

Evaluating Operation Safe Corridor as a Strategy of Counter-Terrorism Policy in the North East of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: This paper evaluates Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), as a Nigerian counter-terrorism policy. Nigerian counter-terrorism policies have been criticised by scholars for its reliance on kinetic approaches, which is believed to have impinged on its effectiveness and efficiency. As a counter-terrorism policy, OPSC was introduced by federal government in September 2015 to provide demobilisation, de-radicalisation and reintegration routes to surrendering and repentant ex-Boko Haram combatants. Strategic Decision-Making Theory was applied as a theoretical framework. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data collection and analysis. The paper discovered that OPSC was introduced as non-kinetic counter-terrorism strategy as evidenced by 492(49.8%) of respondents. This paper concludes that OPSC has not directly helped in winning the hearts and minds of the general population in the terrorised/host communities as they have continued to stigmatise, and at most times, rejected the reintegration of ex-Boko-Haram combatants. The study, therefore, recommends restructuring of OPSC, to enable the operators differentiate those that surrendered willingly from those overwhelmed by hunger/starvation and the superior fire power of Nigerian counter-terrorist operators. To assuage the challenges faced with reintegration of the ex-Boko Haram militants, the research recommends amongst others, the prioritization of welfare of victims of Boko Haram attacks in terrorised communities.

KEYWORDS: Policy, Terrorism, Security, Operation Safe Corridor

INTRODUCTION

The activities of terrorist groups have destabilized national, regional, and international systems, making terrorism a social disorder in global peace and security discourse. The insidious nature of terrorism comes with debilitating effects on the security, socio-economic, and overall development of societies. The United States of America (US) witnessed more than 2,600 terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2013, causing about 3,500 fatalities. The September 11, 2001 (9/11) attack on the World Trade Centre in the U.S. and the Pentagon is one of the worst terrorist attacks in the world and it increased the global consciousness of terrorism, hence the 'global war against terror'. The coherent U.S. counter-terrorism policy was a result of the 9/11 attack and is aimed at crushing global terror-sponsoring individuals and organizations.

Between 1985 and 1986, France experienced 13 terrorist attacks, and for over 30 years the United Kingdom (UK) witnessed terrorist attacks from the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). Between 1970 and 2007, the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) group, launched different terrorist attacks in Spain. Russia has also witnessed different coordinated terrorist attacks, which includes the in-flight explosions of two airfrom the Moscow airport of Domodedov; the suicide bombing of the Moscow metro, and the hostage-taking of School Number One in the North Ossetian town of Beslan. The terrorist attacks in the European continent made Europe both a target and a base for terrorism, hence the European Union (EU) member state security services formed the counter-terrorism-focused cooperation group called the Counter Terrorism Group (CTG).

In Asia, terrorism in the Philippines dates to 1967-68, coinciding with the escalating tensions between China and the Soviet Union. The Abu Sayyaf (ASG) terror group emerged in the Philippines in 1990 and caused severe human and material losses to the Philippines and the ASEAN region as a whole. The People's Republic of China has witnessed terrorist attacks since the late 1980s as a result of the grievances of non-Han ethnic minorities, particularly Uyghurs. However, it is essential to mention that China's anti-terrorism policy has evolved over the past six decades, reflecting its transformation from pariah to significant power (Gill & Murphy, 2005).

Africa has witnessed terrorism, especially in the Eastern region, with the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam bombed in 1998, killing 291 and 10 people respectively, and the Mombasa attack in Kenya in November 2002. The Sahel and Lake Chad Basins of West Africa have witnessed Jihadist terrorism as evidenced by the attacks by 'Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidalis Awati

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WaL-Jihad' (Boko Haram), Islamic States of West Africa Province (an affiliate of ISIL), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and Jama'aNusral UL-Islam Wal al Muslims affiliated to the Al-Qaeda terrorist group (Madubuegwu et al, 2021).

In Nigeria, the Islamist sect known as "Jama'atuAhlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad" aka Boko Haram by the locals, meaning "Western education is sin" emerged in the city of Maiduguri in Borno state in 2009. The movement quickly spread to other parts of the North-Eastern states of Nigeria, particularly Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states. Boko Haram group ideologically condemned Western education, believing that Western education's influence is evil and corrupting Muslims. It is estimated that over 10,000 people were killed by the Boko Haram sect between 2009 and 2021(Sakariyau & Bello, 2024).

The federal government of Nigeria established different counter-terrorism policies which include the Terrorism Prevention Act of 2011; evaluation of the Terrorism Prevention Act of 2011, in 2013; articulation of the National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST- 2014) resulting in Counter-terrorism Operations Restore Order I, II, and III in June 2011, BOYONA in May 2013, Zaman Lafiya in August 2013, and Lafiya Dole in 2015 and Operation Safe Corridor September 2015 as another counter-terrorism policy (Eji, 2016; Ugwueze & Onuoha, 2020).

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

Understanding Policy

Presthus (1975) views policy as a predetermined course of action or approach chosen from a set of alternatives and evaluated in consideration of the circumstances at hand. Roberts (2024) maintains that policy serves as a guide for the ascertainment of future decisions. This may be private, public, and sometimes foreign as the case and situation may apply. Ikelegbe (1996) argues that policies play crucial role in shaping various aspects of our society, including the provision of social services, fuel costs, the accessibility of imported goods, the extent of our economic activities, the availability of agricultural loans and employment opportunities, job security, and tax rates. It is on these backdrops that Dror (1968) conceptualized policy as a major guideline for action. According to Jacob (2019, p. 480), "a policy option made by an individual is known as private policy because it affects the person alone and no other person. Barret and Fudge (1981, p.5, cited in Jacob, 2019) argued that "public policy" refers to when a policy:

Emanates from the 'public sector' including both the institutions and central and local government and state created agencies such as water or health authorities, commissions, and corporations... it may be implemented through and directed at a wide variety of individuals and organizations may or may not be part of the state apparatus, and which may be greater on in lesser degree independent.

Presthus (1975, p. 14), maintains that public policy refers to "a definite course or method of action selected from among alternatives and in the light of given conditions to guide and usually determine present and future decisions."

Meaning of Terrorism

Nkata (2023) opines that academics, analysts, and governments have always struggled to define terrorism because of its lack of a universally acceptable definition. According to Ramsey (2015), the true enigma surrounding terrorism lies not in the purported challenge of defining the term, but rather in the widespread and frequent usage of the word, despite the absence of a clear understanding of its intended meaning. However, the United Nations (UN) views terrorism as a repeated violent action employed by (semi) clandestine individuals, groups, or state actors for criminal or political purposes against soft targets (Bakker, 2014, p.2, Badey, 1998). The British government views terrorism as the use of violence for political purposes and the use of violence to put the public, or any segment of the public, in fear, as a result of attacks on computer installations, electronic data, or public utilities (Teichman, 1989). Roberts et al., (2022) see terrorism as a conglomerate of different factors including religion, economic and political. Jackson (2011) and Bryan (2012) view terrorism as a social construct, not a helpful analytical concept, but merely a label used by those with power to mobilise opinion against violence of which they disapprove. For Marighela (1999), 'one man's terrorist is another man's liberator,' ironically, yesterday's hero may be today's terrorist. Without a clear definition of what the act of terrorism symbolizes, the world is presented with constantly shifting situations and images that make it difficult to define terrorism. For Booth and Dunne (2001), terrorism is a political strategy that involves the use of violence or the intentional creation of fear among civilians and civilian infrastructure. Its purpose is to change conduct, administer punishment, or seek revenge. Saleem (2002) characterised terrorism as a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that violates the limits of description.

Security Explained

According to Sunday & Roberts (2021, p. 230), "the concept of security is plethora in nature. Several attempts have been made by several scholars to conceptualise security from different perspectives." Gallie (1995, p. 167, cited in Sunday & Roberts, 2021, p. 230) views the term 'security' as an 'essentially contested concept', in that there are no assumptions of agreement as to its meaning and that this lack of agreement constitutes a widely recognised ground for philosophical inquiry. Nwankwo (2012) views security as the condition of being protected or secure from peril or risk. Security, according to Alahira (2011), is a safeguard against criminal activity, violence, enemy assault, and emancipation from prison. For example, one could say that strict security measures

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were implemented during the president's visit. As Francis et al. (2005) state, security is the condition of being free from danger, fear, anxiety, poverty, and oppression. According to Roberts (2024-unpublished work), security is generally understood to encompass the absence of peril, danger, or apprehension; protection; assurance; and the capacity of a country to safeguard and defend itself, advance its cherished ideals and legitimate interests and improve the welfare of its citizens. Okene (2011) sees security as the state of being secured or free from danger and risk. It is a situation where either an individual, social group or geo-political entity is protected against any form of danger, espionage or attack of any sort, internally or externally. For Zabadi (2005), security is the condition in which neither individuals nor property are at risk of physical or moral harm, theft, depreciation, or harm. Zabadi's perspective is linked to preserving the state and its citizens. The concept of "security has gone beyond merely setting up roadblocks and parading streets" (Roberts & Ekot, 2023, p. 7).

Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC)

Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) was established as a non-coercive approach to ending Boko Haram terrorism in the North Eastern zone of Nigeria. OPSC establishment resulted from several failed negotiation attempts by the federal government to persuade Boko Haram to stop their violent attacks, leaving the state with little or no option "but to incentivize the insurgents to defect to weaken the group and rehabilitate the defectors. As the outcome of the National Security Council Meeting held in September 2015, OPSC was established through a convening order issued by President Muhammadu Buhari (Hassan, 2022 p. 153)". According to Idris et al., (Daily Trust, 2021), members of Boko Haram's faction loyal to Shekau were left with little or no option than to either join the splinter faction (ISWAP) or to surrender to the federal government following death of Shekau who was said to have killed himself during a confrontation with ISWAP a Boko Haram splinter group. Hassan (2022, p. 157) posits that "increased military pressure, closely monitored borders, and the willingness of forcibly conscripted members to escape has led to an increase in the number of ex-combatants defecting from the group."

OPSC was, therefore, designed as a conflict management strategy to provide surrendering and repentant ex-Boko Haram/ISWAP combatants with demobilisation, deradicalisation and reintegration routes (Hamidu, & Bulila, 2024). However, as the management of the conflict in the North East dictates, the eligibility for the programme was expanded to include the following (a) released convicted associated persons (b) Discharged associated persons. Hassan (2022) maintains that OPSC is implemented by the National Orientation Agency (NOAA), National Identity Management Commission (NIMC), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), and the Federal Ministry of Human Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development (FMHADMSD). Furthermore, Hassan & Routley, (2022) maintains that the focus of OPSC is exclusively on low-level and low-risk Boko Haram members that surrendered during military onslaught and those who joined Boko Haram by conscription and are disenchanted with the leadership and the group's activities.

Theoretical Framework

The Strategic Decision-Making Theory was triggered by the works of Miles and Snow (1978), and later by Porter (1980, 1985). According to Eisenhardt & Zbaracki (1992), strategic decision-making is central among the various issues of strategic processes. The significance of this lies in its involvement with pivotal determinations that influence the trajectory of a company or a nation-state. The extensive scholarly discourse has centred on whether managerial decision-making processes hold significance or not. Dean & Sharfman (1996, p. 369) argues that the link between effectiveness and strategic decision-making rests on two basic assumptions:

1. That different processes lead to different choices, which is to say that Strategic Decision Making (SDM) processes influence the choices organizations make.
2. That different choices lead to different outcomes – that all choices are not equally good.

It is therefore pertinent to state that for the Strategic Decision-Making process-effectiveness link to exist, both assumptions must be true. Dean & Sharfman posit that decision processes are related to strategic choices; however, the assumption may appear intuitively obvious. According to Bourgeois (1984), one outstanding argument supporting this position is that some managers make very poor strategic choices with devastating consequences for their firms, while others in very similar circumstances make much better choices. For a state, the managers refer to those saddled with the responsibilities of policy formulation or policymakers.

Arsham (2010, p. 80) argues that decisions are essential to achieving success, and there are times when they can be challenging, perplexing, and nerve-racking. Typically, a decision involves three steps:

- a.) A recognition of a need - a dissatisfaction within oneself (a void or need);
- b.) A decision to change - to fill the void or need; and
- c.) A conscious dedication to implement the decision.

The issue of Boko Haram terrorism in the North East has caused unprecedented damage to the security and socio-economic development of the region; therefore, making the right decisions is not only what the government wants to do but what it must do as well. On the one hand, the consequences of not making a decision could be more severe than those of making the incorrect choice. This is exactly what Strategic Decision Making is all about. The phased process aims to eliminate policymakers' decidophobia.

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The inability of the Nigerian government to completely destroy the structure and capacity behaviour of the Boko Haram sect operating in the North Eastern region between the examined periods, demonstrates the inadequacy of Nigeria's counter-terrorism policy content. Nigerian counter-terrorism operations in the North East have been largely kinetic hence the introduction of Operation Safe Corridor (non-kinetic). The shift from kinetic to non-kinetic policy is a product of Strategic Decision-Making Theory (SDM). The SDM theory, therefore, provides the theoretical framework to analyse Nigeria's counter-terrorism policy in the North East. The theory's assumptions provide a strategic guide on how to identify Nigeria's counter-terrorism policy deficiencies and provide the necessary policy formulation proposal, adoption/legislation, implementation, and evaluation guidelines capable of producing a more effective and potent counter-terrorism policy.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a hybrid research design, offering logical and methodological flexibility, and providing an in-depth understanding of smaller cases (Maxwell, 2016). Structured questionnaires and a semi-structured in-depth interview guide (IDI) were utilized in the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data for the study. The questionnaire was used for the collection of quantitative data and consisted of two sections. Section 1 consisted of the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and the substantive issue of the Nigerian Counter-terrorism Policy in the North East and its effectiveness on Boko Haram activities. The semi-structured in-depth interview (IDI) guide was used for the collection of qualitative data. The importance of understanding individuals' experiences and peculiarities around shared events is emphasized by this approach (Mangly, 2010). The approach can examine changes over time in individuals' experiences, which makes it ideal and unique for this research.

The population of this study constitutes the population of the six constituent states of the North Eastern geopolitical zone which are Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Bauchi, Gombe, and Taraba states. Between the Guinea Coast's thick tropical rain forest and the Sahara's wide dry expanse sites the North Eastern zone of Nigeria. The zone is bordered to the east by Cameroon, to the north Niger and Chad, to the west by North-Central Nigeria, and the south by South-Eastern Nigeria between latitude 11° 32' and 11° 4' north and longitude 13° 32' and 13° 25' east (Ibrahim, 2012). This zone, include the current states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe, makes up the largest geopolitical zone in Nigeria. The table below shows some selected states' populations.

Table 1: National Population Commission 2021 population projection

S/No.	States	Population of female	Population of Male	Total Population
1	Adamawa	2,384,483	2,394,394	4,778,877
2	Borno	2,968,117	3,027,154	5,995,271
3	Yobe	1,751,931	1,813,327	3,565,258
Total				14,339,406

Source: Modified from the NPC 2021 population projection



Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing the North Eastern states

Source: upload.wikimedia.org

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Major economic activities in the North Eastern zone include farming, and livestock production (Cattle, sheep, and goats). They are also involved in minor mining of solid minerals. This study evaluates the Operation Safe Corridor as a non-kinetic Nigerian counter-terrorism strategy. Using purposive sampling, three North-Eastern states (Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states) were selected for this study. The North Eastern zone of Nigeria is the birthplace of the Boko Haram sect and has “the most extreme dimension of insecurity, especially in the Northern part of Nigeria, and its geographical spread across the West African sub-region has attendant security implications (Uchechukwu et al., 2020, p.196). The data collection for this study involved identifying participants from various professions (security, farmers, traders, schools, and business people), who have resided or worked in the selected North Eastern states and are 18 years or older. A total of one thousand and seventy-seven (1077) copies of online questionnaire were distributed to the respondents, of which nine hundred and eighty-eight (988) copies were validly completed and used for the analysis. 12 in-depth interviews were additionally conducted with purposively selected participants. The data was collected between November 2022 and July 2023. Quantitative data was processed using SPSS version 20.0 and analysed data was presented using descriptive statistical charts and tables. Qualitative data was transcribed, translated, and analysed using NVivo 10. Membership checking was employed to ensure data quality and both quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated.

Findings

The findings of this study are presented in two sections. The first section of the findings is a description of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second section deals with the thematic issues that emerged from the data as shown in table 2 below:

Table 2: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

<i>Description</i>	<i>Demographic Variables</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Age	18 – 22	191	19.3
	23 – 32	146	14.8
	33 – 45	112	11.3
	46 – 52	212	21.5
	53 and above	327	33.1
	Total	988	100
Gender	Female	232	23.5
	Male	756	76.5
	Total	988	100
Marital Status	Single	155	15.7
	Married	643	65.1
	Divorced	30	3.0
	Widow/Widower	160	16.2
	Total	988	100
Educational Attainment	No formal education	142	14.4
	First school leaving Certificate	201	20.3
	WASSCE/NECO/GCE	296	30.0
	OND/HND/B.sc	228	23.1
	M.Sc. MA/Ph.D.	121	12.2
	Total	988	100
Occupation	Public Servants	248	25.1
	Civil Servants	121	12.2
	Civil Society	81	8.2
	Business	276	28.0
	Security Operative	181	18.3
	Farmers	81	8.2
	Total	988	100
Religious affiliation?	Christianity	301	30.5
	Islam	623	63.0
	African Traditional Religion	64	6.5
	Total	988	100

Field study: 2023

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Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The findings are as follows:

- **Age:** 53(33.1%) and above is the highest age range followed by 42-52(21.5%), while 33-45(11.5%) is the lowest age range.
- **Gender:** The majority of the respondents were Male 756(76.5%), while Female were 232(23.5%).
- **Marital Status:** The majority of the respondents were married, represented by 643(65.1%), followed by 160(16.2%) who are widows/widowers, and the least is divorced 30(3.0%).
- **Educational Attainment:** The majority of the respondents had WASSCE/NECO/GCE 296(30.0%), followed by 228(23.1) who had OND/HND/BSc. The lowest was 121(12.2), who had MSc. /MA/PhD.
- **Occupation:** The majority of the respondents were business people 276(28.0%), followed by public servants 248(25.1) and the least were farmers 81(8.2%) and civil societies 81(8.2%).
- **Religious affiliation:** The majority of the respondents practice Islamic religion 623(63.0%), followed by Christians 301(30.5%). The least are respondents who practice African Traditional Religion 64(6.5%).

To interrogate what constitutes the Nigerian counter-terrorism policy, questions were asked on the nature of the strategies deployed by the Nigerian government, such as military operations, operation safe corridor, interagency collaboration, violation of human rights, and deployment of Multi-National Joint Task-Force (MNJTF) against the Boko Haram sect. The findings are in Table 5.

Table 3: Nigerian Counter-Terrorism Policy is based on the Utilization of Military Operations only.

Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	28	2.8
Disagree	18	1.8
Undecided	71	7.2
Agree	389	39.4
Strongly Agree	482	48.8
Total	988	100

Field study: 2023

Table 3 shows that a majority of the respondents, 482(48.8%), strongly agreed that Nigerian counter-terrorism policy is largely military-oriented, while 18(1.8%) disagreed. This implies that the Nigerian government has consistently adopted the kinetic approach in its attempt to resolve the Boko haram terrorist operations in the North Eastern zone.

The qualitative data corroborated the quantitative data, as some respondents emphasized the importance of utilizing military force. Interviewees presented arguments from different perspectives. Emenike (2022, Interview) argues that, for an insurgent group armed to the teeth, what would you suggest we use to engage them except weapons? We use military force because Boko-Haram is not an NGO or any other civilian organization at that, they are not doing civil unrest, they are rather very violent, armed, and willing to kill. Therefore, our policy has always been to suppress them with superior military capacity.

Onuoha (2022, Interview), avers that Operation Safe Corridor has helped Boko Haram members, especially those conscripted. They saw the opportunity to repent, denounce, and reunite their families. Though the Nigerian government has consistently deployed the military against every form of conflict or unrest in Nigeria, the extent it has been effective is highly questionable. To most intellectuals, the deployment of the military is a hangover from military culture. This is why according to Onuoha, "the civilian leadership is not yet democratic; the military rule culture still has an overbearing influence on our leadership approach". Instead of just pushing the military to suppress every conflict, they might as well try other options, though, in the case of Boko-Haram, it probably requires more of military expedition.

To understand other policies besides the kinetic approach identified above, the study further interrogated if the Operation Safe Corridor was a deliberate policy different from the kinetic approach, initiated to counter Boko Haram terrorist operations. The findings are shown in table 4.

Table 4: Operation Safe-Corridor was introduced as a non-kinetic approach in Nigerian counter-terrorism policy.

Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	17	1.7
Disagree	22	2.2
Undecided	81	8.2
Agree	376	38.1
Strongly Agree	492	49.8
Total	988	100

Field study: 2023

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Table 4 shows that a majority of the respondents 492(49.8%), strongly agreed that the Nigerian government formulated the Operation Safe-Corridor strategy as a non-kinetic approach in her attempt to resolve the Boko-Haram terrorist onslaught, while 17(1.7%) strongly agreed. Perhaps having adopted the outright or kinetic approach of full military force and having achieved little or no result, the government re-strategized and tried other options that were less or non-kinetic in nature.

To further evaluate the efficacy of Operation Safe Corridor as a non-kinetic counter-terrorism strategy, another variable was used as shown in the table below:

Table 5: Operation Safe-Corridor has successfully helped in disarming, de-radicalizing, and re-integrating repentant Boko Haram fighters

Options	Frequency	Percent
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	440	44.5
<i>Disagree</i>	309	31.3
<i>Undecided</i>	70	7.1
<i>Agree</i>	86	8.7
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	83	8.4
Total	988	100

Field study: 2023

The quantitative data corroborates the qualitative data. For some respondents, Operation Safe Corridor lacked the capacity to identify repentant Boko Haram combatants or members as some of the acclaimed repentant members of Boko Haram could have surrendered because of the overwhelming firepower of the Nigerian counter-terrorism operators. Most of them also would have surrendered because of hunger, while there might also be some of them who are undercover agents for the Boko Haram sect. The interviewees argued from different perspectives.

For Olere (2022, Interview), the major issue with Operation Safe Corridor is how to ascertain the genuine repentance of Boko Haram members/combatants. “How sure are you that it was not because of the overwhelming firepower of the Military especially with the newly acquired Tukano fighter jets and other weapons by the Nigerian Military?” It could have been hunger and lack of supplies that brought them out of their hiding. Michael (2022, Interview) argues that it is difficult to monitor them when they move out of the facility? Statistics have shown that many of them went back to continue with their terrorist activities. The implication is that they only came to compromise/infiltrate the entire operation. On the reintegration, it is also difficult to return the supposed repentant Boko Haram members to the same village where they killed and destroyed properties. “You expect their victims to accept them with open arms without restitution to the crimes committed.” Stephen (2022, Interview) maintains that, most of those Boko Haram members were exhausted because of the heavy bombardment by the military. However, Operation Safe Corridor has helped to change the human rights abuse allegations on Nigeria by the international community and has given Nigeria a better image which has enabled the country to acquire the needed weapons to fight Boko Haram and its splinter group (ISWAP).

Considering that the general population of the terrorized communities is a key factor in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, another variable to ascertain the success of Operation Safe Corridor as a non-kinetic counter-terrorism strategy, as shown in the table 6 below:

Table 6: Operation Safe-Corridor has successfully helped to win the hearts and minds of the North Eastern general population

Options	Frequency	Percent
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	270	27
<i>Disagree</i>	199	20
<i>Undecided</i>	62	6.3
<i>Agree</i>	175	17.7
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	282	29.0
Total	988	100

Field study: 2023

Majority of the respondents 282(29%) strongly agreed that Operation Safe Corridor has helped to win the hearts and minds of the general population of the North East followed by a close margin of 270 (27%) who strongly disagreed.

The qualitative data was not aligned with the quantitative data, albeit with a slight margin. Operation Safe Corridor according to Dangeri, (2022, Interview), is one of the best things the government has done as soft approach in countering Boko Haram terrorism. However, the concerns remain how they have carried on with the victims of their attack and the communities too. “The

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communities will never welcome people that have killed and destroyed properties with open arms. Government must find ways to appease the victims of Boko Haram attacks and the communities before reintegrating them. In the same vein, Gozha, (2022, Interview), posits that Operation safe Corridor is not in any way helpful to the communities who have been terrorized by these hoodlums, because their repentance or reintegration has not restored the infrastructures destroyed them. “They even come back to meet the people whose family members they killed, and that creates unnecessary tension in the communities”

James (2022, Interview), opines that even though Operation Safe Corridor has helped take away some of the most notorious Boko haram fighters off the battle ground but it may not have direct implication on the general wellbeing of the terrorized communities. Government should focus on quick impact projects in terrorized communities. Joseph, (2022, Interview), interjects that it cannot be ascertained that the people in Operation Safe Corridor camps are really the repentant members of Boko Haram since it has no economic significance. “Government may just have created Operation Safe Corridor to please the foreign agencies who have been complaining of human rights. It has not helped the villagers in the community” However, to a very large extent, it helped restore trust and confidence between the terrorized communities and the Nigerian Counter terrorism operators (Onuoha, 2022, Interview). And as a well-articulated non-kinetic counter-terrorist strategy, OPSC has made it possible for the military to gather intelligence from the terrorized communities which has helped the counter-terrorism operations (Usman, 2022, Interview). According to a resident of Biu Community Mshelbwala (2022, Interview):

I am from Biu and my family has finally returned home now and started skeletal farming to feed. I believe the government is winning the war and the communities are happier now. Operation Safe Corridor is one of the things that has brought some level of calm and we are happier with the military now.

On the whole, OPSC was not designed to give direct benefit to the communities nevertheless may indirectly impact them. In the short term, it has not in anyway helped the communities, but the long-term effect will help those communities because winning the war against the Boko Haram Sect is manifesting. Operation Safe Corridor still requires some kind of fine tune to be able to avoid Boko Haram infiltration and to monitor and protect deracialized Boko Haram members (Obena, 2022, Interview).

The study assessed Operation Safe Corridor as a non-kinetic counter-terrorism strategy implemented in the North East of Nigeria. The findings indicate that:

- i. Nigerian counter-terrorism policy in the North Eastern zone between 2009-2021 were mostly kinetically executed using different military strategies and Joint Task Force operations.
- ii. Operation Safe Corridor is a non-kinetic Nigerian Counter-terrorism strategy designed for the disarmament, deradicalization and reintegration of the repentant or surrendered Boko Haram members and fighters.
- iii. The Operation Safe Corridor requires some level of restructure and fine-tuning from the feedback in the areas of monitoring and the reintegrated Boko Haram members.
- iv. Most of the communities’ reject or stigmatize rehabilitated Boko Haram members because of distrust and the perception that government’s priority for the ex-Boko Haram members over victims of their attacks.

Nigerian counter-terrorism policies had been criticized for being kinetic as supported by studies Nkata (2023); Adesote & Akande (2023); Omolara (2024) and Alao et al. (2024), as they maintained that Nigerian Counter-terrorism policy within the period under investigation was purely kinetic, involving military operations aimed at combating the Boko Haram sect. OPSC was structured for the disarmament, deradicalization and reintegration of the repentant or surrendered Boko Haram/ISWAP members and fighters agrees with studies by Owonikoko (2022); Hassan (2022) and Ogunnubi & Aja (2022). OPSC operational guidelines requires restructure and finetune to differentiate between Boko Haram Members that surrendered willingly and those overwhelmed by superior military firepower and hunger. This finding agrees with studies by Ugwueze et al (2021); Odoh et al. (2023) and Salawu & Ibrahim (2024). Terrorized/host communities stigmatize and, in many cases, reject the reintegration of ex-Boko Haram combatants, this finding is in tandem with studies by Salihu & Yakubu (2021); Owonikoko (2022) and Hassan (2022). The host communities believe that government prioritizes the welfare of ex-combatants above that of the victims has not created the enabling conditions for easy reintegration as suggested by Ogunnubi & Aja (2022, p. 2-3) who asserts that OPSC lacks “legal framework, public perceptions and trust and host communities’ unwillingness to accept former Boko Haram combatants.”

CONCLUSION

As a non-kinetic counter-terrorism strategy designed to provide surrendering and repentant ex-Boko Haram combatants with routes for demobilisation, deradicalisation and reintegration. The eligibility for the programme was expanded to include released convicted associated persons and discharged associated persons. The federal government has been applauded for the successes achieved through OPSC in the North East in the area of demobilization and deradicalization of ex-Boko Haram combatants. However, OPSC requires some restructure in its legal framework and fine-tune to give more preference to the victims of Boko Haram attacks as this will assuage the situation in the terrorized/host communities and make the reintegration of the repentant combatants easier and acceptable.

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