

# The Lived Reality of (Counter)Terrorism in Northeast Nigeria: Co-Creating an Everyday Security Toolkit

Akinyemi Oyawale, PhD.

---

SECURITY POLICY ROUNDTABLE · ABUJA, FCT · 24 JUNE 2026



Early Career Excellence in Teaching  
International Studies Prize (Winner).



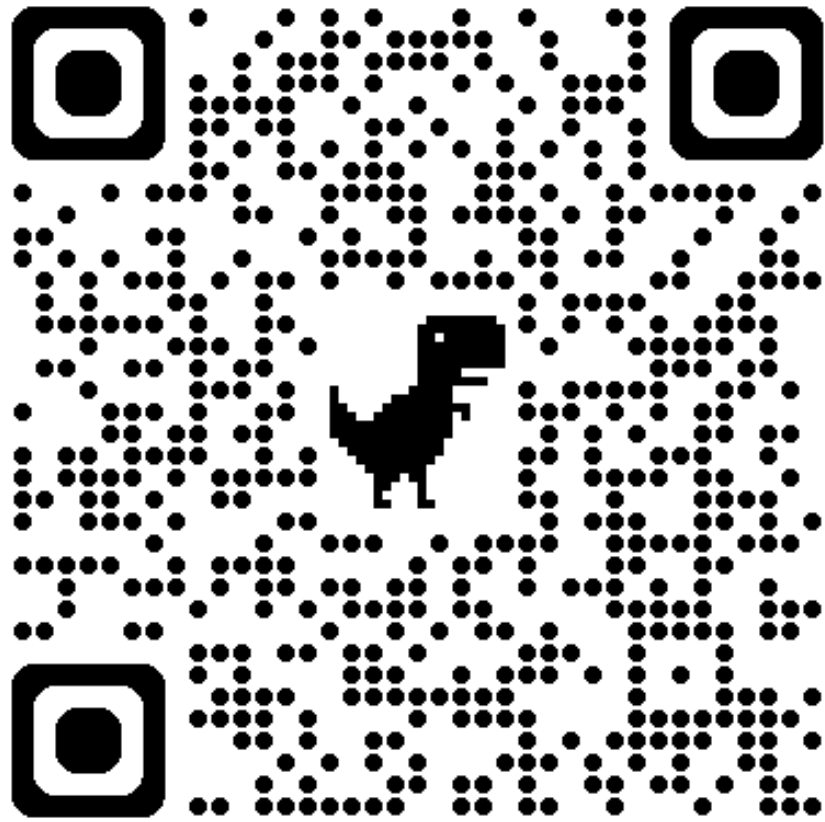
Winner of Warwick Awards for Teaching Excellence (WATE)  
& Butterworth Memorial Awards for Teaching Excellence.

Deborah Gerner Innovative Teaching Award Winner 2025



International Studies Association  
connecting scholars, practitioners, and students around the globe

WARWICK  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK



- You can download all the materials for today's event via this QR code so please scan it and let us know if you have any issues with access.



**Winner of the International Studies Association's Deborah Gerner Innovative Teaching in International Studies Award (2025)**

According to the judges:

We had many strong applications and this was a tough decision, so we want to congratulate you on the award and the excellent work that you are doing. The committee was very impressed with your work, and not only as a teacher, but also as a rising scholar taking on timely security questions through a rigorous, critical lens (ISA Award Committee).

**Winner of the British International Studies Association's (BISA) Early Career Excellence in Teaching International Studies Prize (2024)**

In assessing my nomination, the judging panel noted:

"Akinyemi Oyawale's nomination stands out in its clear emphasis on decentring mainstream approaches to the study and teaching of IR, including his work at integrating non-Western perspectives. We are particularly impressed with the clear teaching philosophy he outlined based on principles of inclusivity (Nobody Left Behind), which are not only noteworthy in themselves, but which are supported by detailed student testimonies as well as by two teaching awards he received in 2023. His contributions are further evidenced by the fact that he led a segment on inclusive seminars at the 2021/2022 PAIS Teaching Away Day. Dr Oyawale provides a highly evidenced submission that clearly demonstrates his reflective and thoughtful approach to teaching."

**Winner of the Butterworth Memorial Award (2023)**

In addition to WATE, Akinyemi was also awarded the Butterworth Memorial Award which celebrates the exceptional achievement of early career WATE winners (within the first five years of their academic career).

**Winner of the Warwick Awards for Teaching Excellence (WATE) Faculty of Social Sciences (2023)**

In recognition of my contribution to teaching and student support, I was recently awarded the much coveted Warwick Awards for Teaching Excellence (WATE). To sum up my approach:

“My teaching philosophy is underpinned by the doctrine of Nobody Left Behind. In my teaching, I view students as partners with agency to not merely listen and absorb knowledge from a so-called ‘sage on a stage’, but rather as active participants who bring a diversity of rich lived experiences to the classroom. Combining Warwick’s ambition of boundless learning with a critical ethos that encourages endless questioning and a transgressive (against oppressive structures) praxis, I have actively supported students in their overall development including providing academic and pastoral support, feedback and assessment that can help students grow.”



# Akinyemi Oyawale, PhD. Assistant Professor in IR, PAIS, Warwick.



## Meet the Team

Nimat Suleiman



Liman Abdullahi  
USMAN

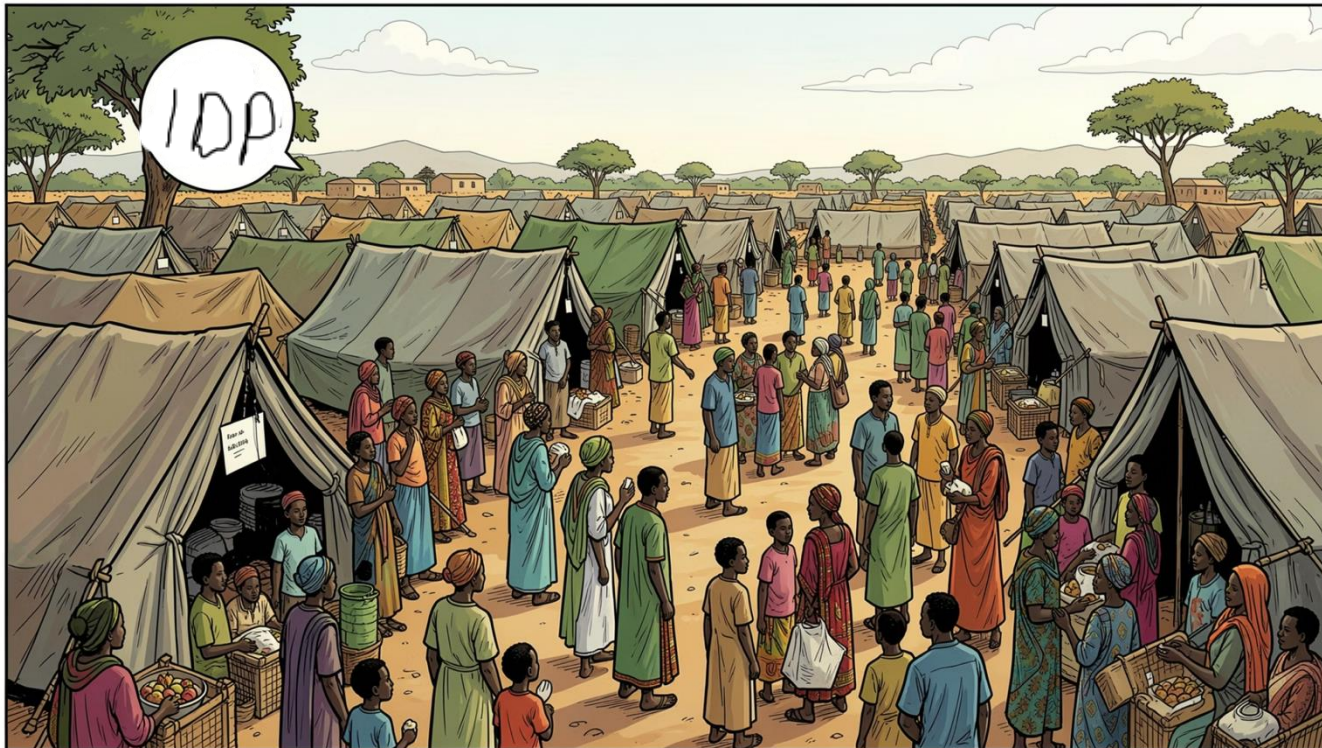


Dr Suleiman Suleiman



Isah Ibn-Mohammed

# Background & Research Setting



Since the last decade and a half, Boko Haram's insurgency has displaced over two million people across the Lake Chad Basin. The Nigerian state's counterterrorism response has been extensively documented — yet the everyday security practices of those living through the conflict remain largely absent from scholarly and policy discourse.

This presentation draws on original fieldwork conducted across IDP camps and host communities in Abuja, Nasarawa, and Niger States, centering the voices of those who navigate insecurity daily.

# A Tale of Two Towers? Ivory Tower vs Policy Tower?



- The title poses a critical question: can academic and policy and practitioner audiences understand themselves? How do we bridge the gaps in communication? What role can research play in policy intervention and impact? How do we bring in the voices of non-elites, narratives and the grounded, vernacular realities of communities living under the constant threat of terrorism?
- Bridging this gap requires not just listening to affected populations but fundamentally rethinking the frameworks through which security is defined, studied, and practiced.

# When We Talk About Security...

## Narrow Conception

- State and national security
- Territorial integrity and sovereignty
- Grounded in (neo)realism, (neo)liberalism, constructivism

## Expansive Conception

- **Copenhagen School:** military, political, economic, societal, environmental
- **Human security:** individual and community referents
- **Critical approaches:** postcolonialism, feminism, the politics of securitisation

□ Deepening security means asking: whose security, at what scale, and defined by whom? This is fundamentally a political question.

## My Approach



## Three Critical Gaps in Existing Research

- **Lived experience:** The voices of those enduring insecurity are routinely absent from terrorism scholarship on Africa and Nigeria.
- **Identity:** Rethink identity in CT and security.
- **Gender:** Engagement is tokenistic – limited to high-profile events like the Chibok abductions, as though other dimensions were not always gendered.

### Fieldwork

**41 semi-structured interviews** conducted over 4 months of ethnography across IDP camps and host communities in Abuja, Nasarawa, and Niger States.

Gender as analytical tool, not just empirical category – 'Gender is not only about women and girls' (Carver, 1995).

# Conceptual Approach

## Vernacular Security

Security as locally articulated 'speech acts' creating imagined communities at multiple scales. Drawing on Appadurai's 'vernacular modernity' — prioritising rootedness and local meaning over external imposition (Bubandt, 2005; Jarvis, 2012).

## Narrative Analysis

Examining how the state narrates itself and how citizens narrate themselves *vis-à-vis* the state — positioning within top-down discourses and everyday practices of security.

## Prosaic Statization

Bakhtin's concept of the *prosaic* — dialogic, unfinalisable, creative. The state as mundane practices enacted by myriad actors and engaged with by citizens daily. The state as emergent, not fixed.



#### RESEARCH INSIGHTS

# Two Discourses of Identity & (In)Security

## (Counter-)Terrorist People Discourse

- State and non-state actors are positioned through ethnic and religious identities
- Officers are seen as belonging to ethnic groups rather than serving as neutral state forces
- Ethnic and religious minorities become visible stakeholders in security

## 'Kafir' (Infidel) Discourse

- Boko Haram shifts its enemy construction from *kafir* (non-Muslim) to *takfir* (apostate)
- Christians are framed as primary targets, while moderate Muslims are also targeted
- Religious identity is more salient for Christian interviewees than for Muslim interviewees
- This discourse reflects disproportionate targeting of ethnic and religious minorities



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

# Gender 'Disguising' Has a Long History

Strategic cross-dressing for survival is not a novel phenomenon. Achilles during the Trojan War and Joan of Arc during the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453 – \*116 years). Also, this forms a part of evasive practices that people have engaged in throughout history, e.g., Mandara (present day Nigeria & Cameroon) and Basotho (present day Lesotho) hiding in mountains — from slave raiders to colonial forces. This presentation situates contemporary practices within that longer arc of vernacular security.

## CORE ARGUMENTS

# Overarching Arguments & Claims

### Gendering Counterterrorism

IDPs gender counterterrorism by narrating competing masculinities — tropes like 'fleeing soldier' and 'disguised soldier' depict cowardice, fear, but also pity and empathy.

### Self-Emasculation as Survival

Armed forces abandon military masculinity — valor, resoluteness, self-sacrifice — and appropriate local repertoires: '*Boko Haram does not kill women.*' Security here is individual survival.

### Gender 'Strategism'

Strategic deployment of gender — subverting masculinity and performing femininity — as a vernacular security practice, condemned by the state as desertion yet rational as resistance.

# Strategic Engagement with Gender

## Gendered Threat Repertoires

- **'BH doesn't kill women'** — sexual violence targets younger women; death is the primary threat for men and boys
- **'BH only kills men'** — women's bodies become shields; femininity as tactical cover
- Military officers cross-dress, travel in convoy with women, are chaperoned by local women

## Competing Interpretations

- **State condemnation:** 'cowardice', 'desertion', 'un-patriotism', absconding from duty
- **Alternative reading:** refusing self-sacrifice; subverting hegemonic military masculinity; resisting elite corruption within the armed forces

□ Women's agency is repositioned: from passive victims to active security providers for men.

# Strategic Engagement with the Material Environment

## Refuge as Historical Security Practice

Seeking refuge in mountains echoes historical responses to slave raiders and colonial wars. The mountain as in-between space — stay hidden, or cross into Cameroon?

Counterterrorism 'As a Game'

'The armies will come and shoot into the air so that Boko Haram can hear and run into the mountains... As we return, the army will go back again, and Boko Haram will re-emerge and attack us... **it was a game. From the mountains you can see everything**' — (Woman from Borno)

Montagnard cultural knowledge transforms terrain into tactical advantage — a vernacular security repertoire the formal security apparatus fails to recognise.



## Policy reflections and Implications



- How do we **conceptualise** and **operationalise** identity and gender in our policy interventions and practices?
- **Agency of women and locals:** we should pay more attention to the agency of women in the provision of their own security and also how (in)security experiences are gendered.
- **Military masculinities:** understanding that soldiers are made rather than born and that military masculinities are produced could help with addressing military needs such as addressing their vulnerabilities during service and during retirement, PTSD is one key issue here. We hardly have veterans in Nigeria, we have 'old soldiers', who apparently, never die, they simply fade away?' Sadly, they do die!.

## Breakout Session 1: Instructions

- **Session Objective:** To explore how ethnic and religious identities shape experiences of terrorism and counterterrorism in Northeast Nigeria, and to identify the vernacular security practices that communities develop in response.

### Output for Plenary

- Each group will present:
  - Overview of discussion: key points?
  - One key challenge identified
  - Two actionable recommendations
- **Note for Facilitators:** Record outputs on flip charts for integration into the Everyday Security Toolkit.

| Time     | Activity               |
|----------|------------------------|
| 5 mins:  | Introduction & Framing |
| 15 mins: | Small Group Discussion |
| 5 mins:  | Prepare Plenary Report |



## Breakout Opening Remarks

- *"Our research with IDPs in Northeast Nigeria revealed that identity is not simply a demographic category—it is actively adopted by communities to understand threats, determine who is trustworthy, and develop survival strategies. Participants constructed two key discourses:*
- *The **(Counter-)Terrorist People** discourse—where ethnic and religious affiliation determined whether military personnel were seen as protectors or threats to locals.*
- *The **Kafir (Infidel)** discourse—where religious identity shaped perceptions of who was targeted by Boko Haram.*
- *Today, we want to move from academic observation to practical application. How can these insights inform security policy and practice?"*



## GROUP ADAMAWA: Community Trust and Security Provision

**Context:** In the research, minority ethnic groups (Glavda, Arboko, Chinene, etc.) who also identified as Christians felt that security personnel who shared their ethnic/religious identity (like Major Godwin Sule) were trustworthy protectors, while commanders from majority groups (like Col. Rabi) were viewed with suspicion or as complicit with Boko Haram.

### Questions:

- How can security forces build trust with communities who view **identity** as the primary lens for assessing protection?
- What practical steps could address the perception that 'ethnicity as brotherhood' shapes who receives protection?
- How can national and community security avoid being mutually exclusive or being in conflict?



## BREAKOUT GROUP BORNO: The "Terrorist People" Category

**Context:** Interviewees used the category 'terrorist people' expansively to include not only Boko Haram fighters but also sponsors, sympathizers, and compromised state officials. This blurred the line between terrorism and counter-terrorism, with some military commanders viewed as part of the problem.

### Question:

- How does the expansive definition of 'terrorist people' affect community cooperation with security forces?
- What strategies could prevent the conflation of counter-terrorism with identity-based persecution?
- How can the state build trust of its citizens such that counterterrorism can be viewed as being in their best interest? Also, how can the state counter alternative narratives that undermine this attempt (e.g., jihadist/ethnocentric narratives)?



## BREAKOUT GROUP YOBE: The Absence of Multicultural Discourse



**Context:** Unlike UK participants who could draw on ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘citizenship’ discourses, Nigerian IDPs—particularly from minority groups—lacked these subject positions. Borno State was described as a ‘Muslim state’, foreclosing claims to equal protection.

### Questions:

- What national or state-level narratives could provide minority communities with a vocabulary for claiming security rights?
- How can policy address the disconnect between Nigeria's constitutional federalism and lived experiences of exclusion?
- How can we make citizenship stronger such that people’s sense of belonging to the state can become stronger?

## Breakout Session 2: (Counter)terrorism, Gender and Security

- **Session Objective:** To examine how gendered understandings of threat shape local security practices, and to explore implications for both community resilience and security sector reform.

### Output for Plenary

- Each group will present:
  - Overview of discussions: key points?
  - One key challenge identified
  - Two actionable recommendations
- **Note for Facilitators:** Record outputs on flip charts for integration into the Everyday Security Toolkit.

| Time     | Activity               |
|----------|------------------------|
| 5 mins:  | Introduction & Framing |
| 15 mins: | Small Group Discussion |
| 5 mins:  | Prepare Plenary Report |



## Breakout Opening Remarks

**Our research uncovered two key gendered dynamics:**

1. Local knowledge that 'Boko Haram did not kill women' and 'only killed men' became a vernacular nugget that communities used for survival. Women were repositioned from victims to protectors—hiding men, providing disguises, and collectively chaperoning.
  2. Military masculinity was publicly subverted when soldiers fled, begged, or cross-dressed to evade militants. Yet these actions were judged inconsistently—sometimes as cowardice, sometimes as understandable self-preservation.
- **This session asks:** How can we build on local gendered security practices while also addressing their limitations?

## Group Adamawa: Vernacular Knowledge and Community Protection



- **Context:** Women in Northeast Nigeria discovered that Boko Haram typically ordered women to run while killing men. This knowledge was used strategically—women hid male relatives, dressed them in women's clothing, and accompanied them to maintain the disguise. Military personnel also appropriated this tactic, with soldiers asking civilians for women's clothing to evade militants.

### Questions:

- How can policy support and integrate local gendered security knowledge without undermining formal security structures?
- What are the risks of relying on the assumption that "Boko Haram did not kill women" given documented cases of violence against women, including SGBV and female suicide bombers?
- Should security forces be trained to recognize and build on local vernacular knowledge?

## Group Maiduguri: Military Masculinities and Performance

- Context: IDPs evaluated military masculinity based on protection outcomes. Soldiers who fled were sometimes condemned as cowardly, but in other instances received empathy—particularly when framed as "Christian soldiers" betrayed by corrupt Muslim commanders. The "(counter-)terrorism as game" discourse depicted state and non-state actors competing for supremacy, with civilians as spectators or trophies.
- Questions:
- How does the subversion of military masculinity (cross-dressing, fleeing, begging) affect civilian perceptions of state capacity and legitimacy?
- What support systems could address the conditions (poor leadership, corruption, inadequate resources) that lead soldiers to abandon their posts?
- How can the military cultivate a masculinity that balances strength with community protection?

## Group Yobe: Gender, Age and Vulnerability

**Context:** The research found that gender intersected with age—young women faced abduction and SGBV, while men (young and old) faced deadly violence. The "man-as-woman" disguise was possible, but "woman-as-man" disguise would have guaranteed execution. Gendered strategies for survival thus favoured men while exposing women to different risks.

### Questions:

- How can security approaches address gender-differentiated vulnerabilities without reinforcing harmful stereotypes?
- What support is needed for women who have been protectors of men but may have experienced trauma through these roles?
- How can community protection strategies be made more gender-inclusive?



## Breakout Session 3: Co-creating the Everyday Security Toolkit



- **Session Objective:** To collectively develop a practical Everyday Security Toolkit for policymakers, practitioners, and communities—building on vernacular security insights and the discussions from Breakout Sessions 1 and 2.

### Output for Plenary

#### Presentation of Findings from Breakout Session 3

Each group leader presents their toolkit component (3 mins each):

- Group Adamawa: Community Engagement and Trust-Building
- Group Maiduguri: Gender-Sensitive Security Practices
- Group Yobe: Vernacular Security and Local Knowledge



## Con-creation Exercise Remarks

**We've heard about how identity and gender shape experiences of (counter)terrorism in Northeast Nigeria. Now we will translate these insights into practical guidance.**

**The Everyday Security Toolkit will be a resource for:**

- Policymakers developing context-sensitive security strategies
- Community leaders supporting local protection practices
- Security personnel building trust with diverse communities
- Humanitarian actors working with IDPs and host communities
- The toolkit will be publicized through government channels, civil society networks, and informal channels.

**We will work in 3 groups, each developing a key component.**

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- **Group Adamawa: Community Engagement and Trust-Building**  
*Focus: How can security actors build trust across ethnic and religious divides?*
- **Group Maiduguri: Gender-Sensitive Security Practices**  
*Focus: How can security approaches respond to gendered threats and leverage local knowledge?*
- **Group Yobe: Vernacular Security and Local Knowledge**  
*Focus: How can formal security structures integrate and support local security practices?*



## Component Drafting (15 minutes)

**Each group will develop their component addressing:**

- Key Challenges (from research and Breakout Sessions 1 & 2)
- Practical Recommendations (actionable steps for different actors)
- Potential Risks and Mitigations (what could go wrong and how to prevent it)

**For each recommendation, specify:**

- Who should implement it? (e.g., military, police, community leaders, NGOs)
- When should it be implemented? (immediate, medium-term, long-term)
- What resources are needed?



## Conclusions

- What have you found most useful about this session?
- What have you found least useful?
- Any final questions?
- Thank you for your participation.