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SHADOW WARS: EVALUATING NIGERIA'S USE OF COVERT OPERATIONS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COUNTERTERRORISM

***Adebimpe Saheed FAGBEMI, Ph.D¹.**

Department of Criminology and Forensic Studies, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Durban, Republic of South Africa

Mudassir Nasir, Ph.D².

Department of Criminology and Security Studies, Iconic Open University of Nigeria

Muhammad Sani IDRIS³ (Research Scholar)

Department of Defense and Security Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Nigerian Defense Academy (NDA), Kaduna- Nigeria.

Abstract

Basically, covert operations do not have a universal acceptable definition. However, the Department of Defence (DoD) United States defines 'Covert operations' as 'an operation that is so planned and executed as to conceal the identity or permit plausible denial by the sponsor'. Covert operations play a pivotal yet controversial role in existing counterterrorism strategies, where the clandestine nature of operations intersects with the imperative of safeguarding national security. The study is anchored on Intelligence-Led Operations and Securitisation Theory to provide analytical depth. Findings reveal that covert intelligence-led operations have become increasingly central to Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy, enhancing surveillance, threat detection, interagency coordination, and the disruption of terrorist networks. However, effectiveness is constrained by institutional weaknesses, inadequate technological resources, limited intelligence sharing, corruption, bureaucratic rivalry, and the evolving tactics of terrorist groups. Legal, ethical, and human rights considerations also present significant challenges, particularly regarding transparency, democratic accountability, and public confidence in security institutions. The study concludes that while covert operations are indispensable to counterterrorism, sustainable success requires an integrated approach combining intelligence with military operations, governance reforms, socio-economic development, community engagement, and regional cooperation.

Keywords: Counterterrorism, Covert Operations, Intelligence-Led Operations (ILO), Securitisation Theory, Terrorism.

***Corresponding Author:**

Adebimpe Saheed FAGBEMI, Ph.D

Email: adebimpefagbemi@yahoo.com

Introduction

Terrorism has become one of the most persistent and complex security challenges confronting the Nigerian state in the twenty-first century. The emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009 and the subsequent rise of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have significantly undermined national security, resulting in widespread loss of lives, destruction of property, forced displacement of millions of people, and severe socio-economic disruption, particularly in Nigeria's North-East region (Olofinbiyi & Steyn, 2019). The North-East continues to be a theater of conflict between residual Boko Haram elements and the more institutionally robust Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), whose operations extend transnationally across the Lake Chad basin. Simultaneously, the North-West has seen the proliferation of hybrid jihadist-criminal coalitions, most recently exemplified by Lakurawa, wherein ideological motivations converge with the illicit economies of smuggling, extortion, and weapons trafficking (Nasir & Jega, 2026). The evolving nature of these terrorist threats has compelled the Nigerian government to adopt a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy that integrates military operations, intelligence gathering, law enforcement, regional cooperation, and legal reforms aimed at preventing and responding to acts of terrorism (Fagbemi & Ogunbanjo, 2024).

Counterterrorism refers to the policies, strategies, and actions employed by governments and security institutions to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorist activities while protecting national security and public safety (Agbiboa, 2018). Among

the various approaches to counterterrorism, covert operations have become increasingly important because they enable states to address security threats through intelligence-led activities conducted with limited public visibility. In intelligence studies, covert operations are generally understood as activities designed to conceal the identity of the sponsoring government while pursuing specific national security objectives (Akinola & Tell, 2019). Such operations differ from conventional military campaigns because they primarily rely on intelligence collection, surveillance, interagency coordination, undercover activities, and strategic cooperation with domestic and international partners.

In Nigeria, covert operations constitute an important element of the broader counterterrorism architecture. Intelligence and security agencies including the Department of State Services (DSS), the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), and the Armed Forces of Nigeria play significant roles in gathering intelligence, identifying terrorist networks, supporting investigations, and assisting military and law enforcement operations against Boko Haram, ISWAP, and other violent extremist groups (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2016). While many operational details remain classified because of national security considerations, publicly available studies indicate that intelligence-driven approaches have become increasingly central to disrupting terrorist activities and enhancing national security (Onuoha, 2019).

The adoption of covert and intelligence-led counterterrorism measures in Nigeria reflects

broader global developments following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. These attacks fundamentally transformed international security policy by encouraging greater emphasis on intelligence cooperation, preventive security measures, and coordinated responses to transnational terrorism (Mosandi, 2019). Nigeria subsequently strengthened its legal and institutional framework through the enactment of the Terrorism (Prevention) Act, 2011. The development of the National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST), and increased collaboration with regional organizations such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the Multinational Joint Task Force (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2016). These initiatives recognize that military force alone cannot effectively eliminate terrorism and that intelligence-led operations are essential for detecting, preventing, and disrupting terrorist activities before they materialize (Fagbemi, Issa & Fagbemi, 2024).

Despite these institutional developments, the effectiveness of covert operations in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts remains a subject of scholarly debate. Proponents argue that covert operations provide strategic advantages by improving intelligence collection, facilitating early threat detection, disrupting terrorist networks, and reducing the operational capabilities of extremist organizations (Bakindo, 2018). Conversely, critics contend that the secrecy surrounding covert activities may limit transparency, weaken democratic oversight, create legal and ethical concerns, and affect public confidence in security institutions (Adelaja, 2018). Furthermore, several scholars argue that sustainable counterterrorism requires not only security measures but also effective

governance, socio-economic development, respect for human rights, and meaningful community engagement in areas affected by violent extremism (Pham, 2016).

Nigeria's experience demonstrates the challenges of combating terrorism within an environment characterized by porous borders, complex humanitarian crises, ethnic and religious diversity, weak institutional capacity in some regions, and evolving extremist tactics. These realities have increased the importance of intelligence-led strategies that support timely decision-making and enhance coordination among security agencies. However, questions remain regarding the extent to which covert operations contribute to long-term counterterrorism success, particularly when balanced against the requirements of democratic accountability, constitutional governance, and the protection of fundamental human rights (Bodunde, Balogun & Layefa, 2019).

Against this background, this study examines the role of covert operations in counterterrorism within the Nigerian state. Specifically, it explores the strategic importance of covert operations, evaluates their contribution to Nigeria's efforts against Boko Haram and ISWAP, examines the legal and ethical issues associated with their use, and identifies the major operational challenges confronting intelligence and security agencies. The study also seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on intelligence and national security by providing an evidence-based assessment of covert operations as an integral component of Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy (Barkindo, 2018).

Literature Gap

Although the existing literature provides substantial analysis of Boko Haram, Nigeria's counterterrorism policies, intelligence gathering, and military operations, relatively few studies specifically examine covert operations as a distinct component of Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy. Most available research focuses on military campaigns, legal frameworks, or the socio-economic causes of terrorism, while giving comparatively limited attention to how covert and intelligence-led operations contribute to operational effectiveness, interagency coordination, and strategic decision-making.

Furthermore, there remains limited empirical analysis of the relationship between covert operations, democratic accountability, legal oversight, and human rights within the Nigerian context. This study seeks to address these gaps by critically examining the strategic role, effectiveness, challenges, and implications of covert operations in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts.

Research Objectives

Based on the manuscript provided, here are two research objectives derived from the stated research gap and the study's aims:

- i. To critically evaluate the strategic importance and operational effectiveness of covert intelligence-led operations.
- ii. To examine the legal, ethical, and democratic accountability challenges associated with the use of covert operations in Nigeria's counterterrorism framework.

Literature Review

The Concept of Covert Operations

Covert Operations has received considerable scholarly attention within intelligence and

security studies. Lowenthal (2017) defines covert operations as activities conducted by a state to influence political, military, or security outcomes while concealing the identity of the sponsoring government. Unlike conventional military operations, covert operations rely heavily on secrecy, intelligence collection, surveillance, undercover activities, and cooperation among security agencies. Their primary objective is to prevent or disrupt security threats while minimizing political and diplomatic repercussions. In contemporary counterterrorism, covert operations have become increasingly significant because terrorist organizations often operate through decentralized networks that are difficult to confront using conventional military force alone. Nwankwo (2020) argues that intelligence-led covert activities enhance a state's ability to detect, monitor, and disrupt terrorist plots before they materialize. Covert operations are clandestine activities undertaken by a state to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, designed so that the sponsoring government's role remains hidden thereby allowing for plausible deniability and the ability to achieve foreign policy objectives without risking open conflict or diplomatic rupture Alexandra, (2024).

Under U.S. law a covert operation is an activity or mission of the U.S. government to influence events in a foreign country, where the operation is planned and executed so that the U.S. role is not apparent or publicly acknowledged. It is specifically authorized by a presidential finding and overseen by the intelligence committees of Congress, and is distinct from traditional military, diplomatic, or law enforcement activities U.S.

Government, (2022). Covert operations are deniable, low-visibility missions carried out by specialized intelligence or military personnel, employing methods such as sabotage, paramilitary action, psychological warfare, or financial manipulation, with the explicit requirement that operational security (OPSEC) guarantees the sponsor's identity is concealed from both the target and the international community Cormac and Aldrich (2018).

According to Dostri (2020), defines Covert operations are a form of "unconventional statecraft"—tools of gray-zone warfare in which a nation projects power through secret means to destabilize adversaries, support allied factions, or counter insurgent threats, operating in the ambiguous space between diplomacy and overt military intervention, where success is measured by effect rather than public attribution. Within the Nigerian context, covert operations are generally associated with intelligence gathering, surveillance, interagency coordination, and confidential investigations conducted by agencies such as the Department of State Services (DSS), the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), and military intelligence units. Although the operational details of these activities are largely classified, available literature suggests that intelligence-led approaches have become indispensable in Nigeria's efforts to combat Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Bodunde, et al., 2019).

For the purpose of this study, covert operations are defined as secretive, state-directed interventions in the internal or external affairs of foreign actors, executed through non-attributable means to achieve strategic objectives while maintaining

plausible deniability. This definition operationalizes covert action as a tool of "gray-zone" statecraft, distinct from both overt diplomacy and declared warfare.

The Concept of Terrorism and Counterterrorism

Terrorism is the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of violence to instill fear, coerce societies, or intimidate governments. It is a tactic employed by non-state actors or clandestine agents to achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives. Its primary target is often the psychological state of a broader population, rather than the immediate physical victims Richards, (2015).vTerrorism is a politically constructed label applied to violent acts that are deemed illegitimate by dominant powers, serving to delegitimize the perpetrator's grievances while identical state violence is classified as "counter-insurgency" or "self-defense." (Nasir, *et al.*, 2026).

Counterterrorism encompasses the policies, laws, institutions, and operational measures adopted by states to prevent, deter, respond to, and recover from terrorist activities. Nwankwo (2020) describes counterterrorism as a comprehensive approach involving intelligence, law enforcement, military operations, diplomacy, financial regulation, border security, and community engagement. Counterterrorism encompasses the strategies, tactics, and policies used by states to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorist acts. It operates on a multi-layered spectrum, including law enforcement for intelligence and prosecution, military force for direct intervention, and robust financial measures to cut off funding Rothermel, (2026).

Nigeria's counterterrorism framework evolved significantly following the emergence of Boko Haram. Initially, government responses were largely military-oriented; however, scholars argue that these approaches proved insufficient because they failed to address intelligence deficiencies, governance challenges, and the socio-economic drivers of violent extremism. Onapajo (2018) observes that Nigeria lacked a coherent national counterterrorism policy until the introduction of the National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST), which sought to integrate both preventive and responsive measures.

Counterterrorism operates across four primary pillars: (1) intelligence gathering and surveillance to detect and disrupt plots; (2) law enforcement and judicial measures to prosecute perpetrators; (3) military and special operations to neutralize active threats; and (4) financial and regulatory actions to dismantle terrorist financing networks (Rothermel, 2026). Crucially, contemporary counterterrorism also emphasizes preventive "soft" approaches, including countering violent extremism (CVE) through community engagement, deradicalization programs, and addressing socio-political grievances that fuel recruitment (Richards, 2015).

This research adopts a holistic view, recognizing that effective counterterrorism must balance coercive measures with efforts to build societal resilience, as over-reliance on hard security can inadvertently generate backlash and perpetuate cycles of violence (Hutchinson, 1972 as cited in Nasir, et al., 2026). For the purpose of this research, **counterterrorism** is defined as the comprehensive suite of state-led strategies, policies, and operational activities aimed at preventing, deterring, mitigating, and

responding to terrorist threats and acts. It is fundamentally a proactive and reactive framework that integrates multiple instruments of national power.

Terrorism in Nigeria

Scholars generally agree that terrorism in Nigeria is rooted in a complex interaction of political, religious, economic, and social factors. Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s as a radical religious movement but evolved into one of Africa's deadliest terrorist organisations following the death of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009. The insurgency has resulted in thousands of deaths, widespread displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and severe humanitarian crises across the Lake Chad Basin. Bodunde, et al. (2019) argue that weak governance, poverty, youth unemployment, corruption, porous borders, and limited state presence contributed significantly to the persistence of terrorism in Nigeria. Similarly, Onuoha (2018) maintains that socio-economic marginalisation and political grievances created conditions that facilitated extremist recruitment. Several empirical studies have examined intelligence operations and counterterrorism in Nigeria, although relatively few focus specifically on covert operations.

Fagbemi and Ogunbanjo, (2023) investigated the role of intelligence in Nigeria's counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaign against Boko Haram between 2010 and 2021. Their findings indicate that intelligence gathering significantly improved operational planning, enhanced coordination among security agencies, and contributed to disrupting terrorist activities. Nevertheless, they identified persistent challenges, including inadequate interagency

cooperation, intelligence leaks, limited technological capacity, and insufficient institutional coordination.

Mosandi (2019) critically evaluated the Nigeria's National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST), and concluded that early counterterrorism efforts relied excessively on military force while neglecting preventive and intelligence-based approaches. According to the study, NACTEST represented a major policy improvement by promoting intelligence sharing, stakeholder collaboration, and a whole-of-government approach. However, implementation challenges, resource limitations, and institutional weaknesses reduced its effectiveness.

Bodunde, et al. (2019) assessed Nigeria's broader counterterrorism policies and found that the country's strategy combines "hard" security measures with "soft" approaches such as deradicalisation, strategic communication, and community engagement. The authors argue that long-term success depends on integrating intelligence operations with governance reforms, economic development, and effective public institutions. Pham (2016) examined Boko Haram's use of covert tactics and found that the group's operational success has often depended on avoiding conventional confrontations while relying on surprise attacks, infiltration, and attacks against civilian targets. The study suggests that effective counterterrorism therefore requires intelligence capabilities capable of identifying and disrupting covert terrorist networks before attacks occur. More recent evaluations of Nigeria's counterinsurgency indicate that military successes have reduced Boko Haram's territorial control but have not eliminated the broader terrorist threat.

Researchers argue that intelligence-led operations, stronger interagency collaboration, improved surveillance technologies, and enhanced regional cooperation remain essential to sustaining long-term counterterrorism gains (Onuoha, 2019).

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on Intelligence-Led Operations (ILO), and Securitisation Theory

Intelligence-Led Operations (ILO), was emerged from British and American counter-insurgency in early 2000, founded by David L. Carter, who, along with fellow researcher Jeremy G. Carter, established its core principles by integrating criminal intelligence into modern, proactive law enforcement and community policing experiences, holds that effective operations must be predicated on accurate, timely intelligence rather than reactive force deployment (Rathmell, 2002, as cited in Nasir & Jega, 2026). This requires fusion of multiple intelligence disciplines (i.e. SIGINT, HUMINT, GEOINT, MASINT) into a common operating picture, and delegation of intelligence-driven decision authority to tactical commanders (Nasir & Jega, 2026).

Securitisation Theory, developed by Buzan, Waeber, and De Wilde (1998), argues that issues become security concerns when political leaders successfully present them as existential threats requiring extraordinary policy responses. The designation of Boko Haram as a major national security threat justified the adoption of exceptional counterterrorism measures, including expanded intelligence capabilities, emergency legislation, and increased cooperation among security agencies.

Together, these theories provide a useful framework for understanding why covert operations have become integral to Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy and how intelligence contributes to preventing and disrupting terrorist activities

Research Methodology

This section describes the research methodology adopted for the study titled *Covert Operations in Counterterrorism in the Nigerian State*. It outlines the research design, sources of data, methods of data collection, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness of the study, ethical considerations, and limitations of the methodology. The study adopts a qualitative research approach using secondary data to examine the role, effectiveness, and challenges of covert operations in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is appropriate because it enables the researcher to explore, interpret, and critically analyze social phenomena through the examination of textual and documentary evidence rather than numerical data. According to Olofinbiyi & Steyn (2019), qualitative research seeks to understand the meanings individuals or institutions assign to social and political issues within their natural context.

The study specifically employs a qualitative secondary data analysis approach. Secondary qualitative analysis involves the systematic examination and interpretation of existing documents and datasets collected by other researchers or institutions to answer new research questions. This approach is widely recognized as an effective method for policy

and security research where direct access to participants or classified information may be impractical. The qualitative design is particularly suitable for this study because covert operations are sensitive security activities whose operational details are often classified. Consequently, relying on authoritative secondary sources allows for a comprehensive and evidence-based analysis while maintaining methodological rigor (Adegoke, 2018).

Sources of Data

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources of data. Secondary data were obtained from published and publicly accessible materials relevant to covert operations, intelligence, terrorism, and counterterrorism in Nigeria.

The principal sources include:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles on terrorism, intelligence, and security studies.
- Academic textbooks on intelligence and counterterrorism.
- Government publications, including the National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST) and relevant legislation such as the Terrorism (Prevention) Act.
- Reports published by international organisations, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the African Union.
- Publications from research institutions such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS).

- Official publications of Nigerian security institutions where publicly available.
- Reputable newspapers and policy reports used only to provide contextual information and corroborate documented events.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through qualitative and secondary data. Relevant materials were identified through systematic searches of academic databases, university library resources, government publications, and institutional repositories.

Documents included in the study satisfied the following criteria:

- They addressed terrorism, counterterrorism, intelligence, or covert operations.
- They focused on Nigeria or provided comparative perspectives relevant to the Nigerian context.
- They were published by reputable academic publishers, government agencies, or recognized international organisations.
- They contained sufficient empirical or theoretical information relevant to the objectives of the study.

The collected documents were carefully reviewed, organized according to thematic relevance, and classified under major research themes such as intelligence gathering, covert operations, legal frameworks, institutional coordination, operational effectiveness, and counterterrorism challenges (Mosandi, 2019).

Method of Data Analysis

The study employs thematic content analysis as its method of data analysis. Thematic

content analysis involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring themes, concepts, and patterns within textual data.

The analysis followed these stages:

1. Careful reading of all selected documents.
2. Coding significant concepts and recurring ideas.
3. Grouping related codes into broader themes.
4. Comparing findings across multiple sources.
5. Interpreting the identified themes in relation to the research objectives and theoretical framework.

Themes that emerged from the analysis include:

- Intelligence-led counterterrorism.
- Strategic importance of covert operations.
- Institutional coordination among security agencies.
- Legal and ethical considerations.
- Operational challenges.
- Effectiveness of covert operations.
- Policy implications for Nigeria's national security.

Thematic analysis was selected because it facilitates a systematic interpretation of qualitative data and enables the researcher to synthesize findings from diverse documentary sources. Guidance on qualitative secondary analysis emphasizes transparent coding, contextual interpretation, and explicit reporting of analytical procedures to strengthen rigor.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the research adopted four established qualitative criteria:

- i. **Credibility:** Information was obtained from authoritative academic publications, government documents, and internationally recognized organisations. Findings were compared across multiple sources to ensure consistency.
- ii. **Dependability:** A systematic procedure for identifying, selecting, organizing, and analyzing documentary evidence was followed, enabling the research process to be transparent and reproducible.
- iii. **Confirmability:** Interpretations were grounded in documented evidence rather than personal opinions. Multiple sources were used to minimize researcher bias.
- iv. **Transferability:** Detailed descriptions of Nigeria's counterterrorism environment and covert operations provide sufficient contextual information for readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

Ethical Considerations

This study relies solely on secondary data obtained from publicly available sources, it does not involve human participants, interviews, questionnaires, or experiments. Consequently, informed consent was not required.

Nevertheless, ethical standards were maintained by:

- Properly acknowledging all sources using APA 7th edition referencing.

- Avoiding plagiarism through accurate citation and referencing.
- Presenting findings objectively without misrepresenting source materials.
- Respecting intellectual property rights by using only publicly available information.

The study does not disclose classified information or attempt to reveal operational details of covert security activities.

Limitations of the Methodology

The principal limitation of this methodology is its dependence on publicly available information. Since covert operations are inherently secretive, many operational details remain classified and inaccessible to researchers. Additionally, secondary data may reflect institutional perspectives, publication bias, or variations in methodological quality. To reduce these limitations, the study draws on multiple independent academic, governmental, and international sources and compares findings across them. Despite these limitations, qualitative secondary data analysis provides a practical and appropriate methodological framework for examining covert operations in counterterrorism within the Nigerian state, particularly where direct access to primary operational information is restricted.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study based on the qualitative analysis of secondary data obtained from academic literature, government publications, policy documents, and reports from international organisations. The findings are organized according to the objectives of the study and interpreted in

relation to the literature reviewed and the theoretical framework.

Covert Operations Have Become a Significant Component of Nigeria's Counterterrorism Strategy

The reviewed literature indicates that covert and intelligence-led activities have become increasingly important in Nigeria's efforts to combat terrorism, particularly since the escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009. Although conventional military operations remain central to counterterrorism, intelligence gathering, surveillance, information sharing, and interagency coordination have strengthened the ability of security agencies to identify and disrupt terrorist networks before attacks occur.

The findings suggest that intelligence institutions, including the Department of State Services (DSS), the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), and military intelligence units, play complementary roles in supporting counterterrorism operations through intelligence collection and analysis.

Intelligence Is the Foundation of Effective Counterterrorism

A recurring theme in the literature is that intelligence is the cornerstone of successful counterterrorism. The study found that timely intelligence enhances operational planning, supports informed decision-making, and improves the coordination of security agencies. Intelligence-led operations contribute to identifying terrorist leaders, disrupting financing networks, monitoring extremist activities, and preventing planned attacks.

The findings further reveal that effective intelligence depends on cooperation among domestic agencies, regional partners, and international organisations involved in combating terrorism

The analysis identified several challenges affecting the effectiveness of covert operations in Nigeria. These include inadequate technological resources, insufficient intelligence-sharing mechanisms, bureaucratic rivalry among security agencies, funding constraints, corruption, porous international borders, and the adaptive tactics employed by terrorist groups. The literature also indicates that intelligence leaks and limited interagency collaboration occasionally reduce operational effectiveness and compromise counterterrorism efforts.

The findings demonstrate that covert operations exist within a complex legal and ethical environment. While secrecy is necessary for protecting national security and operational success, scholars emphasize the importance of maintaining accountability, judicial oversight, and respect for constitutional rights.

The reviewed literature highlights concerns relating to transparency, public confidence, and allegations of human rights violations during some counterterrorism operations. These issues underscore the need to balance national security objectives with democratic governance and the rule of law.

Regional and International Cooperation Enhances Counterterrorism

The findings indicate that Nigeria's cooperation with neighboring countries through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), intelligence-sharing arrangements, and partnerships with international

organisations has improved its capacity to address transnational terrorist threats. Because terrorist organisations operate across national borders, regional collaboration has become essential for intelligence exchange, border security, and coordinated responses to violent extremism.

Military Force Alone Is Insufficient

The reviewed studies consistently conclude that military operations, while important, cannot independently eliminate terrorism. Long-term success requires integrating intelligence-led operations with good governance, socio-economic development, community engagement, deradicalisation initiatives, and strengthened public institutions. The findings suggest that sustainable counterterrorism depends on addressing both the immediate security threat and the broader conditions that enable violent extremism.

Discussion of Findings

The findings support Intelligence Theory by demonstrating that intelligence gathering and analysis are fundamental to preventing and disrupting terrorist activities. Effective covert operations improve situational awareness, enhance decision-making, and strengthen coordination among security agencies. The findings also align with Intelligence -Led Operations (ILO), which explains how the Nigerian government's response to Boko Haram and ISWAP has justified the adoption of extraordinary security measures, including expanded intelligence capabilities and specialized counterterrorism strategies. Overall, the analysis indicates that covert operations contribute significantly to Nigeria's counterterrorism framework. However, their effectiveness depends on

institutional coordination, legal oversight, technological capacity, professional intelligence management, and public confidence in security institutions.

Summary

This study examined the role of covert operations in counterterrorism in the Nigerian state using a qualitative research design based on secondary data. The study reviewed relevant literature on terrorism, covert operations, intelligence, and Nigeria's counterterrorism policies to assess the strategic importance, effectiveness, and challenges associated with covert operations. The study found that covert operations have become an essential component of Nigeria's counterterrorism architecture by supporting intelligence gathering, surveillance, threat assessment, and interagency cooperation. Intelligence-led approaches have improved the ability of security agencies to detect and disrupt terrorist activities, particularly those associated with Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

The study also established that the effectiveness of covert operations is constrained by institutional weaknesses, inadequate technological resources, limited intelligence sharing, corruption, bureaucratic rivalry, and the evolving tactics of terrorist organisations. Furthermore, legal, ethical, and human rights considerations remain important factors influencing the implementation of covert counterterrorism activities. Finally, the study found that sustainable counterterrorism requires an integrated strategy combining intelligence, military operations, law enforcement, regional cooperation, community engagement, and socio-economic interventions.

Conclusion

The study concludes that covert operations constitute an important component of Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy. Intelligence-led activities strengthen the capacity of security agencies to identify, monitor, and disrupt terrorist threats before they develop into large-scale attacks. Nevertheless, covert operations alone cannot eliminate terrorism. Their effectiveness depends on reliable intelligence, strong institutional coordination, lawful oversight, respect for human rights, adequate funding, modern technology, and cooperation among national, regional, and international partners. The study further concludes that counterterrorism policies are likely to be more effective when security measures are complemented by initiatives that address the underlying drivers of violent extremism, including poverty, unemployment, poor governance, and social exclusion. A balanced approach that combines effective intelligence with democratic accountability is essential for strengthening national security while maintaining public trust.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The Nigerian government should strengthen intelligence coordination among the Department of State Services, the National Intelligence Agency, the Defence Intelligence Agency, the Nigerian Armed Forces, and other relevant security institutions through improved information-sharing mechanisms.
2. Greater investment should be made in intelligence infrastructure, including secure communications, analytical capabilities,

surveillance technologies, and professional training for intelligence personnel.

3. Oversight mechanisms involving the executive, legislature, and other legally mandated institutions should be strengthened to ensure that covert counterterrorism activities remain consistent with the Constitution, applicable laws, and human rights obligations.
4. Nigeria should continue to strengthen regional and international intelligence cooperation through existing multilateral frameworks to address the cross-border nature of terrorist threats.
5. Government should complement intelligence-led operations with community-based approaches that encourage public cooperation, improve trust between citizens and security agencies, and support early identification of potential security threats.
6. Counterterrorism strategies should be integrated with broader development initiatives that promote education, employment opportunities, good governance, social inclusion, and conflict prevention in communities vulnerable to violent extremism.

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