

Dissecting Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria and Organisational Resilience

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Abstract. Boko Haram (Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, JAS) remains one of Africa's most resilient insurgent groups despite sustained leadership decapitation efforts by the Nigerian state. This paper examines why the removal of key commanders has failed to dismantle the group and has sometimes coincided with adaptation, fragmentation, and continued violence. Moving beyond leader-focused counterterrorism, it reconceptualises Boko Haram as a violent social movement shaped by governance failures, ideological cohesion, and decentralised structures. Using a qualitative case study design, the study draws on interviews with military personnel and journalists, alongside analysis of insurgent communiqués, policy reports, and academic literature. Guided by Social Movement Theory, it explains Boko Haram's resilience through decentralised command systems, leadership succession mechanisms, resource mobilisation, and ideological framing that sustains recruitment and cohesion beyond leaders. Findings show that leadership decapitation produces only short-term disruption and does not significantly weaken the group where succession systems and ideological continuity persist. The paper argues that effective counterterrorism must extend beyond leadership targeting to include governance reforms that strengthen legitimacy, accountability, rule of law, and civilian administration, alongside community-based counter-radicalisation involving religious leaders, local actors, and civil society.

Keywords: Boko Haram, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, decapitation, ideology, leadership.

1 Introduction

Boko Haram is among Africa's deadliest terrorist organisations, ranking sixth globally in the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025). The group reflects broader global patterns in contemporary extremist movements (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid, 2015). Since its emergence in 2002, Boko Haram has inflicted widespread violence, disrupted livelihoods, instilled fear, and caused significant civilian and security force casualties (Onuoha, 2014). In response, the Nigerian government has relied heavily on leadership decapitation - targeted killing or capture of key commanders as a core counterterrorism strategy (Uduo, 2025).

The effectiveness of leadership decapitation, defined as the removal of a group's leadership through killing or capture, remains contested. In Boko Haram's case, the extrajudicial killing

of its founding leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009 did not weaken the organisation. Instead, it was followed by the rise of Abubakar Shekau and a marked escalation in violence, operational capacity, and organisational brutality, suggesting that leadership removal may have intensified rather than curtailed the group's militant trajectory (Comolli, 2015).

This article demonstrates that, despite extensive scholarship on Boko Haram's activities, significant gaps remain in understanding the group's internal organisational dynamics and the long-term effects of leadership decapitation strategies (Kielhard and Orina, 2000). In particular, the efficacy of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism measure against Boko Haram remains underexplored, especially with respect to its unintended consequences, including organisational fragmentation and resilience. Scholars have advanced a range of theoretical frameworks to explain Boko Haram's evolution and persistence (Omeni, 2022b).

This article employs Social Movement Theory (SMT) as an analytical framework, focusing in particular on the concepts of political opportunity and framing, to examine Boko Haram's organisational dynamics and its strategic use of discourse in mobilisation and activism. Boko Haram's ideological foundations are deeply rooted in radical interpretations of Islam, through which the group frames its mission as a religious obligation (Makai et al., 2024). Guided by a central research question how terrorist organisations such as Boko Haram sustain or even intensify their activities despite repeated leadership decapitation, the study focuses on leadership transition, ideological sources of resilience, and the structural limits of decapitation as a counterinsurgency strategy.

2 Methodology

The data for this article are drawn from the author's doctoral research. The study employed in-depth, semi-structured one-on-one interviews to examine Boko Haram as an empirical phenomenon. The choice of a qualitative research design was motivated by the need to move beyond the limitations of closed-ended questionnaires and to capture the depth and complexity of participants' experiences and interpretations (Preshing, 2006). Semi-structured interviews enabled respondents to articulate nuanced perspectives in their own terms while maintaining consistency across core thematic areas (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

The research adopts an instrumental single-case study design (Stake, 1995), treating Boko Haram not merely as an instance of terrorism but as an insurgent organisation characterised by ideological and structural complexity. Interviews were conducted in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, Nigeria, between August and October 2024 with 17 participants, comprising serving and retired military officers from the Army, Navy, and Air Force, as well as journalists. This diverse participant pool provided context-sensitive insights into leadership decapitation strategies, command structures, and insurgent responses (Patton, 2002).

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, at which point no new substantive insights emerged. Interviews averaged 45 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken to capture salient observations. Primary interview data were supplemented with documentary sources from government agencies, including the Office of the National Counter-Terrorism Centre and the Nigerian Military

Resource Centre, as well as reports from non-governmental organisations, academic journals, press statements, and Boko Haram media materials. This triangulated approach enhanced analytical rigour by reducing reliance on any single data source.

3 Literature Review

Leadership decapitation, commonly operationalised through targeted killing or leadership targeting, has become a central feature of contemporary counterterrorism and counterinsurgency practice. Despite its widespread adoption, the academic literature does not support a settled consensus regarding its effectiveness. Instead, scholarship consistently demonstrates that the impact of leadership removal is contingent, variable, and deeply shaped by organisational characteristics, political context, and the interaction between state strategy and insurgent adaptation (Jordan, 2009; Price, 2009). This article places leadership decapitation discussion within a broader and more nuanced context as an intervention into an ongoing and unresolved debate concerning when, how, and under what conditions leadership targeting disrupts insurgent organisations or alternatively facilitates their regeneration and evolution.

Drawing on novel empirical evidence from Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign against Boko Haram, this article advances a context-specific contribution to the leadership decapitation literature. Nigeria provides a particularly revealing case because it combines sustained leadership targeting with persistent insurgent violence, organisational fragmentation, ideological resilience, and enduring governance deficits. As such, it allows for a critical examination of the core theoretical claims advanced by leading scholars in the field, while extending these debates by drawing on in-depth evidence and contextually rich assessment of insurgent adaptation under prolonged pressure.

The foundational logic underpinning leadership decapitation is rooted in organisational disruption. The approach rests on the assumption that militant organisations depend heavily on leadership for coordination, legitimacy, and strategic direction; removing leaders is therefore expected to disrupt command structures, weaken morale, and hasten organisational collapse (Price, 2012). Despite its widespread adoption, the scholarly debate over its effectiveness remains deeply unsettled. Rather than converging on a generalisable conclusion, the literature has produced mixed and sometimes contradictory findings, competing theoretical expectations regarding when, how, and whether decapitation weakens violent organisations prompting scholars to move away from universal claims toward context-dependent explanations.

A major turning point in this debate came with Jordan (2009), whose intervention significantly challenged prevailing assumptions about the strategic effectiveness of leadership decapitation in counterterrorism by demonstrating that leadership decapitation frequently fails against older, religiously motivated, and bureaucratically organised groups. Drawing on a global dataset of terrorist organisations, Jordan (2019) shows that leadership decapitation is neither inherently effective nor inherently counterproductive. Instead, outcomes vary systematically according to organisational age, ideological orientation, administrative capacity, and the presence of institutionalised succession mechanisms. Jordan identifies religiously motivated organisations as among the least vulnerable to leadership removal.

Jordan's work (2019) reframes leadership decapitation not as a universally reliable strategy, but as a contingent tool whose effectiveness depends on how leadership is embedded within organisational and ideological structures. While much of the leadership decapitation literature treats leadership as a unitary variable, a smaller but influential body of work disaggregates leadership into distinct functions. Michael Freeman's (2014) theory of terrorist leadership makes an important contribution by distinguishing between charismatic, ideological, operational, and bureaucratic leadership roles. Freeman argues that the consequences of leadership targeting depend not simply on whether leaders are removed, but on which leadership functions are targeted and how central they are to organisational survival.

According to this framework, organisations that rely heavily on charismatic leadership may be more vulnerable to decapitation. By contrast, groups in which leadership authority is embedded in ideology or bureaucratic routines are more resilient, as leadership loss does not dismantle the belief systems or institutional practices that sustain collective action. In such cases, decapitation may remove individuals while leaving intact the organisational logic of the movement. Freeman's typology complements Jordan's (2019) findings by offering a micro-level explanation for why ideologically saturated and bureaucratised organisations often withstand leadership loss. Rather than producing collapse, leadership decapitation may leave intact the ideological and institutional foundations that structure behaviour and facilitate regeneration.

A closely related strand of the literature focuses on organisational structure, leadership centrality, and succession mechanisms. While earlier quantitative studies suggested that leadership targeting increases organisational mortality, Price later refined this claim by emphasising the importance of leadership replacement and institutional depth. Price (2012) argues that leadership decapitation is most effective against young organisations lacking routinised succession processes. Where leadership replacement is easy and anticipated, decapitation is unlikely to produce organisational collapse.

This argument is extended by Milton and Price (2020), who introduce the concept of organisational centrality. They contend that some terrorist networks are structured in ways that render them resilient to leadership removal, with leadership functions dispersed across multiple bureaucratic and operational nodes rather than concentrated in a single individual. In such organisations, leadership removal may generate short-term disruption but leaves the underlying organisational architecture largely intact. These studies challenge leader-centric models of insurgent behaviour and emphasise the importance of decentralisation, redundancy, and institutional learning. Leadership decapitation, in this view, targets individuals rather than organisations and is therefore poorly suited to movements characterised by bureaucratic depth and dispersed authority.

Beyond terrorism studies, civil war scholarship offers important insights into the long-term consequences of leadership decapitation. Tiernay's (2015) study of the Lord's Resistance Army demonstrates that leadership change can contribute to conflict termination only under restrictive conditions, particularly where rebel groups lack territorial control and alternative leadership pools. In the absence of these conditions, leadership loss is more likely to prolong conflict than to end it. Similarly, Ryckman (2017) finds that rebel group decapitation is more likely to produce temporary reductions in violence rather than durable peace. In many cases,

violence resurges as successor leadership consolidates authority or as fragmented factions compete for dominance. Analysis of Colombia's targeted killing campaign indicates that leadership removal is more effective against hierarchical 'snake' organisations than decentralised 'hydra' structures (Morehouse, 2014). While individual leaders were successfully removed, insurgent organisations adapted through fragmentation and regeneration, sustaining violence through organisational resilience rather than collapse. Together, these studies underscore a recurring theme: leadership decapitation often reshapes insurgent organisations without eliminating them.

Another body of scholarship evaluates leadership decapitation through the lenses of deterrence, coercion, and diffusion. Wilner (2010) conceptualises targeted killings as a coercive tool intended to raise the costs of leadership and deter future attacks. While theoretically compelling, empirical evidence for durable deterrent effects remains inconsistent. Tominaga (2018) further nuances prevailing accounts of leadership decapitation by identifying a diffusion effect. Leadership decapitation in one organisation may influence the behaviour of other militant groups, encouraging tactical emulation, innovation, or alliance formation. Rather than containing violence, leadership targeting can therefore reshape insurgent ecosystems in unintended ways. Country-level analyses highlight the importance of state context. Carson (2019) demonstrates that the effectiveness of targeted killing programmes varies significantly depending on regime type, institutional accountability, and civil–military relations. Dear (2013) and Morehouse (2015) similarly emphasise that leadership decapitation reflects state-specific doctrines, legal frameworks, and strategic cultures, which can amplify or undermine its strategic impact.

Jordan (2019) integrates these insights by arguing that leadership decapitation is less likely to succeed in contexts characterised by weak governance, legitimacy deficits, and coercive state practices. Taken together, the leadership decapitation literature offers no settled consensus. Instead, it converges on three broad propositions. First, leadership decapitation is inherently context-dependent, not universally effective. Second, leadership type, organisational centrality, and succession mechanisms critically shape outcomes. Third, political and governance contexts condition whether leadership removal weakens or reinforces insurgent movements.

Despite these scholarly debates, significant gaps persist. Much of the literature relies on quantitative datasets and a limited range of regional cases, with relatively little qualitative evidence from African counterinsurgency campaigns. Moreover, few studies integrate leadership typologies, organisational structure, and political context within a single empirical framework. The case of Boko Haram presents a particularly revealing challenge to generic decapitation models. The extrajudicial killing of Boko Haram's founding leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009 is widely acknowledged as a pivotal moment in the group's trajectory. Rather than precipitating collapse, Yusuf's death catalysed a dramatic escalation in violence under Abubakar Shekau, transforming Boko Haram from a fringe religious movement into a full-scale insurgency (Comolli, 2015). This outcome departs from classical decapitation theory, which anticipates organisational degradation as a consequence of leadership removal.

Subsequent leadership losses including the killing of Shekau in 2021 have similarly failed to dismantle the movement (Albert, 2021). Instead, Boko Haram fragmented into factions, most

notably the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which has demonstrated greater organisational discipline, governance capacity, and military sophistication (Albert, 2021). Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign against Boko Haram provides a valuable opportunity to address leadership decapitation strategy. The prolonged and repeated use of leadership decapitation against Boko Haram across multiple leadership generations allows for closer examination of how leadership type, bureaucratic depth, decentralised command, and weak governance conditions interact to shape decapitation outcomes in practice.

4 Social Movement Theory and Boko Haram: Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Positioning

This article advances the application of Social Movement Theory (SMT) to jihadist and insurgent organisations by specifying how SMT can be refined to explain leadership decapitation outcomes and organisational resilience in fragile-state contexts. While prior scholarship has demonstrated that jihadist actors can be analysed as social movements, the contribution here lies in clarifying how SMT's core constructs—political opportunity structures, resource mobilisation, and framing processes operate in combination to neutralise the disruptive intent of leadership targeting.

Applying SMT to jihadist movements is not novel. Davis (2012), in a RAND analysis of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, uses Social Movement Theory to demonstrate how jihadist groups adapt strategically under military pressure, responding to political constraints rather than operating as irrational or purely theological actors. In the Boko Haram context, Omeni (2022b) offers a detailed SMT account of ideological mobilisation, demonstrating how diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing converts governance failure, corruption, and exclusion into moralised claims that legitimise violence and sustain participation. Omeni's analysis is foundational for understanding Boko Haram's ideological architecture and this article builds directly on it, particularly in the use of framing processes to explain narrative resonance and commitment (Omeni, 2022b).

This article differs from earlier SMT-based studies by focusing on leadership removal as a main issue to be explained, rather than treating it as a secondary or background factor. Thus, it integrates SMT into the analysis of organisational continuity even when its leaders are repeatedly removed, repositioning SMT as a framework not only for why movements mobilise but also for how they endure and regenerate under repression. SMT emerged as a corrective to earlier accounts that viewed collective action as irrational crowd behaviour or as a mechanical response to deprivation. It conceptualises movements as strategic, organised, and meaning-making actors embedded in structured political environments (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). A core SMT claim is that grievances are common, but mobilisation is not: collective action typically requires the interaction of political openings, organisational capacity, and resonant frames that justify and coordinate participation (Tarrow, 1991).

Although developed largely in studies of democratic contention, SMT has increasingly been applied to insurgency, terrorism, and political violence, helping reframe militant organisations as contentious actors that learn, adapt, and sometimes govern through hybrid repertoires combining persuasion, coercion, and institutional substitution (Wiktorowicz, 2004). The

Social Movement Theory framework explains movement trajectories as outcomes shaped by the interaction of political opportunity structures, resource mobilisation, and framing processes (Omeni, 2022b). These are relational mechanisms: political context shapes what is feasible, organisational resources determine what can be sustained, and frames structure meaning, legitimacy, and motivation.

Political opportunity structures (POS) refer to environmental features that shape mobilisation incentives and constraints, including state capacity, elite fragmentation, regime openness, and repression patterns (McAdam, 1998). POS is not limited to permissive contexts; repression can also expand mobilisation by delegitimising authorities and intensifying oppositional identities where the state is viewed as predatory or discriminatory (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). Meyer and Minkoff (2004) also cautions against treating political conditions as an all-encompassing explanatory category. For security studies, this implies specifying which opportunities matter such as enforcement gaps, territorial peripheries, justice deficits, patterns of abuse, and tracing how movements exploit them. In fragile-state contexts, opportunities are often structural and persistent rather, rooted in chronic governance vacuums and limited state reach (Della Porta, 2006). This has direct implications for leadership targeting: decapitation is unlikely to curtail insurgent operating space where underlying structural conditions persist and may instead be absorbed into insurgent narratives and organisational adaptation.

Resource mobilisation theory argues that movements endure because they can acquire, organise, and reproduce material, human, organisational, and relational resources (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Movements are organisations with infrastructure—recruitment pipelines, communication networks, internal discipline, and routines that sustain participation over time. For violent movements, resource mobilisation extends beyond recruitment and financing to include the institutionalisation of authority through governance-like practices like taxation, dispute resolution, welfare provision, protection, and coercive regulation especially where state institutions are absent or distrusted (Wiktorowicz, 2004). This article advances the resource mobilisation agenda by showing that leadership itself can be institutionalised as a renewable organisational resource. Contrary to assumptions embedded in leadership-centric counterterrorism models that treat charismatic leadership as a critical vulnerability, Boko Haram demonstrates how leadership functions can be routinised through collective bodies and decentralised command arrangements, enabling organisational continuity under high leadership degradation.

Frames may be understood as culturally embedded definitions of reality that structure the interpretation of objects and events, enabling individuals and groups to “locate, perceive, identify, and label events within their life space and the world at large.” (Goffmann, 1974). Framing is an agentic process whereby actors deliberately construct and present interpretations of events in order to shape understanding and influence the perceptions of others (Lavine et al., 2017). Thus, frames explain how movements construct meanings that render participation legitimate and urgent. Benford and Snow (2000) identify diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing as core tasks through which movements define problems, propose solutions, and generate rationales for action. For militant organisations, framing is especially crucial because participation is high-risk: frames supply moral justification, identity anchoring, and interpretive coherence that can stabilise commitment under repression and loss (Benford and Snow, 1992).

Building on Omeni's (2022b) Boko Haram analysis, this article treats framing not only as mobilisation rhetoric but as an institutional resource: once embedded in doctrine, training, propaganda, and governance, frames can outlast individual leaders and reduce dependence on charisma. This institutionalisation helps explain why decapitation often disrupts individuals without dissolving the belief systems that reproduce recruitment and violence. Boko Haram's trajectory illustrates how SMT's mechanisms interact to generate resilience under leadership targeting. Politically, the group exploited chronic governance failures in Nigeria, weak state capacity, entrenched corruption, and pervasive security force abuses—creating enduring opportunity structures rather than temporary openings (Aghedo and Osumah, 2012). Organisationally, Boko Haram mobilised resources through hybrid recruitment (ideological and coercive), material extraction, and criminal economies such as kidnapping and extortion, alongside external support from transnational jihadist networks (Onuoha, 2014).

Framing processes consolidated these dynamics by reinterpreting socio-economic deprivation and political exclusion as moral decay rooted in Westernisation and secular governance, thereby legitimising violence as obligation rather than choice (Kassim and Nwankpa, 2018; Omeni, 2022a). Under sustained counterinsurgency pressure, leadership decapitation was absorbed through routinised succession arrangements and decentralised authority, allowing operational and ideological continuity. In this configuration, decapitation does not terminate mobilisation because the movement's key sustaining mechanisms which includes structural opportunity, institutionalised authority, and embedded frames are not leader dependent. In essence, framing plays a pivotal role by enabling social movement actors to selectively amplify particular interpretations of events and to define these events as salient social or political problems requiring collective attention and response.

By linking SMT directly to leadership decapitation outcomes, this study refines SMT for application to violent movements in fragile states, showing that resilience is produced by conceptualising political opportunities as chronic and by extending resource mobilisation to include coercive governance and leadership succession as institutional resources. The study shows how violent movements engineer resilience through organisational design, ideological saturation, and structural embeddedness, rendering decapitation or leader removal strategically ineffective where authority and ideology are organisationally embedded. The contribution therefore lies not in asserting that Boko Haram can be analysed through SMT, an argument established by earlier work (Davis, 2012; Omeni, 2022b) but in demonstrating how SMT must be adapted to account for leadership loss, decentralised governance, and coercive mobilisation in protracted insurgencies.

5 Findings and Discussion

5.1 Ideological Radicalisation as the Core Driver of Resilience

The findings of this study demonstrate that Boko Haram's longevity is rooted fundamentally in ideological radicalisation rather than reliance on individual leadership. The movement has institutionalised commitment to a shared ideological cause, enabling leadership succession, sustain recruitment, and organisational cohesion despite repeated leadership decapitation. This embedded ideological structure is central to Boko Haram's resilience and has shaped the post-

Shekau consolidation of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Boko Haram's model aligns with Cronin (2006) and Kilcullen's (2011) assertions that organisational flexibility when anchored in ideology increases insurgent longevity.

Interview data consistently identified ideology as the primary driver of this resilience. As one serving military officer explained,

"Ideological belief is a major factor for Boko Haram's resilience because that is what the whole thing is all about. They propagate their own religion to others."

Another officer reinforced this point by emphasising ideology's generative function beyond leadership loss:

"When people turn around the narrative to suit themselves and base it within an ideology, it becomes very easy to recruit and getting people to emerge as new leaders also becomes very easy."

Another interviewee stated that:

"It is not easy to kill a movement... The principles are ideologies, and you can't kill an ideology easily..."

These accounts align with scholarship that conceptualises Boko Haram's ideology as a mechanism of political mobilisation, selectively instrumentalising religious discourse to legitimise violence and obedience (Brigaglia, 2015). Within Mohammed Yusuf's ideological discourse, diagnostic framing constructed the Nigerian state as corrupt, impious, and actively complicit in producing sin, thereby defining governance itself as the source of religious crisis (Oriola and Akinola, 2018). Political authority was portrayed not merely as ineffective but as morally contaminating, delegitimising obedience to the state and legitimising withdrawal from, and resistance to, secular institutions. Through this frame, political grievance was reconstituted as a radical religious ideology requiring corrective action.

Building upon this diagnosis, prognostic framing advanced jihad as the necessary and divinely sanctioned solution. Yusuf presented armed struggle and the rejection of secular governance as the only viable means of restoring moral order, entailing the replacement of state authority with an alternative Islamic system governed by Sharia law (Anugwom, 2018). Importantly, jihad was framed as an obligatory response to systematic deviation from accepted religious norms, collapsing the distinction between moral diagnosis and political action. This prognosis was reinforced through motivational framing, which articulated jihad as a religious obligation incumbent upon Muslims, framed as a continuation of the practices of earlier generations and selectively justified through reference to the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya (Kassim and Nwankpa, 2018).

Drawing on Social Movement Theory, Mohammed Yusuf articulated a framing repertoire that combined diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements in ways that facilitated ideological durability beyond his leadership. Yusuf attributed moral disorder in Nigeria to the perceived dilution of Sharia and the dominance of secular governance, casting Muslims who engaged state legal systems as seeking judgment from illegitimate authorities (*ṭawāghūt*) and thus engaging in polytheism (Kassim and Nwankpa, 2018). Democratic institutions were framed as usurping divine sovereignty. On this basis, Yusuf advanced armed struggle as a

religious obligation once the state compelled Muslims to participate in practices deemed sinful. This framing endowed violence with moral urgency by presenting participation as a sacrificial duty and religious obligation, while defining non-participation as sinful complicity. The coherence and transferability of this framing enabled its reproduction after Yusuf's death, helping to sustain mobilisation and legitimise continued violence despite leadership decapitation.

Interview evidence strongly corroborates this tripartite framing process. Military and security respondents consistently described Boko Haram's mobilisation narratives as portraying the Nigerian state as fundamentally anti-Islamic while presenting violence as both corrective and purifying. As one respondent noted, recruits were repeatedly exposed to narratives emphasising moral contamination under secular rule and the redemptive necessity of jihad, indicating that diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames were deployed simultaneously and reinforcing one another. This convergence between Yusuf's discourse and empirical accounts underscores the centrality of framing processes to Boko Haram's mobilisation and organisational durability.

Under Abubakar Shekau, however, this framing architecture hardened into an uncompromising and exclusionary variant of Salafi-jihadism. Shekau intensified the denunciation of Western education as sinful (haram) and rejected any non-literal or contextual interpretation of Islamic scripture (Kassim and Nwankpa, 2018). Although Boko Haram continued to exploit Western technologies and media pragmatically, Shekau's ideology foreclosed interpretive pluralism, asserting that any belief or practice not explicitly attested in the Qur'an or Hadith constituted *bid'ah* (reprehensible innovation) requiring eradication (Kassim and Nwankpa, 2018).

Boko Haram advances a highly restrictive interpretive framework through which Western influence and cultural imports are categorically rejected, grounded in an uncompromising reading of religious texts that leaves little room for non-literal or contextual readings of the Qur'an. Practices, institutions, or forms of knowledge not explicitly attested in the Qur'an or *hadith* are designated as illegitimate innovations (*bid'a*) and therefore subject to excision (Kassim and Nwankpa, 2018). This doctrinal rigidity departs from the broader and internally diverse Salafi tradition and instead aligns more closely with Wahhabi-inspired doctrinal rigidity (Al-Fahad, 2004). The simplicity and absolutism of this interpretive stance contribute to ideological persistence: by reducing religious authority to a narrow and self-referential canon, the movement minimises interpretive flexibility while maximising doctrinal continuity. As a result, core ideological commitments are easily transmitted and reproduced, remaining resilient to leadership loss and allowing the movement to sustain mobilisation and legitimising narratives despite organisational fragmentation or leadership decapitation.

By contrast, Islamic State West Africa Province exhibits a more pragmatically adaptive ideological orientation, incorporating selective doctrinal flexibility in its engagement with Muslim civilian populations, governance practices, and strategic restraint (Salihu, 2021). ISWAP's comparatively moderated approach, in contrast, trades doctrinal absolutism for strategic adaptability, enabling population management and territorial governance but potentially increasing vulnerability to ideological dilution. This divergence illustrates how rigid doctrinal commitment sustains ideological persistence under decapitation, while more

adaptive frameworks prioritise organisational effectiveness, potentially at the expense of doctrinal coherence.

This case demonstrates how ideological extremity can function simultaneously as a source of resilience and a driver of organisational fragmentation. While Shekau's rigid framing strengthened internal discipline and moral clarity, it undermined strategic flexibility, civilian legitimacy, and coalition maintenance. From an SMT and organisational perspective, extreme framing narrows coalition potential and raises the internal costs of dissent, increasing the likelihood of splintering when ideological rigidity conflicts with survival imperatives. Boko Haram thus illustrates how ideational coherence, when pursued through absolutist framing, can sustain violence while simultaneously precipitating organisational fracture thereby limiting the effectiveness of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism strategy.

The institutionalisation of this framing triad as defined by Benford and Snow (2000), explains Boko Haram's continuity following Yusuf's death and its subsequent fragmentation into Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and ISWAP. Despite divergences in leadership style, targeting practices, and civilian engagement, both factions retained Yusuf's core framing logic (Oriola and Akinola, 2018). Diagnostically, both continued to depict the state as inherently un-Islamic; prognostically, both upheld armed struggles as indispensable, even as ISWAP adapted this frame toward population management and proto governance; motivationally, religious obligation remained central to mobilisation, routinised through sermons, indoctrination, and local command structures.

Ideological resilience within Boko Haram is further reinforced through intergenerational reproduction and early socialisation into violence. Interview data reveal structured efforts to indoctrinate children, embedding militant ideology from an early age. As one serving military officer observed,

"They train small kids. They have classrooms where they draw AK-47 rifles and IEDs... these kids are between 7 to 10 years."

This practice reflects a deliberate strategy of ideological socialisation, whereby beliefs and violent repertoires are transmitted across generations rather than mobilised episodically through leadership charisma. This dynamic is further reinforced by the fact that children socialised within such environments are exposed to these ideological frames from an early age and internalise them over time (Akinringbe and Tegbe, 2020). In the absence of meaningful counter-narratives or alternative interpretive frameworks, these ideologies become normalised and are subsequently reproduced and operationalised as the primary lens through which social and political realities are understood. Consistent with Social Movement Theory, such social embedding transforms ideology into a lived and routinised experience, sustaining commitment through everyday practices and family networks. The production of second-generation fighters reduces organisational reliance on recruitment campaigns and individual leaders, enabling continuity despite leadership decapitation.

5.2 Organisational Architecture and Decentralised Operations

This study finds that Boko Haram's organisational resilience is rooted in a deliberately engineered hybrid architecture that combines centralised ideological authority with decentralised operational execution, strategic resource mobilisation, and adaptive recruitment practices. This structure enables continuity of violence, rapid regeneration after leadership losses, and sustained territorial reach across northern Nigeria. At its apex sits a Supreme spiritual leader, supported by a Shura Council that functions as the movement's governing, judicial, and advisory authority. Beneath this core are Amirs who oversee territorially defined commands (cells), alongside specialised logistics, intelligence, and supply units, autonomous operational cells, and sleeper cells designed to ensure redundancy and survival under military pressure.

Interview data consistently depicts this architecture as expansive, bureaucratic, and territorially embedded. As one seasoned journalist observed:

"They have a structure just like the government... and you will be surprised that in virtually all 19 northern states, they have what you call sub-councils just like state governors. They operate via some cells."

This shadow state configuration reflects a decentralised command-and-control system that allows Boko Haram to operate uninterrupted despite sustained counterinsurgency operations. Another journalist with extensive field exposure to Boko Haram and ISWAP camps explained:

"Now coming to their structure... Boko Haram and ISWAP operate through what you call cells. Most times they operate independently in a way that sometimes members of a cell may not even know members of the other cell but the purpose and aim of the operation is still aligned and their allegiance is to the overall leadership of the group."

The findings demonstrate that the Shura–Amir relationship operates as a vertical–horizontal blend. Vertically, authority flows downward from the Shura Council through strategic direction, ideological guidance, and leadership decisions. Information, intelligence, and operational feedback flow upward, enabling adaptive decision-making grounded in battlefield and logistical realities. Horizontally, coordination is achieved through shared logistics, supply chains, and operational intent across territorially dispersed units. Resources, fighters, weapons platforms, and intelligence are pooled and recombined across commands under Shura oversight, producing what this study conceptualises as cohesion in fragmentation.

The result is a command system capable of surging and recombining capabilities without requiring constant central micro-management precisely the organisational property that insurgent-structure scholarship associates with endurance under sustained counterinsurgency pressure. This configuration allows Boko Haram to absorb losses, reorganise quickly, and maintain operational tempo even when senior leaders are removed. Participants consistently described a decentralised operational model in which sub-cells conduct tactical operations autonomously while remaining ideologically aligned with the movement's overarching objectives. A military commander captured this dynamic succinctly:

"The decentralised nature of Boko Haram ensures that when we take out one leader, another steps in immediately. There is no vacuum."

Another serving military officer elaborated on the depth of this decentralisation:

“They have various cells, they have those that handle equipment, they have drivers, they have people that handle their big guns, they have those that prepare IEDs, they have mechanics, they even have medics who over time they have captured such as medical personnel and medical doctors. They also have supply chains—to supply drugs, PMS, tyres, spare parts and fix it for them.”

These accounts underscore the existence of redundant competencies distributed across cells, ensuring that operational functions—attack planning, logistics, recruitment, medical support, and intelligence—are never concentrated in a single node. Local commanders (Amirs) exercise substantial discretion over territorial operations, reducing reliance on any single figurehead. As one military officer explained:

“When they want to attack any formation of the army or security outfit or police, they delegate functions. You can say this Amir give us 20 fighters, two-gun trucks, the other give us 22-gun trucks, 10 fighters, and they will now select an Amir among themselves to lead the operation. So, this is how they successfully carry out operations.”

Another operational account illustrates how dispersed units converge tactically while remaining structurally independent:

“There was an attack that happened in 2021, we saw four gun trucks coming and passing behind us, but it was out of our reach. They passed through two locations, and we reported it. Other groups came from the other side with one gun truck too. The information was coming... This is how they converge. Any resources they capture, they share within themselves, and this is how they sustain leadership.”

These narratives demonstrate how Boko Haram’s architecture facilitates distributed action with coordinated outcomes, allowing autonomous units to converge rapidly for complex operations and disperse afterward, thereby minimising exposure. These empirical findings align closely with existing scholarship. Zenn (2020b) emphasises that decentralisation enhances insurgent survival by eliminating single points of failure. Each cell remains semi-autonomous yet ideologically connected to central authority, enabling swift leadership transitions and operational continuity following decapitation. This model is consistent with Sageman’s (2004) concept of “leaderless jihad,” which locates organisational resilience in distributed networks and shared identity rather than hierarchical command. It also parallels Al-Qaeda’s post-9/11 organisational mutation and broader networked terrorism theory (Kenney, 2010).

Kenney’s (2010) organisational learning framework further explains how such groups develop redundant skills and diffuse knowledge across cells to mitigate dependency on individual leaders. Boko Haram’s ability to regenerate leadership, recombine resources, and sustain violence reflects precisely this learning logic. Cronin (2009) argues that terrorist organisations with bureaucratic or institutionalised structures are more resistant to leadership decapitation than leader-centric movements, a characterisation that aptly describes Boko Haram. Price (2012) similarly finds that decentralised insurgent groups possess enhanced survivability against leadership targeting. In contrast, Moghadam (2013), Warner and Lizzo (2023), and Lia (2015) caution that decentralisation can produce doctrinal drift and factional violence when

control mechanisms weaken. While such risks are evident in Boko Haram's historical factional splits, the empirical evidence from this study demonstrates that institutionalised governance through the Shura Council has largely mitigated organisational collapse.

From a Social Movement Theory (SMT) perspective, Boko Haram's durability is best understood through its mobilising structures such as the formal and informal arrangements that sustain collective action under repression. The Shura Council functions as the movement's core authoritative and interpretive structure, responsible for ideological arbitration, leadership legitimisation, and strategic framing. This institutionalisation ensures that the movement's collective action frame remains stable even when individual leaders are removed.

Amirs, by contrast, operate as decentralised nodes exercising distributed agency, translating central frames into locally adapted action. The relationship between the Shura and Amirs reflects a system where central authorities link dispersed actors to a shared movement project without direct micromanagement. Vertical authority over ideology and legitimacy coexists with horizontal operational autonomy, producing both coherence and flexibility. In SMT terms, Boko Haram's resilience lies in its capacity to reproduce collective action through organisational depth. Leadership decapitation disrupts individuals, not the mobilising structures, interpretive frames, and authority relations that sustain the movement. Overall, decapitation strategies tend to frame the primary source of organisational power by focusing on individual leaders rather than the underlying organisational structures that enable regeneration and continuity.

5.3 Succession Mechanisms and Leadership Regeneration

Boko Haram's capacity to withstand sustained leadership targeting is best explained by the institutionalisation of succession and authority. Leadership reproduction is embedded within routinised organisational practices overseen by the Shura Council and reinforced by a continuous pipeline of operational commanders cultivated through battlefield performance and ideological vetting. As Jordan (2009) observes the effectiveness of leadership decapitation depends less on leader removal itself than on how leadership is organised within the group. In Boko Haram's case, leadership functions are deliberately distributed across multiple organisational layers, substantially reducing the strategic impact of any loss.

Interview evidence consistently identifies the Shura Council as the organisation's central governance institution, responsible for leadership selection, discipline, and ideological arbitration. A senior military officer explained:

"There is a body known as the Shura Council which is the policy-making body that determines who will be the next leader. They have judges and field commanders... If the leader is killed, there are people who succeed him. The goal is to keep the group running."

This depiction closely aligns with Cronin's (2009) argument that terrorist organisations with bureaucratic or council-based governance structures are less dependent on individual leaders and therefore more resistant to leadership decapitation. In such organisations, leadership removal disrupts personalities rather than authority itself, which is embedded in institutional

routines rather than individual figures. The removal of an Amir, a territorial or operational commander was consistently described by respondents as producing short-term operational disruption but negligible strategic effect. Amirs command geographically bounded units and operate within decentralised cells designed with internal redundancy and clear promotion pathways. A journalist with extensive field exposure to Boko Haram camps noted:

“Everyone knows where he belongs and who is next in line unless some form of mutiny takes place... even if you kill the leader, somebody else will step in.”

This assessment was reinforced by a military commander:

“The decentralised nature of Boko Haram ensures that when we take out one leader, another steps in immediately. There is no vacuum.”

These observations exemplify what Price (2012) describes as substitution effects, whereby decentralised insurgent organisations rapidly replace lost leaders, preventing decapitation from cascading into organisational failure. Leadership emergence at the Amir level is further reinforced through performance-based advancement. An operational commander explained:

“The Amirs tend to grow within the hierarchy... every successful operation and ambush against the military or security operatives, they tend to bring themselves to recognition and grow in hierarchy.”

Such accounts reflect Kenney’s (2010) organisational learning framework, which emphasises how militant groups diffuse skills, authority, and leadership capacity across members to ensure continuity under loss. They also support Sageman’s (2004) contention that networked jihadist organisations derive resilience from distributed competence and shared identity. In this context, decapitating an Amir is largely absorbed by design, yielding transient tactical gains rather than enduring strategic decline.

Decapitating a Shura Council leader targets a qualitatively different layer of the organisation, its governance and legitimisation infrastructure. Whereas Amirs execute violence, the Shura Council arbitrates discipline, authorises leadership, and resolves internal disputes. One respondent described this role succinctly:

“The Shura Council decide matters of discipline... punishment... and can even depose a leader.”

This distinction is analytically significant. The Shura governs who is authorised to lead, not merely who commands fighters. As Moghadam (2013) argues, when central ideological and governance mechanisms weaken, militant organisations face heightened risks of internal contestation and doctrinal divergence. Lia (2015) similarly warns that leadership losses at the governance level can strain internal cohesion when succession authority becomes contested. However, empirical evidence from this study does not substantiate the inference that Shura-level decapitation results in organisational collapse. Respondents repeatedly emphasised continuity through institutional replacement:

“If a leader is decapitated, all they do is just appoint a new person.”

Leadership selection remains governed by consistent doctrinal and operational criteria. As one interviewee explained:

“The way they choose their leaders is based on the ability to launch an attack and knowledge of the group’s ideology.”

This reflects what Gerges (2009) describes as the jihadist preference for doctrinal continuity over charismatic authority, and what Hoffman (2017) identifies as institutionalised leadership as a core survival mechanism under persistent military pressure. Zenn (2020b) similarly documents the Shura Council’s role in maintaining ideological and organisational cohesion across leadership transitions within Boko Haram and ISWAP. Succession within Boko Haram is anticipated, routinised, and embedded in organisational practice through mentorship, hierarchical socialisation, and decentralisation of authority.

This succession logic extends beyond Amirs to the broader fighter base, creating a leadership pipeline that continually replenishes command capacity. As an operational commander noted:

“The Amirs tend to grow within the hierarchy and not just the Amirs but even among the fighters. They can delegate a fighter to plant IEDs... and when it’s successful, the person that leads it tends to come to limelight.”

Zenn (2020a) provides a detailed account of Boko Haram’s internal governance, highlighting how the Shura Council institutionalises leadership transitions to preserve cohesion. Thurston (2017) similarly shows how ISWAP formalised its succession processes to prevent fragmentation. Nwankpa (2025) situates such practices within broader Salafi-Jihadist traditions that prioritise continuity through ideological alignment, while Hoffman (2017) underscores the operational logic of institutional leadership for survival under sustained military onslaught. Gerges (2009) further argues that layered leadership tiers serve not only resilience but also doctrinal preservation across generations. The triangulation of interview evidence and scholarly literature underscores a central conclusion: Boko Haram’s succession system systematically neutralises the strategic effects of leadership decapitation. While removing an Amir is operationally inconsequential in the medium term, even Shura-level targeting fails to dismantle the organisation because leadership reproduction is institutionalised, anticipated, and ideologically regulated. Accordingly, leadership decapitation strategies tend to prioritise the primary source of organisational power, focusing on individuals rather than the succession mechanisms and governance structures that enable regeneration.

5.4 Limits of Leadership Decapitation and the Dynamics of Mutation

Leadership decapitation has become a widely deployed counterterrorism instrument, yet its effects remain deeply contested particularly when applied against ideologically driven and decentralised insurgent organisations. In the case of Boko Haram, the findings of this study indicate that leadership targeting has generated limited and temporary disruption but has not produced durable organisational collapse. Instead, repeated removals of key leaders have been followed by reorganisation, mutation, factionalisation, and, in some instances, escalation, underscoring the limits of kinetic strategy when movements possess ideological depth, decentralised command, and institutionalised mechanisms of regeneration.

The extrajudicial killing of Mohammed Yusuf in 2009 represents a critical rupture in Boko Haram's organisational history. Intended to cut off the head of the snake, Yusuf's death did not dismantle the movement but instead precipitated a period of regrouping and subsequent violent transformation. Interview evidence consistently describes a temporary setback rather than defeat. As a retired officer recalled:

"Leadership decapitation weakens their propaganda temporarily, but that's it. They have mechanisms to resume."

Another respondent similarly noted:

"Historically, it is on record that Boko Haram evolution of the use of violence became very established after the death of Yusuf their founding leader... for almost a year there was no action and like as if they went to regroup and they came fully later part of 2010 or 2011 with a new leader Shekau."

Another military officer emphasised strategic recalibration rather than collapse:

"What leadership decapitation does is just a temporary setback... for the terrorist side, it is an issue of going to re-strategise."

These accounts are consistent with a broad body of insurgency literature arguing that decapitation often induces organisational mutation rather than termination, particularly in movements where early leadership is institutionalised (Prunckun, 2025; Jordan, 2014; Milton and Price, 2020). In Boko Haram's case, Yusuf's death created uncertainty over leadership succession, allowing more violent-oriented actors to challenge the Nigerian government and redirect the group's strategic trajectory. Abubakar Shekau's rise was therefore not just a routine leadership replacement but a reconfiguration of organisational logic. His personalised rule, reliance on extreme violence, and coercive internal discipline initially produced cohesion through fear, yet simultaneously alienated commanders, fighters, and ideological allies planting the seeds for later fragmentation (Mahmood and Ani 2018). These insights align with critiques advanced by Cronin (2006), Johnston (2012), and Jordan (2009), who argue that decapitation is least effective against decentralised or ideologically embedded organisations where cohesion is not leader centric.

Fragmentation became explicit with the split between Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) under Shekau and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) faction associated with Abu Musab al-Barnawi. Interviewees consistently attributed this breakdown to leadership disputes and ideological breakdown. One participant noted:

"When Shekau failed after some months or some years, another faction of ISWAP broke out from Boko Haram. Both ISWAP and Boko Haram are the same thing- terrorists."

Others emphasised that the threat did not disappear but shifted organisational form:

"Boko Haram has been splitted into groups and the major one that is currently a challenge to Nigeria is ISWAP."

Shekau's indiscriminate violence particularly against Muslim civilians and rival commanders generated internal resistance and defections, culminating in a faction that sought to restore

discipline, population management, and external legitimacy (Mamood and Ani, 2018). As another respondent explained:

“ISWAP broke away because of Shekau’s erratic leadership... but now ISWAP is more dangerous with support from ISIS.”

This pattern reflects what Staniland (2018) characterises as competitive institutionalisation, whereby insurgent groups fragment into rival factions pursuing divergent organisational strategies while remaining anchored in a shared ideological lineage. In this respect, leadership decapitation did not eliminate Boko Haram; instead, it reconfigured the organisation into parallel factions with distinct threat profiles as a form of adaptive survival strategy. This fragmentation enabled the movement to mitigate leadership loss, sustain operations under military pressure, and avoid sticking to the same approach when circumstances change. While Shekau’s JAS faction relied on coercion and extreme violence to enforce loyalty and maintained control over parts of the Sambisa Forest, ISWAP leveraged its affiliation with the Islamic State to consolidate resources, training, and strategic direction around the Lake Chad Basin.

This bifurcation mirrors findings in the wider literature that fragmentation can enhance insurgent resilience by organisational forms and tactics diversifying (Schubiger, 2023; Price, 2012). Rather than a zero-sum outcome, Boko Haram’s split produced differentiated trajectories: Shekau’s faction became increasingly isolated and territorially constrained, while ISWAP evolved into a more structured, regionally embedded, and strategically disciplined insurgent organisation. The eventual death of Abubakar Shekau further illustrates how decapitation can reconfigure rather than terminate insurgent violence (Albert, 2021). Interviewees noted that while Shekau’s removal weakened JAS, it did not end Boko Haram’s operations:

“Removing leadership has not solved any problem... Shekau has gone but Boko Haram still remains.”

Instead, Shekau’s death accelerated ISWAP’s consolidation as the dominant faction, redistributing authority and territorial control rather than producing organisational collapse. This intra-movement decapitation reinforces Jordan’s (2019) synthesis that leadership targeting is least effective against organisations with institutional depth and multiple leadership nodes, where violence can be redistributed rather than eliminated. While fragmentation introduced internal violence and competition, it also expanded the insurgent ecosystem, enabling survival through organisational diversification. It demonstrates a mechanism-based relationship in which leadership removal interacts with pre-existing decentralisation, ideological cohesion, and succession capacity to produce mutation rather than collapse.

6 Conclusion

Boko Haram’s leadership is not by accident or arbitrarily appointed. As confirmed by both field data from this study and scholars (e.g. Zenn, 2020(b); Thurston, 2017; Hoffman, 2017), the group Shura council offers a well-structured leadership succession mechanism that goes

beyond the loss of individual leaders. This structure which is rooted in ideological alignment, ensures continuity of the group's strategic focus and the use of frames to drive its ideological vision in line with Quranic exegesis. This research makes several original contributions to the academic understanding of terrorism, insurgency and social movements in African context. It affirms the SMT's explanatory value in analysing insurgent mobilisation, particularly through political opportunities, resource strategies, and ideological framing. However, by applying the SMT to violent extremist group like Boko Haram and critically examining its limitations, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to broaden SMT's applicability beyond non-violent resistance movements. The study reassesses dominant narratives that equate leadership removal with insurgent collapse, offering evidence-based critique of such assumptions in African context, using Boko Haram as a case study. Sole reliance on kinetic responses, including decapitation is insufficient to dismantle the group.

While the SMT offers a robust framework for analysing the socio-political conditions that foster insurgency, it falls short in fully capturing the dynamics of violent religious extremism and accounting for the group's resilience in the face of leadership decapitation. Traditional SMT models assume voluntary participation, rational actors, and largely secular goals (Benford and Snow, 2000). Boko Haram in contrast, uses coercion, and religious absolutism that devalues individual life and justification of martyrdom as organising principles. Spiritual incentives, including promises of rewards in the afterlife, play a central role in recruitment dynamics and in sustaining patterns of violence. These incentives operate alongside systematic, multigenerational indoctrination practices, including early-age socialisation and forced recruitment through coercion. Such processes produce durable participation that extends beyond individual choice, indicating that mobilisation within the movement is shaped by structural constraint, socialisation, and compulsion across generations. Boko Haram's resource networks often operate through criminality and not legitimate support networks (Commolli, 2015), highlighting limitations in the assumptions underlying SMT.

Overall, counterterrorism strategies centred primarily on leadership decapitation are insufficient to undermine insurgent durability. More effective approaches combine leadership targeting with sustained, bottom-up counter-radicalisation efforts that address the ideological and social foundations of mobilisation. In the case of Boko Haram, engagement with locally credible religious authorities, community leaders, and civil society actors can weaken the legitimising frames that sustain violence. By disrupting the social and intergenerational transmission of extremist ideology, such measures offer greater potential to limit organisational continuity and reduce long-term insurgent resilience.

6.1 Implications For Practice and Policy

The study offers sustainable strategies encompassing governance reforms, socio-economic development, and ideological recalibration, offering actionable implications for practitioners, policy makers, and security strategies.

Governance Reforms: Restoring State Legitimacy and Justice

The persistence of Boko Haram is closely linked to governance deficits in Nigeria, particularly in the northeast and the wider Lake Chad Basin region. The erosion of state presence in rural and border communities has created ungoverned spaces that the group exploits to establish parallel systems of governance, arms circulation, taxation, and justice. Restoring state legitimacy requires reasserting territorial control and rebuilding public trust through inclusive, accountable governance.

Securing Ungoverned spaces:

The porous borders in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states along the fringes of Niger, Chad and Cameroon serves as a critical transit corridor for arms, illicit trade, and fighters. Effective border control should combine increased deployment of security personnel with Unmanned Ariel Vehicles (UAVs) and regional intelligence sharing under the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). However, securitization should be complimented with broader civil administration presence of the police, immigration, armed forces, courts, civil registries, and social services as a symbol of state authority in those places.

Anti- Corruption and Human Rights Enforcement:

Endemic corruption in security agencies and local governance structures undermines the credibility of counterterrorism efforts and fosters citizens resentment. Strengthening anti-corruption institutions such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent and Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) should be complemented by transparent procurement and personnel practices within the military and police. Moreover, a coherent human rights framework is essential. Frequent reported cases of arbitrary arrests, torture, and extra judicial killings by security agencies, has created a grievance narrative for insurgent exploitation. Institutionalizing human rights training for security personnels, civil military relationships, and public reporting systems, would mitigate impunity and align counterinsurgency within the ambit of democratic norms.

Judicial System Reforms

The unlawful detention of suspected Boko Haram fighters in military and correctional centres without trial contravenes due process and often ignite the perceptions of state injustice. Reforming the Judicial process requires establishment specialised courts handling of terrorism related cases with terrorism specific trial procedures and evidence handling protocols. Though the military is not trained to be gathering evidence in battlefield, however for the purposes of trial of terrorist suspects, there is the need for special training of military personnels on evidence gathering in battlefields. Anyone indicted or caught for financing terrorism should be brought to justice irrespective of status or political affiliations and must be prosecuted according to the law. Accelerating trial timelines, ensuring fair representation, and providing transparency in legal proceedings would uphold the rule of law and counter insurgent narratives of state injustice.

Ideological Recalibration: Countering Extremist Worldviews

The combination of poor governance, economic hardship, and the manipulation of religious ideology forms the core foundations for Boko Haram's ideological coherence and persuasive propaganda. Combating violent extremism requires a nuanced and culturally grounded

strategy of ideological engagement, not merely top-down communication or securitized suppression through official communication.

Community- Based Counter-Narrative

Extremist ideologies remain powerful in environments where credible alternative interpretations of Islamic teachings are inaccessible or delegitimized. Boko Haram's religious doctrine is a distorted form of Islamic teaching built on literal interpretations, selective readings, and fabricated hadiths. The construction of counter-narratives must begin at the community level, using local languages, symbols, and idioms to frame peace, coexistence, and justice as Islamic virtues. Engaging traditional rulers, youth influencers, Qur'anic teachers, and moderate clerics can lend authenticity to these efforts. Public sermons, radio jingles, drama, and social media campaigns should be deployed strategically to amplify these messages.

Religious Leader Partnerships:

Ideological recalibration is critical using trusted Islamic scholars. The state should facilitate training programmes that equip clerics to challenge extremist interpretations with scriptural depth and rhetorical skill. However, partnerships must be carefully managed to avoid perceptions of state co-optation, which can erode credibility. Independent Islamic platforms, perhaps supported by reputable Islamic institutions may provide effective legitimacy. Partnerships with religious leaders and moderate Islamic scholars are essential to constructing theological counter-messaging capable of neutralizing extremist propaganda, particularly on peace and tolerance in the Qur'an, the prohibition of killing, and the legitimacy of secular governance. Reforming curricula in Qur'anic schools is vital with a fusion of secular and Islamic education.

Defector Rehabilitation and Reintegration:

With thousands of Boko Haram defectors and surrendered fighters, reintegration becomes a frontline issue, though many are perceived as politically driven, insufficiently transparent, and resented by communities who see them as rewarding terrorists. The reintegration of former terrorist remains critical for long-term peacebuilding. Successful rehabilitation requires a multi-pronged approach: to deconstruct extremist dogma, trauma healing through psychological counselling, community support through sensitization campaigns to reduce resentment, and mentoring and mentorship programs to reduce recidivism. Reintegration should be anchored in community trust-building mechanisms which includes restorative justice models, truth-telling forums, and victim-led reconciliation. Civil-society rather than the military can play a bridging role between state institutions and local communities, facilitating dialogue, monitoring reintegration outcomes, and advocating for victim-centred approaches.

Finally, the deployment of heavy weaponry and explosives has contributed to the destruction of farmlands, resulting in reduced soil fertility, land degradation, and a significant destruction of vegetation essential for sustaining rural economies. These environmental disruptions have adversely affected agricultural productivity, food scarcity, and the primary means of livelihood for many communities but also facilitates the weaponisation of poverty. Consequently, these conditions have increased the vulnerability of the local population and facilitated easy recruitment by Boko Haram, promising security, income and status where

possession of arms becomes a symbol of authority and survival. This reality raises a critical reflection: Does the predominant reliance on kinetic (military) approaches effectively resolve the insurgency or does it inadvertently entrench the very conditions that sustain it?

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The author confirm that this manuscript is original and has not been previously published, in whole or in part, nor made publicly available in any form. The manuscript is not currently under consideration by any other journal, and the authors affirm that it will not be submitted elsewhere while under review.

Ethics

All information obtained during the research was treated with strict confidentiality, and the anonymity of participants was fully protected. Participants were informed in advance of the scope of confidentiality and of any potential limitations associated with the information they provided. Robust procedures were implemented to safeguard both the confidentiality of the data and the anonymity of participants across all research materials and outputs. The researcher ensured transparency by providing sufficient detail about the research design, methods, and findings in all publications to enable rigorous scholarly assessment. The limitations of the study, including those relating to reliability, accessibility, and applicability, were clearly acknowledged.

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