the dominant trends shaping terrorism in the 21st century, including the diffusion of jihadist ideology, digital radicalization, the decentralization of terrorist cells, and the involvement of women and youth in violent extremist networks. It will also assess the changing landscape of global security governance, including the roles of institutions such as the United Nations, NATO, and INTERPOL in combating terrorism.

At the African regional level, the paper will explore why the continent has become increasingly vulnerable to extremist violence. This includes an examination of regional dynamics — such as the failure of state institutions, porous borders, and weak law enforcement — as well as broader structural issues, such as underdevelopment, political repression, and ethnic tensions. The study will highlight key hotspots such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Lake Chad Basin, analyzing how regional and international counter-terrorism initiatives have succeeded or failed.

Finally, the paper will zoom in on Nigeria, a country that represents a microcosm of broader African security challenges. It will explore the evolution of terrorism in Nigeria, including the ideological motivations, recruitment strategies, and organizational structures of groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP. It will also assess the Nigerian government's military and non-military responses — including community-based interventions, deradicalization programs, and foreign assistance — and evaluate their effectiveness. In doing so, this paper seeks to contribute to academic and policy debates on how to effectively address the root causes and manifestations of violent extremism. It advocates for a holistic and context-sensitive approach to security that integrates human development, inclusive governance, education, and regional cooperation. Ultimately, violent extremism and terrorism pose complex, adaptive challenges. While no single solution exists, understanding their underlying causes, their diverse manifestations, and the interplay between local and global dynamics is crucial for designing effective countermeasures — especially in vulnerable regions like Africa and fragile states like Nigeria.

The escalation of violent extremism and terrorism has emerged as one of the defining global security challenges of the 21st century. Over the last two decades, terrorist attacks have surged in frequency, scale, and geographic scope. From the attacks of September 11, 2001, to the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the 2010s, and continuing into the 2020s with localized insurgencies across Africa and South Asia, the world has witnessed a transformation in the nature of violent conflict. As of 2023, terrorism remains a persistent threat across multiple continents. According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2024, there were over 8,000 terrorist incidents worldwide in 2023 alone, resulting in more than 23,000 deaths (IEP, 2024). The report notes a geographic shift in terrorist activity from the Middle East — where conflicts have decreased — to sub-Saharan Africa, which now accounts for 43% of global terrorism deaths. Africa, in particular, has seen the emergence of new extremist groups and the evolution of existing ones. Countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Somalia, and Nigeria are at the epicenter of these developments. In the Sahel region, for example, groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS have exploited political instability, poverty, and weak governance to expand their influence (ACLED, 2024). These groups are not only targeting military and government facilities but increasingly attacking civilian populations, schools, religious institutions, and humanitarian workers.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and its largest economy, has been particularly affected. Since the rise of Boko Haram in 2009, Nigeria has suffered thousands of attacks, displacing millions and creating severe humanitarian and developmental crises. The emergence of ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) in 2016, a Boko Haram splinter group with closer ties to ISIS, has further complicated the security environment (International Crisis Group, 2023). In addition, widespread banditry and ethno-religious violence in northwestern and central Nigeria have contributed to the country's deepening insecurity. Beyond Africa, the global implications of terrorism are evident. Attacks in Western countries — including mass shootings, vehicle ramming, and bombings — often perpetrated by "lone wolf" actors inspired by online propaganda, highlight the transnational and evolving nature of violent extremism. Moreover, technological advancements — particularly the use of encrypted communication, drones, and social media — have created new operational tools for terrorists and new challenges for states trying to contain them (Europol, 2023). The global security architecture, therefore, faces significant strain. Traditional military responses have proven insufficient when not paired with socioeconomic and political reforms. States and international organizations are increasingly recognizing that preventing violent extremism (PVE) must involve addressing the root causes: marginalization, unemployment, social injustice, identity-based discrimination, and ideological indoctrination. Going forward in this paper however, requires the definition of key terms.

Concept Definitions

Violent extremism refers to the use or support of violence to achieve ideological, religious, or political objectives, often by rejecting democratic processes or promoting intolerance toward diverse views (UNESCO, 2016). It encompasses both actions and ideologies that are rooted in radical beliefs and foster violence as a necessary or justified means of achieving goals. Violent extremist groups often recruit disenfranchised individuals by exploiting social, political, and economic grievances.

Terrorism, on the other hand, is more narrowly defined as the use of unlawful violence and intimidation, particularly against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims (United Nations General Assembly, 1994). It is designed to create fear, destabilize governments, and coerce policy changes. While all terrorism can be considered violent extremism, not all violent extremism takes the form of organized terrorism.

Security, in this context, goes beyond military and policing efforts. Traditionally viewed through a state-centric lens — involving protection against external aggression and internal subversion — the modern understanding of security is broader and more inclusive. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conceptualizes **human security** as encompassing protection from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression, as well as protection from sudden disruptions in daily life (UNDP, 1994). This wider perspective acknowledges that insecurity stems not just from acts of violence, but from systemic injustice, inequality, and the absence of human rights and opportunities.

Understanding these definitions is critical for engaging with contemporary security challenges. In a world where conflicts are increasingly asymmetric and ideological, and where non-state actors often play significant roles, countering terrorism and violent extremism requires a nuanced and multidimensional approach.

This paper is organized into six sections. Following this introduction Section, Section 2 explores global trends in violent extremism and terrorism, including their historical evolution, key drivers, and emerging patterns across various geopolitical hotspots. Section 3 narrows the focus to Africa, examining regional realities, structural vulnerabilities, and the impact of extremism on governance and development. Section 4 presents a detailed analysis of the Nigerian experience, highlighting the rise of Boko Haram and ISWAP, government responses, and societal consequences. Section 5 offers comprehensive policy recommendations aimed at addressing both the symptoms and root causes of violent extremism through regional cooperation, socioeconomic inclusion, and governance reform. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper by synthesizing key insights and underscoring the need for a holistic, locally driven, and preventive approach to sustainable peace and security.

Global Trends in Violent Extremism and Terrorism

Historical Evolution of Terrorism and Violent Extremism

To understand current global patterns in terrorism and violent extremism, it is essential to consider their historical trajectories. Terrorism, in its modern form, gained prominence in the 20th century through various ideological movements — from anarchism in Europe to anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Asia. During the Cold War, state-sponsored terrorism proliferated as the U.S. and Soviet Union supported proxy insurgencies. Post-Cold War, terrorism shifted from leftist revolutionary movements toward religiously motivated extremism, most notably after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the rise of Salafi-jihadism (Laqueur, 2001).

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 by Al-Qaeda marked a turning point. The attacks catalyzed a global counter-terrorism campaign led by the United States, resulting in military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. These events, however, had unintended consequences. The vacuum created by the Iraq War, coupled with repression and sectarian politics, contributed to the rise of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), which declared a caliphate in 2014 and attracted tens of thousands of foreign fighters from over 100 countries (Byman, 2016).

Since then, terrorism has become more fragmented and decentralized. While core Al-Qaeda and ISIS networks have weakened, their ideologies and affiliates continue to inspire or direct violence across the globe, especially in fragile states where governance is weak.

Key Drivers of Violent Extremism

Ideological and Religious Radicalization: At the heart of many violent extremist movements is a distorted interpretation of religious or ideological narratives. Salafi-jihadist ideologies — championed by groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda — promote the use of violence to achieve a purist interpretation of Islam and oppose what they perceive as corrupt, secular Muslim governments and the Western world. These ideologies are spread through online propaganda, mosques, prisons, and personal networks (Neumann, 2013).

Political Marginalization and State Repression: Violent extremism often flourishes in environments where people feel politically excluded or repressed. Authoritarian regimes, corruption, rigged elections, and the absence of political pluralism can push individuals, especially youth, toward radical groups that promise justice or revolution. The Arab Spring protests in 2010–2011 were a manifestation of these frustrations; the post-revolutionary instability in countries like Libya and Syria provided fertile ground for extremist groups (Lynch, 2014).

Economic Inequality and Unemployment: High levels of poverty and youth unemployment, particularly in fragile or conflict-affected states, have been linked to increased vulnerability to radicalization. While not all terrorists are poor or uneducated, socioeconomic exclusion can foster resentment and create opportunities for extremist recruiters to offer financial incentives and a sense of purpose (World Bank, 2015).

Technological Advancement and Online Radicalization

The internet has revolutionized extremist propaganda, recruitment, and operations. Platforms like Telegram, Twitter, and YouTube have allowed groups like ISIS to disseminate content, reach global audiences, and recruit members remotely. Lone-wolf attackers — individuals radicalized online without direct organizational ties — have carried out deadly attacks in cities like Paris, Orlando, and Christchurch (Europol, 2023). The "gamification" of jihadist violence and the use of encrypted messaging apps pose significant challenges to intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

Transnational Networks and Criminal Enterprises: Many terrorist groups operate within transnational criminal networks involved in arms trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, drug trade, and illegal mining. These revenue streams help sustain their operations. For example, the Sahel-based Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and ISIS affiliates engage in illicit smuggling and taxation of local populations to fund their insurgencies (UNODC, 2023).

Global Geopolitical Hotspots of Terrorism

Middle East and North Africa (MENA): The MENA region has long been a focal point of terrorism, primarily due to enduring conflicts, authoritarian governance, and sectarian divisions.

Syria and Iraq were central to the rise of ISIS, which at its peak controlled territory the size of the United Kingdom. Although ISIS lost its territorial control by 2019, remnants continue to operate as insurgents in rural areas. Similarly, Al-Qaeda's affiliates, such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria and AQAP in Yemen, remain active (ICG, 2023).

South and Southeast Asia: In South Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to face violence from groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K). The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has raised fears about Afghanistan once again becoming a haven for international terrorists (UNSC, 2023). Southeast Asia has also seen homegrown extremism, with the Philippines and Indonesia grappling with violent Islamist groups like Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah.

Western Countries: Western nations face a unique threat: radicalization of individuals through online propaganda and social alienation. Mass shootings, stabbings, and vehicular attacks have been carried out by homegrown extremists, often inspired by global jihadist or far-right ideologies. Governments have responded with heightened surveillance, community-based interventions, and efforts to remove extremist content online (UK Home Office, 2023).

Sub-Saharan Africa: As will be explored in greater detail in Section III, Africa has emerged as the new epicenter of global terrorism. The Global Terrorism Index (2024) reports that four of the top ten countries most affected by terrorism are in Africa: Burkina Faso, Somalia, Mali, and Nigeria. The region has seen both local and internationally linked extremist groups flourish due to porous borders, weak governance, and unresolved conflicts.

Emerging and Future Trends in Global Terrorism

Cyber terrorism and Tech-Based Threats: The future of terrorism is increasingly digital. Cyber terrorism — attacks on infrastructure, communication systems, or financial networks — has gained traction. Extremist groups may use cyber tools not just for propaganda but also for sabotage. The use of AI-generated deep fakes and autonomous drones in terrorist operations is now a real possibility (RAND Corporation, 2023).

Hybrid Threats and Grey-Zone Warfare: Terrorist groups increasingly operate in the "grey zone" between war and peace, combining guerrilla tactics, propaganda, and cyber-attacks. They exploit humanitarian crises, political instability, and public disinformation to weaken state authority without conventional military confrontation (NATO, 2022).

Environmental and Climate-Driven Extremism: Climate change is emerging as a multiplier of insecurity. Scarcity of water, food, and arable land can increase competition and conflict, providing terrorist groups with recruitment narratives and strategic opportunities. In the Lake Chad Basin, shrinking water resources have exacerbated grievances that Boko Haram has capitalized on (UNEP, 2023).

Female and Child Involvement in Extremism: Contrary to earlier assumptions, women and children are playing increasingly active roles in violent extremist groups — not just as supporters but also as fighters and suicide bombers. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has used hundreds of young girls in suicide missions (UN Women, 2022). This shift presents unique challenges for deradicalization and reintegration efforts.

International Responses and Challenges

Global Counter-Terrorism Cooperation: The global community has mobilized through frameworks such as the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and military alliances like NATO and the Global Coalition Against Daesh. These mechanisms aim to coordinate intelligence, disrupt financing, and conduct joint operations. However, international cooperation is often hampered by political differences and lack of enforcement capacity.

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE): Beyond kinetic responses, many countries are adopting **PVE approaches**, emphasizing education, youth engagement, and community policing. The UN, EU, and several NGOs promote programs targeting vulnerable populations with counter-narratives, economic support, and psychosocial interventions (UNDP, 2016).

Limitations and Criticisms: Critics argue that global counter-terrorism efforts often emphasize military solutions at the expense of long-term socio-political reforms. Counter-terrorism laws have sometimes been used to suppress dissent or violate human rights. The securitization of development has also raised concerns about the shrinking space for humanitarian aid in conflict zones (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

African Realities of Violent Extremism and Terrorism

Violent extremism and terrorism have gained a disturbing foothold across various African regions in recent years. Once considered peripheral to global jihadist networks, Africa is now a major theater of operations for extremist groups, many of which are affiliated with or inspired by global organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. According to the **2024 Global Terrorism Index (GTI)**, seven of the ten countries most impacted by terrorism in 2023 were located in Africa — notably Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, and Niger (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024). These realities present a multidimensional challenge that combines governance, socio-economic fragility, weak institutions, and global jihadist influences.

Regional Overview of Violent Extremist Hotspots in Africa

The Sahel Region: The Sahel — a semi-arid belt stretching from Senegal in the west to Sudan in the east — has become a major epicenter of terrorist violence. Extremist groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have exploited political instability, weak borders, and local grievances to expand their operations. In Burkina Faso, the number of terrorist attacks surged dramatically after 2016, leading to thousands of deaths and the displacement of over two million people (ACLED, 2024). Neighboring Mali and Niger have also experienced widespread attacks on civilians, military installations, and public infrastructure.

The Horn of Africa: In the Horn of Africa, Al-Shabaab, a Salafi-jihadist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda, has maintained an insurgency in Somalia for over a decade. Despite continuous counterterrorism efforts, including by the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), Al-Shabaab remains resilient. It conducts attacks not only in Somalia but also across the border in Kenya, where high-profile incidents like the Westgate Mall attack (2013) and Garissa University attack (2015) have occurred (ICG, 2023). The group's ability to generate revenue through extortion, taxation, and trade further strengthens its capacity to survive and expand.

The Lake Chad Basin: The Lake Chad Basin, spanning Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, is dominated by Boko Haram and its breakaway faction Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). This region represents one of Africa's most protracted insurgencies. Boko Haram's campaign, which

began in 2009, has led to more than 350,000 deaths and displaced over three million people (UNDP, 2022). While Boko Haram has weakened in recent years due to leadership losses and ISWAP's rise, both groups continue to stage deadly attacks and control parts of northeastern Nigeria and neighboring territories.

Southern and Central Africa: In Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province, Ansar al-Sunna, locally known as Al-Shabaab (unrelated to the Somali group), has aligned with ISIS and launched a violent insurgency since 2017. The group captured the strategic port of Mocímboa da Praia in 2020 and carried out the high-profile Palma attack in 2021, disrupting major gas projects and displacing over 800,000 people (UNHCR, 2023). In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) — now also affiliated with ISIS — have continued to kill civilians and conduct cross-border attacks into Uganda.

Root Causes and Contributing Factors

Weak Governance and State Fragility: One of the most prominent factors contributing to the rise of violent extremism in Africa is state fragility. Many African countries facing terrorism have weak institutions, limited government presence in peripheral regions, and corrupt or ineffective security forces. In the Sahel, remote rural areas often lack access to justice, healthcare, and education, allowing extremist groups to fill the governance void, provide services, and gain local legitimacy (OECD, 2021).

Youth Unemployment and Socioeconomic Disparities: Africa's "youth bulge" — where over 60% of the population is under 25 years old — can be both a demographic dividend and a security risk. In regions with high youth unemployment, especially in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, extremist groups offer economic incentives, identity, and belonging. Recruitment strategies often target disenfranchised young men, but women and children are increasingly recruited, coerced, or manipulated into joining (UN Women, 2022).

Ethno-Religious and Communal Tensions: Extremist groups often exploit existing ethnic and religious fault lines. For instance, in Mali and Burkina Faso, Fulani communities — historically marginalized and accused of harboring jihadists — have faced retaliatory violence from government forces and rival ethnic militias, creating cycles of communal violence that benefit extremist recruiters (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Similarly, in Nigeria, sectarian divides between Muslims and Christians in the Middle Belt region have fueled conflicts that occasionally intersect with jihadist narratives.

Porous Borders and Regional Spillover: Africa's long, poorly monitored borders allow extremist groups to move freely between states, evade capture, and expand their operations. This is evident in the **tri-border area** of Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso, where insurgents exploit borderlands and carry out cross-border raids. The lack of effective regional intelligence-sharing and joint military coordination enables groups like ISGS and JNIM to outmaneuver state forces (ICG, 2023).

Climate Change and Resource Scarcity: Environmental stressors, particularly climate-induced scarcity of water and land, have exacerbated local conflicts that feed into extremist recruitment. In the Lake Chad Basin, the lake has shrunk by over 90% since the 1960s, leading to competition over dwindling resources among farmers, herders, and fishermen — a situation Boko Haram has exploited to recruit vulnerable individuals (UNEP, 2023).

Impact on Regional and Continental Security

The impact of terrorism in Africa is far-reaching and multidimensional, touching virtually every sector of society.

Humanitarian Crises: Violent extremism has led to one of the world's largest displacement crises. As of 2023, more than 20 million people across the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Lake Chad Basin are displaced due to violence and insecurity (UNHCR, 2023). Displacement increases vulnerability to poverty, exploitation, and radicalization, creating feedback loops that perpetuate conflict.

Economic Costs: Terrorism has decimated local economies, reduced foreign investment, and disrupted agriculture, trade, and tourism. In Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria, entire regions have been rendered inaccessible, preventing economic development and causing food insecurity. The cost of counter-terrorism operations also diverts limited government resources away from essential services like education and healthcare (African Development Bank, 2022).

Political Destabilization

Extremist violence has undermined state legitimacy, weakened democratic processes, and in some cases, directly contributed to military coups. Between 2020 and 2023, there were coups in **Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger** — countries facing high levels of terrorist violence. These coups have often been justified as necessary to address insecurity but have, in many cases, worsened it (Freedom House, 2023).

African and International Responses

African Union (AU) and Regional Initiatives: The AU's African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) provides a continental framework for counter-terrorism, though implementation remains inconsistent. Regional coalitions have been more active — such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, Lake Chad Basin Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), and SADC's deployment in Mozambique — but often suffer from poor funding, logistical shortfalls, and inter-state mistrust (ISS Africa, 2023).

International Cooperation: International actors, including the United Nations, United States, France, and the European Union, have played prominent roles in Africa's counter-terrorism efforts. For example, France's now-ended Operation Barkhane in the Sahel sought to contain jihadist threats but was often criticized for limited success and fostering resentment due to perceived neo-colonial overreach. The U.S. AFRICOM provides training, intelligence, and drone operations, while the EU has invested heavily in stabilization and development programs (Brookings, 2023).

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) Programs: There is growing recognition that military solutions alone are insufficient; PVE programs, often supported by UNDP, UNESCO, and bilateral donors, aim to engage communities, promote education, support at-risk youth, and amplify counter-narratives to extremist ideologies. Initiatives such as radio messaging, vocational training and interfaith dialogue are being implemented in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and Mali, though their reach and sustainability vary widely (UNDP, 2022).

The Nigerian Experience

Overview of Terrorist Groups in Nigeria

Nigeria remains one of the countries that are most affected by terrorism globally. The primary sources of violent extremism include Boko Haram, its offshoot Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and various armed criminal networks often referred to as bandits. These groups have varying ideological, political, and economic motivations, but their operations collectively contribute to widespread insecurity across the country.

Boko Haram, ISWAP and Banditry

Formed in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf in northeastern Nigeria, Boko Haram (meaning "Western education is forbidden") initially focused on rejecting Western secular values and promoting a puritanical form of Islam. Following Yusuf's death in police custody in 2009, the group radicalized under Abubakar Shekau, initiating an armed insurgency that would soon engulf Nigeria's northeast. Boko Haram's tactics have included mass killings, suicide bombings, abductions (e.g., the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping), and attacks on religious and educational institutions. In 2016, a major schism within Boko Haram led to the formation of **ISWAP**, backed by the Islamic State's central leadership. Unlike Boko Haram, ISWAP has adopted more strategic approaches to governance, taxation, and community engagement. While it remains highly violent, ISWAP has targeted military personnel and infrastructure more frequently than civilians and has gained support in some areas by distributing aid and enforcing "order" (International Crisis Group, 2023). In Nigeria's northwest, violent criminal groups known as bandits operate in states like Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna, engaging in cattle rustling, mass abductions, and extortion. Though not ideologically motivated like Boko Haram, these groups have increasingly adopted terror tactics and occasionally collaborated with jihadist factions. In some instances, entire villages have been razed, and school kidnappings have surged, creating widespread panic (Amnesty International, 2021).

Evolution of Terrorism in Nigeria

The trajectory of terrorism in Nigeria reflects a convergence of religious extremism, criminality, and state failure.

Early Roots and Radicalization (2000–2009). In the early 2000s, Boko Haram operated mainly as a radical Islamic sect offering alternative education and social services in Maiduguri, Borno State. Its recruitment was largely peaceful until 2009, when a crackdown by Nigerian security forces led to the extrajudicial killing of Mohammed Yusuf. This event radicalized the movement, which went underground and re-emerged with violent tactics.

Insurgency Phase (2010–2015). Boko Haram launched an armed insurgency around 2010, characterized by attacks on police stations, military barracks, churches, and public spaces. By 2014, the group had seized significant territory in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states, even declaring a "caliphate" in Gwoza. The 2014 Chibok schoolgirls abduction brought international attention to the crisis, with campaigns like #BringBackOurGirls amplifying public outrage (UN Women, 2015).

Fragmentation and ISWAP Emergence (2016–Present). Following military offensives and Shekau's brutality, Boko Haram splintered. ISWAP emerged, aligning more closely with ISIS's operational model. Shekau died in 2021 during clashes with ISWAP forces, further weakening his faction. ISWAP now dominates many areas once controlled by Boko Haram and has expanded into the Lake Chad and Sambisa Forest regions (HumAngle, 2023).

Government Responses to Terrorism

Successive Nigerian governments have deployed a mix of military, political, and humanitarian responses, though often with limited or uneven success.

Military Operations: The Nigerian Armed Forces launched various operations to combat terrorism, including: Operation Lafiya Dole (2015–2021) which Focused on reclaiming territories from Boko Haram and Operation Hadin Kai (2021–Present): A restructured effort involving air and ground forces to counter ISWAP and Boko Haram more effectively. Despite significant offensives,

challenges remain: difficult terrain, limited air support, underfunded troops, and an overstretched military have hindered full-scale victory (ICG, 2022). Security forces are also accused of **human rights abuses**, arbitrary arrests, and extrajudicial killings, further alienating local populations (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Multinational and Regional Cooperation: Nigeria is a member of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), alongside Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Benin, aimed at coordinating cross-border counter-terrorism. Though the MNJTF has helped reclaim territory and share intelligence, it suffers from funding shortages and operational coordination issues (ISS Africa, 2023).

Deradicalization and Reintegration Programs: The Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) program, launched in 2016, is a flagship initiative targeting repentant Boko Haram fighters. Participants undergo vocational training, religious reorientation, and psychological counseling before reintegration into society. However, the program faces criticism for lack of transparency, insufficient community buy-in, recidivism among some former fighters (Brookings, 2023). Many communities oppose reintegration efforts, citing inadequate justice and lack of security guarantees.

Legislative and Policy Frameworks: Nigeria developed a National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST) and Terrorism Prevention Act (2011, amended in 2013). NACTEST emphasizes a "whole-of-government" approach, including intelligence gathering, public engagement, and law enforcement coordination. Yet, policy implementation remains weak due to bureaucratic fragmentation and poor inter-agency cooperation (CLEEN Foundation, 2022).

Challenges in Counter-Terrorism Efforts

Despite investments in military hardware and international support, several systemic and structural challenges hinder Nigeria's ability to effectively counter terrorism.

Corruption and Mismanagement: Corruption within the military and procurement processes has diverted resources meant for operations. A 2016 investigation revealed that over **\$2 billion** intended for arms purchases was misappropriated under the former National Security Adviser (Premium Times, 2016). Such scandals erode trust in the government's ability to manage the crisis competently.

Poor Intelligence and Surveillance Infrastructure: Lack of real-time intelligence and surveillance capacity limits Nigeria's ability to preempt attacks. Many military operations rely on outdated information and are reactive rather than preventive. Coordination between the **Department of State Services (DSS)**, **military intelligence**, and local informants is often inconsistent (Global Centre on Cooperative Security, 2021).

Trust Deficit between Civilians and Security Forces. In regions like Borno and Yobe, civilians are often caught between insurgents and military forces. Security operations have been marred by allegations of indiscriminate killings and abuse, undermining community cooperation. Fear of reprisal discourages locals from sharing intelligence, enabling extremist groups to operate with relative impunity (Amnesty International, 2021).

Humanitarian and Displacement Crisis. Nigeria has over **3.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)** due to the conflict, many of whom live in precarious conditions in camps or host

communities. These camps are often unprotected and have been attacked by insurgents. Moreover, IDPs face food insecurity, sexual violence, and lack of education, creating conditions ripe for radicalization (UNHCR, 2023).

Societal Impact of Terrorism in Nigeria

Education Disruption. Boko Haram's ideological stance against Western education has devastated school systems in northeastern Nigeria. Over **1,500 schools** have been destroyed or closed since 2009, with thousands of teachers killed or displaced (UNICEF, 2022). The trauma of mass abductions, such as those in Chibok, Dapchi, and Kankara, has left deep scars and discouraged school attendance, especially among girls.

Psychological and Social Trauma. Survivors of attacks, abductees, and former child soldiers experience long-term psychological trauma. Mental health services are grossly inadequate, especially in rural areas. The lack of structured psychosocial support further delays societal recovery and reintegration (IOM Nigeria, 2022).

Economic Losses. The insurgency has cost Nigeria over **\$9 billion** in damaged infrastructure, reduced agricultural output, and lost economic productivity, particularly in the North-East (World Bank, 2020). Commerce in Maiduguri, Bama, and other towns remains subdued, with many businesses either destroyed or relocated.

National Cohesion and Identity. Terrorism has worsened ethno-religious divisions and eroded the fabric of national unity. It has also fueled **sectarian sentiments**, with communities blaming others for harboring terrorists or receiving preferential treatment. This balkanization poses long-term risks for state stability and cohesion.

Policy Recommendations

Tackling violent extremism and terrorism in Nigeria—and by extension across Africa—requires a comprehensive, multifaceted, and long-term strategy. Military action, while necessary, has proven insufficient on its own. Instead, sustainable counter-terrorism and counter-extremism efforts must integrate security, governance, development, and social inclusion. The following policy recommendations are structured across six strategic pillars:

Strengthen Regional Cooperation and Intelligence Sharing

Enhance Multinational Security Partnerships. Nigeria must prioritize strengthening its role within regional security frameworks such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Coordination Structures. Improved operational coordination, joint patrols, and shared command infrastructure can reduce the ability of terrorist groups to exploit borders for sanctuary or arms trafficking. *“Without robust regional coordination, military victories in one country merely displace extremist groups into neighboring territories”* (ISS Africa, 2023).

Improve Intelligence Gathering and Sharing. One of the consistent weaknesses of Nigeria's counter-terrorism efforts is poor intelligence coordination. Government should invest in: Human Intelligence (HUMINT) through community engagement; Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) using technology for tracking communications; and Enhanced data integration across the DSS, police, and armed forces. A centralized intelligence fusion center under civilian oversight would prevent duplication and miscommunication among security agencies (Global Centre on Cooperative Security, 2021).

Enhance Socioeconomic Development and Inclusion

Address Root Causes of Extremism. Poverty, youth unemployment, lack of education, and regional inequalities are core drivers of extremism in Nigeria. The North-East, North-West, and Middle Belt require targeted development programs that include: Job creation through agricultural revitalization and micro-enterprise support, Vocational and formal education, especially for girls and young men and Access to quality healthcare, housing, and infrastructure. UNDP's 2022 report notes that 71% of individuals who joined extremist groups in Africa were influenced by the lack of economic opportunity (UNDP, 2022).

Invest in Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Many communities in Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, and Zamfara remain without basic services. Long-term peace-building requires rebuilding schools, clinics, and markets, Demining and restoring farmland, Facilitating the safe return of IDPs and refugees and The North-East Development Commission (NEDC) should be restructured with more autonomy and funding, ensuring transparency and participatory planning (World Bank, 2020).

Build Community Resilience and Local Governance

Promote Community Policing and Trust-Building. Security cannot succeed without the trust and participation of local communities. The Nigerian government should institutionalize community policing, particularly in remote or insurgency-prone regions. Local vigilante groups (e.g., Civilian Joint Task Force – CJTF) should be formalized under legal frameworks and given Basic training on human rights and rules of engagement, Stipends and benefits to reduce corruption and abuse and Clear command structures accountable to civil authorities

Engage Traditional and Religious Leaders

Traditional institutions and religious leaders command influence and legitimacy in many communities. These actors can be leveraged to De-escalate ethnic/religious tensions, Debunk extremist ideologies through counter-narratives and Facilitate peace dialogues and reintegration of defectors. Such grassroots engagement is essential to undermine extremist recruiters who exploit communal grievances (UNESCO, 2016).

Improve Governance, Justice, and Rule of Law

Strengthen Accountability and Reduce Corruption. Corruption in defense procurement, intelligence, and aid delivery has undermined counter-terrorism. The government must Implement transparent **audits of military spending**, empower anti-corruption agencies to investigate and prosecute fraud and Digitize **procurement and payroll systems** for transparency. Public trust is vital in any counter-extremism effort. Citizens need to believe that the state acts in their interest (Transparency International, 2023).

Ensure Fair and Functional Justice Systems. Mass arrests, indefinite detentions, and extrajudicial killings have eroded trust in state security forces. Judicial reforms should include Expedited trials for suspected terrorists, Legal access and rehabilitation opportunities for low-risk individuals and independent monitoring of detention centers and prisons. The military should not be used for civilian law enforcement except under clear legal frameworks (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Strengthen Deradicalization, Reintegration, and Transitional Justice

Scale and Reform Deradicalization Programs. Programs like Operation Safe Corridor must be better resourced and redesigned. Government and civil society should differentiate between

hardcore combatants and low-risk conscripts or abductees; Provide psychological support, religious re-education, and vocational skills; and Ensure community sensitization to prevent rejection or retaliation. Community leaders should be involved from the start to rebuild trust and reduce stigmatization of returnees (Brookings, 2023).

Establish Truth and Reconciliation Mechanisms. In areas where mass atrocities have occurred, transitional justice frameworks should be explored, including truth-telling commissions at the local level, public acknowledgment of past abuses; and Compensation for victims and survivors. This approach could offer a path toward healing and reconciliation in divided communities (ICTJ, 2022).

Leverage Technology and Media for Counter-Radicalization

Monitor and Counter Online Extremism. The internet remains a potent platform for jihadist propaganda and recruitment. The Nigerian government should establish a cyber security and Digital Intelligence Taskforce, Work with tech companies to flag extremist content and Promote counter-messaging campaigns targeting youth and vulnerable populations. Training young Nigerians to create and spread peace-building content on TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp can be a powerful tool (Europol, 2023).

Support Media Literacy and Peace Education. Youth should be trained to critically evaluate online content. National curriculum reform can introduce peace education and conflict resolution in schools, Civic education that promotes tolerance, diversity, and dialogue and Workshops and digital tools to teach online safety and critical thinking; UNESCO (2016) highlights that early prevention through education is one of the most effective long-term solutions to extremism.

Integrate Gender-Sensitive Approaches

Protect Women and Girls from Exploitation. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by terrorism in Nigeria, facing sexual violence, forced recruitment and marriage and psychological trauma. Security operations and reintegration programs must include safe spaces, trauma-informed care, and gender-based violence (GBV) services (UN Women, 2022).

Engage Women as Peacebuilders. Women play critical roles in early warning, mediation, and post-conflict recovery. Policies should fund women-led CSOs in conflict-prone areas; involve women in peace dialogues, governance, and security decisions and Promote female representation in police and military units. Gender inclusion increases the sustainability of peace efforts and reduces recidivism (UNSCR 1325, 2000).

Institutionalize Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

All counter-extremism policies should be monitored through robust evaluation frameworks. Key steps include: Developing national indicators for PVE progress, partnering with research institutions and universities and ensuring real-time feedback loops between communities and policymakers. This ensures adaptability in programming and avoids repeating failed approaches (OECD, 2021).

The complexity of Nigeria's security challenges demands more than military might. Sustainable peace and resilience require governance reforms, community participation, and inclusive development. The global community, regional partners, and national stakeholders must collaborate to ensure that efforts are not only reactive but preventive and people-centered. These policy recommendations provide a blueprint for action toward lasting stability.

Conclusion

Violent extremism and terrorism have emerged as some of the most complex and enduring threats to global and national security in the 21st century. Their manifestations—ranging from coordinated attacks by transnational jihadist networks to localized insurgencies and lone-wolf assaults—demonstrate the adaptability and persistence of non-state armed actors. From a global standpoint, the evolution of terrorism reflects a transformation from structured ideologically motivated movements to hybrid networks that blend political, religious, economic, and criminal motives. The decentralization of terrorist organizations, along with the use of emerging technologies and online platforms, continues to challenge conventional counter-terrorism strategies. This global transformation has taken a particularly intense and devastating form in Africa, especially in regions such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Lake Chad Basin. In these areas, violent extremism has been fueled by state fragility, poor governance, endemic poverty, youth disenfranchisement, and ethnic marginalization. Terrorist groups have evolved from fringe actors to formidable forces capable of occupying territories, administering alternative governance, and perpetrating large-scale violence against civilians and state institutions alike.

Among the most affected countries in Africa, Nigeria's experience stands out as both a cautionary tale and a case study in the multi-dimensional nature of terrorism. The country's encounter with Boko Haram, ISWAP, and increasingly organized banditry reveals the entanglement of ideological extremism with deep-rooted governance failures, socio-economic inequalities, and regional insecurity. While Boko Haram started as a religious movement in northeast Nigeria, its evolution into a full-blown insurgency exposed how state neglect and brutal repression could radicalize marginalized populations. The rise of ISWAP further demonstrated the dangers of splintering and ideological franchising, particularly as the group adopted a more strategic governance approach to win local legitimacy.

Nigeria's military and governmental response has been mixed. On the one hand, large-scale military operations have succeeded in reclaiming some territories and weakening insurgent structures. On the other hand, corruption, lack of coordination, poor intelligence, human rights abuses, and the failure to address root causes have limited the effectiveness of these responses. Many military gains are not sustained due to the absence of credible civil governance and social services in recovered areas, creating a vacuum those extremists can re-exploit. The human cost of terrorism in Nigeria has been staggering. Over 350,000 lives have been lost since 2009, millions have been displaced, and entire communities have been traumatized and economically devastated (UNDP, 2022). Schools have been closed or destroyed; creating a "lost generation" of children denied education. Agriculture has collapsed in many parts of the North-East, deepening food insecurity. Meanwhile, the psychological scars left by abductions, mass killings, and sexual violence are likely to haunt affected populations for decades to come. Addressing these multidimensional challenges demands more than tactical responses; it requires a comprehensive national and regional strategy anchored in prevention, development, inclusion, and justice. Military force alone cannot eliminate terrorism—it can only suppress its symptoms. Sustainable peace and security in Nigeria and across Africa hinge on addressing the root causes of radicalization, restoring state legitimacy, empowering youth, building community resilience, and fostering inclusive governance. The policy recommendations outlined in Section V emphasize a holistic approach. These include strengthening regional cooperation, reforming the justice sector, expanding socioeconomic development in marginalized regions, scaling community policing, investing in mental health and reintegration programs, and promoting inclusive education and gender-sensitive peace-building. Equally important is the need

to reclaim the digital space from extremist ideologies by promoting credible counter-narratives and media literacy. At the regional level, African countries must enhance intelligence sharing, cross-border cooperation, and joint counter-terrorism operations. Organizations like the African Union, ECOWAS, and the Lake Chad Basin Commission must transition from policy rhetoric to operational efficiency. More importantly, regional and national responses must be community-led and rooted in local realities. Peace cannot be imposed from above—it must be built from the ground up.

The role of the international community is equally significant. While military assistance and humanitarian aid are important, donor countries and multilateral organizations must prioritize capacity building, institutional reform, and long-term economic investment over short-term military engagements. Initiatives should be led by African governments and communities, with international actors playing a supportive—not dominating—role. Ultimately, the Nigerian experience offers a powerful lesson: the battle against terrorism is not just fought on the battlefield—it is waged in classrooms, village councils, courts of law, and the hearts and minds of citizens. Defeating terrorism requires rebuilding public trust in the state, expanding access to justice, creating livelihoods, and addressing the grievances that extremists exploit. Nigeria stands at a crossroads—one path leads to deeper fragmentation and perpetual insecurity, while the other points toward a more inclusive, just, and resilient society. The path to peace is neither quick nor easy, but it is possible—if leaders prioritize people over politics, prevention over repression and justice over vengeance. Nigeria's success or failure in confronting violent extremism will not only shape its own future but will also determine the trajectory of peace and security in West Africa and the wider continent.

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