

The Invisible Insurgency: How Jihadist Sympathy Is Quietly Reshaping Nigeria's Security Future.

Why Nigeria's most dangerous threat isn't armed militants, but the quiet spread of extremist thinking within the ordinary communities. A nation does not fall when militants advance, but when its people begin to echo their worldview.

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Introduction

1.

The Hidden Crisis of Jihadist Sympathy

One of the most overlooked drivers of insecurity in Nigeria today is not the firepower of insurgent groups, nor the porousness of its borders, nor even the weakness of its institutions. It is something far less visible and far more psychologically corrosive: the quiet, growing emotional sympathy for jihadist narratives among segments of the population, especially in regions where the state is absent and religious identity is strong.

This sympathy rarely announces itself openly. It does not look like recruitment. It does not sound like ideological commitment. It begins as something far simpler, a feeling that “maybe they have a point.” And in fragile societies, feelings are often the first step in the formation of political realities.

Across northern Nigeria today, in WhatsApp groups, tea stalls, marketplaces, informal sermons, and private conversations, you hear refrains that were almost unthinkable a decade ago:

- “At least they fight injustice.”
- “The government is worse than them.”
- “They are not wrong in everything.”
- “If our leaders listened, this wouldn’t be happening.”

These are not radical statements on their surface.

But they reveal a deeper psychological drift: the erosion of moral distance between ordinary citizens and violent extremist movements.

The tragedy is that most of these sympathisers have never read jihadist literature, never studied jihadist governance, and never observed what happens inside territories ruled by Boko Haram, ISWAP, ISIS, or al-Qaeda affiliates. They support an idea of justice that jihadists claim to embody, not the reality of what these groups actually do.

This gap between imagined righteousness and real-world brutality is one of the most dangerous cognitive traps in modern conflict zones.

What fuels this trap is not ideology alone but a combustible mix unique to Nigeria's northern belt:

- deep illiteracy that limits the ability to interrogate religious claims,
- identity insecurity in a region stigmatized and marginalized
- long-standing grievances against corrupt or predatory state actors,
- and a powerful religious vocabulary that can be weaponized by charismatic preachers or insurgent propaganda.

When people cannot distinguish between theology and manipulation, when they cannot access information beyond what local networks circulate, when their daily reality is humiliation or state neglect, jihadist messaging does not need to be accurate, it only needs to be emotionally satisfying.

And this is precisely why the crisis is so dangerous.

Extremist groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP do not need to recruit millions.

They only need a population that is:

- disillusioned enough to listen,
- angry enough to sympathize,
- fearful enough to stay silent,
- and ill-informed enough to confuse violence with justice.

Sympathy is not yet support, but it is the psychological soft ground on which support can grow.

A society does not fall to extremism the day fighters take territory. It falls the day ordinary people begin to believe that the extremists are "not entirely wrong."

Nigeria is closer to that threshold than many admit.

This article examines the roots of this sympathy, the role of illiteracy in amplifying it, the mechanisms extremists use to manipulate religious sentiment, and the grave implications for Nigeria's future stability.

Because the real battle against extremism is not on the battlefield.

It begins and ends in the human mind.

2.

Why Emotional Sympathy Forms: The Psychological Vulnerabilities

Sympathy for jihadist movements in Nigeria does not emerge from doctrinal conviction.

It emerges from psychological conditions shaped by lived reality. People are not persuaded by ideology first, they are persuaded by emotion, and insurgent groups understand this with surgical precision.

To understand why sympathy takes root, we must examine the vulnerabilities that insurgents repeatedly exploit.

1. Collective Humiliation: The Emotional Fertilizer of Extremism

Across northern Nigeria, entire communities live with a daily sense of humiliation:

Poverty, corruption, police extortion, political neglect, and a feeling that the state is not merely absent but antagonistic.

This creates the perfect emotional climate for extremist propaganda.

In Borno and Yobe (2010–2012), many communities resented the brutality of the Operation Flush police units. Multiple eyewitness accounts recall police raids, beatings, arbitrary arrests, and humiliation.

Boko Haram's early recruitment speeches exploited this perfectly:

- "The government humiliates you."
- "We will restore your dignity."
- "We are the only ones who stand for justice."

It wasn't theology; it was revenge packaged as righteousness.

The psychology is clear: Humiliated individuals do not seek ideology, they seek significance. Extremists offer that.

2. State Failure Creates a Need for Alternative Authority

Where the state is weak, slow, or predatory, extremist groups fill the vacuum with a seductive message:

"We are the justice you have been denied."

In 2013–2015, ISWAP entered parts of northern Borno and set up its own "courts."

Shockingly, some villagers, Muslim villagers voluntarily brought civil disputes to these courts because:

- judgments were fast,
- corruption was absent,
- and punishments were predictable.

Did they support ISWAP ideology? No.

They distrusted the Nigerian system so deeply that even a brutal parallel system felt more "fair."

This practical legitimacy becomes emotional sympathy.

3. Illiteracy + Religious Vocabulary = Weaponized Authority

Nigeria's northern literacy rate remains one of the lowest in the world. But the real danger is not illiteracy itself, it is scriptural illiteracy, the inability to distinguish between:

- Arabic reading
- Qur'anic understanding
- jurisprudence
- and propaganda

Extremists know this and exploit it constantly.

When Shekau broke from ISIS, he justified mass killings by quoting verses out of context.

Many uneducated followers believed him simply because he spoke Arabic and sounded “religious.”

In a society where religious language carries enormous authority and literacy is low, extremists do not need good arguments, they only need confident voices.

4. Pain Makes People Vulnerable to Simplistic Explanations

Insurgent psychology is built on a simple principle:

“Offer simple answers to people with complicated pain.”

Northern Nigeria faces multilayered crises:

- unemployment
- banditry
- governmental neglect
- ethnic tensions
- insecurity
- stigma and stereotypes
- poverty-driven despair

Into this chaos, extremists introduce a single narrative: “Your suffering has one cause and we will destroy it.”

This narrative is false, but psychologically satisfying.

After years of bandit attacks in Zamfara and Sokoto, some villagers began saying things like:

- “If Boko Haram or Lakurawa comes, at least they will deal with the bandits.”

This is how extremism begins not through ideology, but through desperation misdirected into false hope.

5. Extremists Exploit Anger at Local Leaders and Corruption

When communities see local politicians, traditional rulers, or security forces acting corruptly, they begin to lose faith in the state as a source of justice. Extremists convert this anger into moral legitimacy.

In early Boko Haram propaganda (2009–2011), Yusuf’s sermons frequently attacked:

- corrupt governors

- politicians living in luxury
- abusive police
- religious leaders cooperating with the state

These sermons resonated because they reflected real grievances. Extremist groups can survive without ideological accuracy, But they cannot survive without psychological accuracy. They know exactly which wounds to touch.

6. Social Isolation Creates Echo Chambers of Extremist Narrative

Radicalization does not always come from mosques or recruitment cells.

It often comes from:

- unmoderated WhatsApp groups
- TikTok sermons
- local rumor networks
- tea stall discussions
- community gossip

In such environments, nuance dies, emotion spreads, and narratives harden.

During the height of bandit violence in Zamfara (2021–2022), many WhatsApp groups circulated messages saying:

- “Bandits are reacting to injustice. Government caused this.”
- “These boys are not wrong; they have been cheated by the system.”

While this wasn’t open jihadist support, it created moral ambiguity, the soil in which sympathy grows.

7. Emotional Support Does Not Require Ideological Agreement

This is the most important insight:

People do not need to believe in jihad to emotionally sympathize with jihadists.

They only need:

- anger
- confusion
- humiliation

- religious emotion
- a sense of injustice

Extremist groups weaponize these emotions to create passive allies among the population not fighters, but people who stay silent, look away, or believe “they are not entirely wrong.”

That silence is often more valuable than fighters.

Extremists do not win hearts through theology. They win them through pain, illiteracy, humiliation, identity wounds, and the failure of the state. Jihadist sympathy in Nigeria is not a religious phenomenon. It is a psychological one.

And to fight it, Nigeria must understand the mind not just the battlefield.

3.

Illiteracy + Religious Manipulation: The Most Dangerous Combination

Across northern Nigeria, the single most explosive driver of extremism is not poverty, nor ethnicity, nor even insecurity, it is the lethal intersection of illiteracy and religious manipulation.

Individually, each is destabilizing.

Together, they form the psychological operating system that jihadist groups exploit to recruit, radicalize, and dominate communities.

To understand how sympathy becomes support and how support becomes violence, we must examine why this mixture is uniquely dangerous in the Nigerian context.

1. Illiteracy is not just the inability to read, it is the inability to resist manipulation

Nigeria’s northern literacy rate is among the lowest globally.

But the dangerous aspect is not simply the inability to read English or Hausa text, it is scriptural illiteracy, the inability to:

- Interpret Arabic beyond recitation,
- Distinguish metaphor from jurisprudence
- Differentiate scholarship from demagoguery

Or challenge men who claim “religious authority.”

This creates an environment where charisma replaces scholarship and emotion replaces understanding.

In early Boko Haram recruitment (2006–2009), Mohammed Yusuf’s sermons contained numerous theological inaccuracies that any trained scholar could dismantle easily.

But his audiences did not consist of scholars, they consisted of:

- Unemployed youth,
- Uneducated almajiri boys,
- Frustrated traders
- And villagers with minimal religious training.

To them, he didn’t need accuracy, he only needed confidence.

This is why illiteracy is deadly:

Without the ability to question, people mistake certainty for truth.

2. Religious language carries absolute authority in high-faith societies

Northern Nigeria is deeply religious. Faith shapes identity, social hierarchy, and political legitimacy. In such societies, language itself becomes a weapon.

When a man quotes Arabic even inaccurately he instantly gains credibility among audiences who cannot verify the text.

Extremists use this for psychological coercion:

- “Allah commands...”
- “The Prophet said...”
- “This is jihad...”
- “This is fard...”

When people cannot distinguish between fabrication and scripture, manipulation becomes effortless.

ISWAP militants often justify their killings with half-verses or entirely fabricated hadiths.

Villagers rarely challenge them because:

- The militants are armed,
- They sound religious,
- And questioning a Quranic claim feels like questioning God.
- Thus, religious vocabulary becomes a shield for tyranny.

3. Illiteracy creates dependence on intermediaries, who can be easily radicalized

In literate societies, individuals can verify information independently. In illiterate societies, they depend on intermediaries:

- Local mallams
- Preachers
- Madrassa teachers
- Community leaders
- Rumor networks

If these intermediaries are manipulated, bribed, coerced, or ideologically compromised, entire communities follow them blindly.

In 2014–2016, Boko Haram infiltrated villages across Borno and Adamawa by recruiting ONE local Islamic teacher or preacher. Once the teacher endorsed them, dozens of youth followed.

This is not ideological recruitment, It is social trust hijacked at source.

4. Extremists exploit cognitive shortcuts created by illiteracy

Illiteracy forces people to rely on simple narratives, such as:

- “They are fighting for Islam.”
- “The government hates Muslims.”
- “These boys only want justice.”
- “Jihad is our duty.”

These statements bypass critical thinking and appeal to emotional instincts:

- Identity
- Loyalty
- Honour
- Fear

Extremists understand these shortcuts and craft messaging explicitly to hack them.

During Boko Haram’s 2012 expansion, recruiters told villagers: “We fight because the government banned hijab.”

This was false. But for people with limited literacy, the simplicity of the narrative made it believable. When information is scarce, the easiest explanation becomes the dominant one.

5. Illiteracy makes people vulnerable to symbolic manipulation

Extremist groups rely heavily on symbolism:

- Black flags
- Arabic calligraphy
- Qur’anic quotes

- “Islamic State” branding
- Videos with nasheeds
- Fighters praying before battle

For literate, informed Muslims, these symbols mean nothing. For illiterate, impressionable populations, they create an illusion:

“These men must be true Muslims, their faith is strong.”

Extremists use symbolism to trigger emotional faith responses that precede and override analysis.

6. Religious extremism thrives in environments where questioning is taboo

In many parts of northern Nigeria, cultural norms discourage questioning religious authority.

Asking:

- “Where is the evidence for this ruling?”
- “Which scholar supports this interpretation?”
- “Is this hadith authentic?”

This is considered disrespectful. Extremists use this cultural rigidity to suppress scrutiny.

They frame their agenda as an extension of divine will:

- “Opposing us is opposing God.”

This psychological trap is devastating because it makes disagreement feel like blasphemy.

In territories controlled by Boko Haram, even asking about the meaning of a verse could lead to execution for “doubt.”

Ignorance is not the enemy, Fear of knowledge is.

7. Illiteracy + Extremist Messaging = Misplaced Loyalty

Many young sympathisers believe jihadist groups:

- Defend Islam,
- Protect Muslims,
- Fight injustice,
- And establish divine law.

Reality is the opposite.

Factual deaths caused by these groups (approximate):

- Boko Haram: over 35,000 Muslims killed
- ISWAP: thousands of Muslim civilians and soldiers killed

- Al-Qaeda affiliates (JNIM/Ansaru): frequent attacks on Muslim communities
- Bandits: overwhelmingly Muslim victims in Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina

Yet sympathy grows because illiteracy prevents people from accessing the full picture. Extremists hide their crimes while amplifying their grievances.

It is a psychological asymmetry:

- They broadcast their ideology,
- They conceal their atrocities,
- And illiterate populations cannot fact-check either.

This Combination Is More Dangerous Than Poverty or Injustice

Illiteracy means people cannot interpret texts. Religious manipulation means extremists interpret the texts for them.

Together, they create a reality distortion field where:

- Lies sound holy
- Violence looks righteous
- Criminals appear as defenders
- And the community confuses oppression with piety.

This is how a society becomes ideologically vulnerable. And once ideological vulnerability takes root, military victories become temporary. Because the war is happening inside the mind.

4.

The Myth That Jihadists “Defend Islam” - Case Studies of Violence Against Muslims

One of the most enduring illusions fueling sympathy for extremist groups is the belief that they “protect Islam” or “defend Muslims.” This belief is not only false, it is historically and statistically the opposite of reality.

Across every jihadist organization operating in Nigeria, the Sahel, the Middle East, or South Asia, the majority of their victims are Muslims, not Christians, not Westerners, not “enemies of Islam”, but the same ordinary Muslims they claim to defend.

Extremism always begins by claiming to protect the community. It always ends by destroying the community.

The case studies below make this undeniable.

1. ISIS Executing Its Own Defectors “Faithfulness” Defined as Obedience, Not Islam

ISIS in Iraq and Syria executed thousands of:

- Defectors,
- Doubters,
- Fighters who wanted to leave,
- Scholars who questioned doctrine,
- And civilians who resisted recruitment.
- Entire execution videos were dedicated to killing Muslim men who simply refused orders.

Lesson:

In jihadist systems, Islam is irrelevant. Obedience is the true religion.

2. Al-Qaeda’s War Against Other Islamic Groups

Even within the global jihadist ecosystem, groups kill each other.

- Al-Qaeda in Syria (HTS) fought and killed hundreds of ISIS fighters.
- Al-Qaeda in the Sahel (JNIM) clashes regularly with ISIS-Sahel (ISGS).
- Ansaru (al-Qaeda-affiliate in Nigeria) has attacked Boko Haram units.

These are all Muslims, yet they kill each other over ideology, loyalty, or territory.

Lesson:

If jihadists cannot tolerate other jihadists, How can ordinary Muslims expect mercy?

3. Boko Haram's Record: More Muslims Killed Than Anyone Else

Boko Haram's violence disproves any claim to "Islamic defense."

They have murdered:

- Muslim imams who oppose them
- Muslim villagers who refuse to join
- Muslim farmers
- Muslim women
- Muslim children

Examples:

Attacks on central mosques in Borno, Kano and Yobe dozens killed during prayer.

Execution of Imam Goni Aisami for preaching against them.

Burning of Muslim villages in Gwoza, Bama, Chibok, Damboa.

Use of Muslim children as suicide bombers in Maiduguri markets.

No Christian government did this.

No Western military did this.

This is Muslims killing Muslims.

4. ISWAP's Brutality: Taxation, Punishment, and Massacre of Muslim Communities

ISWAP tries to brand itself as "disciplined" compared to Boko Haram. This is propaganda.

Reality:

- They execute Muslim farmers for refusing zakat (their illegal tax).

- They whip Muslim women for not obeying dress codes.
- They kill Muslim youth who refuse recruitment.
- They punish entire villages by burning farms and killing livestock.

Example:

In 2021, ISWAP massacred dozens of Muslim fishermen in Ngala and Marte for refusing to pay taxes and give their sons as fighters.

Lesson:

No enemy of Islam has harmed northeast Muslims more than jihadists themselves.

5. The Historical Precedent: The Khawarij - The First Extremists Who Killed Muslims

In Islamic history, the Khawarij were the earliest extremists who:

- Declared Muslims who disagreed with them as apostates,
- Waged war on the Caliph Ali (RA),
- Assassinated Muslims in mosques,
- And used Qur'an as a weapon for domination.

Every major Islamic scholar for 1,400 years, Sunni and Shia condemned the Khawarij as the greatest danger to Muslims, not non-Muslims.

Modern jihadists are ideological descendants of the Khawarij, not defenders of Islam.

Evidence:

- Like the Khawarij, they:
- Kill Muslims first,
- Declare disagreement as apostasy,
- Weaponize scripture,
- And destroy the ummah from within.

They are not defenders of Islam, they are predators hiding behind Islamic vocabulary.

5.

Sympathisers Are Supporting a Machine That Would Destroy Them

One of the greatest tragedies unfolding in Nigeria and in many parts of the Muslim world is that ordinary people emotionally sympathize with jihadist movements without understanding a brutal, consistent truth:

These groups do not protect their sympathisers, they consume them.

Supporting a jihadist project is not like supporting a political movement.

It is like raising a lion in your house because you believe it only eats your enemies.

At first, you feel empowered.

You say, *“At least the lion fights those who oppress us.”*

But lions are not loyal, they are hungry and sooner or later, they kill whoever is closest.

This is exactly how jihadist groups operate, across Nigeria, the Sahel, the Middle East, and South Asia.

Below are the real-world patterns that prove this beyond any doubt.

1. Boko Haram’s Oldest Pattern: Villages That Welcomed Them Were Later Massacred

At the beginning of the Boko Haram insurgency (2009–2013), some communities in Borno and Yobe allowed Boko Haram to stay in their villages because:

- they thought the group defended “true Islam,”
- they disliked corrupt local officials,
- they believed the militants would protect them from bandits,
- or they simply felt safer with “their own people.”

But the moment these communities disagreed or refused further cooperation, Boko Haram turned on them viciously.

Examples:

Konduga Massacres (2014)

The town initially tolerated Boko Haram presence. When elders complained about forced recruitment, Boko Haram slaughtered dozens, burned homes, and kidnapped young men.

Gwoza Region (2014–2016)

Villages that offered early support were later wiped out when they refused to hand over girls for forced marriage.

Damboia Axis

Communities that fed insurgents out of fear were later punished when they tried to stop giving food.

Lesson:

Jihadist loyalty lasts only as long as you obey. The moment you resist, you become a target not an ally.

2. ISWAP Executes “Disobedient” Muslims, Including Their Own Commanders

ISWAP markets itself as “disciplined” compared to Boko Haram. But its internal brutality is worse.

They have executed:

- commanders who refused orders,
- fighters who tried to defect,
- villagers who refused to pay taxes,
- informants suspected of helping the army,
- young men who refused recruitment.

Case Example: ISWAP’s Internal Purges

In 2021, ISWAP executed over 100 fighters in Lake Chad after accusing them of “disloyalty.” Most of them were Muslims who joined the group willingly.

Case Example: ISWAP vs Kukawa Villages

Villagers who initially cooperated were later punished, fined, executed, or enslaved when they refused ongoing taxation.

Lesson:

Extremist groups treat obedience, not Islam, as the highest virtue.
Anyone who disobeys even a commander is disposable meat.

3. ISIS Forced Children to Spy on Their Own Parents

One of the clearest signs that jihadist groups destroy the very communities that support them is how they target families.

ISIS in Mosul and Raqqa forced children to:

- report their parents for “disbelief,”
- expose neighbors who listened to music,
- spy on teachers,
- reveal hidden mobile phones,
- identify anyone reluctant to join.

Parents who refused were executed.

Children were rewarded with:

- sweets,
- money,
- praise,
- ranking in the “Cubs of the Caliphate.”

Lesson:

Jihadist groups destroy families from inside, the ultimate betrayal of any claim to “moral defense.”

4. Boko Haram’s Punishment of Villages That Refused Marriage or Recruitment

In many cases, villagers who initially welcomed Boko Haram were later attacked for refusing to give:

- daughters for marriage,

- sons for fighters,
- food and supplies,
- allegiance to Shekau or ISWAP.

Examples:

Chibok Area (before the 2014 mass abduction)

Multiple villages were attacked because families refused to give daughters to fighters.

Askira-Uba Axis

Boko Haram slaughtered men who refused to hand over their sons.

Kukawa and Marte

Entire villages were punished because community leaders refused forced recruitment.

Lesson:

Your initial sympathy becomes irrelevant the moment you deny them anything they want.

5. Al-Qaeda and JNIM in Mali: Communities Who Once Supported Them Later Destroyed

In central Mali (Mopti, Gao, Timbuktu regions), some Fulani communities initially sympathized with jihadist groups because they believed:

- the militants would protect them from rival ethnic militias,
- they would bring justice,
- they spoke the language of grievances.

But the moment these communities tried to negotiate with the government, or refused taxes, or resisted recruitment, they were massacred by the same jihadist factions.

Specific Example: Macina Liberation Front (MLF)

The MLF killed dozens of Fulani Muslims who once sheltered them, simply because they refused further demands.

6. The Taliban Killed More Pashtuns Than Any Other Group - Including Their Supporters

Across Afghanistan, many Pashtun tribes supported the Taliban thinking they represented “Pashtun honor” or “Islamic justice.”

The Taliban later:

- executed tribal elders,
- assassinated local leaders,
- imposed brutal taxation,
- abducted young girls,
- tortured dissenters.

Some of their earliest victims were the same communities that sheltered them.

Lesson:

Jihadist groups always eat their host population.

7. The Lion Analogy Is Not Metaphor - It Is Reality

Supporting a jihadist group is not noble. It is not Islamic. It is not resistance.

It is **feeding a predator with the blood of tomorrow.**

These groups:

- kill their own fighters,
- enslave their own women,
- indoctrinate their own children,
- massacre their own supporting villages,
- destroy the very communities that sympathize with them.

The lion does not distinguish between the one who fed it and the one who threatened it. It only distinguishes between hunger and opportunity.

Sympathizers believe they are strengthening Islam. They are strengthening a machine designed to devour them once they are no longer useful.

This is not ideology, it is survival and in jihadist systems, those who obey die later, but they still die.

6.

The “Paradise Trap”: Why Leaders Don’t Die, Only Followers Do

Jihadist groups constantly preach that martyrdom is the highest path to God, that death in battle is a guarantee of paradise, and that the quickest route to eternal reward is to strap explosives to your chest or rush into gunfire.

But here is the single most revealing fact about these movements:

The ones who preach martyrdom the loudest almost never die. Only the followers do.

This is not a coincidence, It is a system, a hierarchy built on manipulated idealism, coerced loyalty, and psychological exploitation.

Understanding this “Paradise Trap” is essential to understanding why sympathy for jihadists is not only misinformed, but suicidal.

1. Commanders Hide While Youth Go to Die

Every jihadist group creates a clear division between:

- those who preach sacrifice,
- and those who provide the sacrifice.

In Boko Haram, ISWAP, ISIS, al-Qaeda, and JNIM, commanders rarely die in combat. They die of:

- drone strikes while hiding,
- airstrikes while fleeing,
- internal purges, or
- old age.

Meanwhile, **the actual fighters are overwhelmingly:**

- 14–25 years old,
- illiterate,
- unemployed,
- emotionally vulnerable,

- indoctrinated,
- or abducted.

Case Study: Boko Haram Suicide Bombers

Between 2014 and 2017, more than **300 suicide bombers** used by Boko Haram were:

- under 18
- female
- or abducted children

But not a single senior commander ever volunteered for a suicide bombing.

Not one.

2. Drone Strikes Expose the Hypocrisy

If jihadist commanders truly longed for martyrdom, they would welcome death. Instead they:

- change safehouses daily
- turn off mobile phones
- hide in caves or forests
- sleep underground
- use children as human shields
- flee at the sound of aircraft
- and panic at drone activity

Case Example: ISWAP Commanders on Lake Chad

When Nigerian or regional forces deploy drones, commanders relocate instantly. Ordinary fighters are left behind to die.

If paradise is assured, why flee?

Why fear drones?

Why hide?

Because the ideology is a tool.

Not a belief.

3. Leaders Use Followers as Disposable Assets

In every jihadist group, foot soldiers are resources not believers.

They are tools to:

- collect taxes
- intimidate villages
- guard camps
- absorb bullets
- distract the military
- create propaganda sacrifices

Commanders preserve themselves because **their survival sustains the hierarchy.**

Fighters are told:

“Your life is worth less than your death.”

This is exploitation weaponized with scripture.

4. Suicide Bombers Are Always the Youngest, Poorest, Least Educated

Across jihadist organizations worldwide, suicide bombers share the same profile:

- extremely young
- extremely poor
- minimally literate
- emotionally desperate
- heavily indoctrinated
- sometimes drugged
- often abducted
- socially powerless

Meanwhile, the children of commanders become:

- logistics officers
- media operatives
- tax collectors
- junior imams

- administrators

Their parents do not send them to paradise.

Only other people's sons go.

This alone exposes the lie.

5. “If Paradise Is Guaranteed, Why Don't Commanders Volunteer First?”

This is the philosophical heart of the Paradise Trap.

If jihadist leaders genuinely believed:

- paradise is guaranteed
- martyrdom is the highest reward
- death in battle is the ultimate honour

then logically:

they should rush to die before anyone else.

What greater act of faith could a leader show?

Why not lead the charge?

Why not detonate the vest?

Why not drive the VBIED?

But they never do.

Instead they:

- send children,
- send abducted girls,
- send manipulated youth,
- send the desperate,
- send the brainwashed.

They preach courage from behind walls, they preach sacrifice from behind human shields, they preach paradise from inside bunkers.

This contradiction is not just hypocrisy, it is the central proof that jihadist ideology is a **tool of control**, not a pathway to God.

6. Leaders Survive Because They Value Power Over Paradise

The highest-ranking figures in jihadist organizations:

- relocate with armed escorts,
- sleep in secure compounds,
- eat the best food,
- monopolize resources,
- marry the most women,
- control the flow of money,
- execute those who challenge authority.

This is not the behavior of men yearning for heaven.

This is the behavior of men building earthly kingdoms on the backs of young believers.

Case Study: Shekau (Boko Haram)

He lived surrounded by:

- multiple wives
- bodyguards
- slaves
- mansions carved into Sambisa Forest
- his own prison system

He only died when cornered by ISWAP, not charging into battle as he preached.

His own life proved his ideology false.

7. The Paradise Trap: Sacrifice for the Believer, Survival for the Leader

The entire system functions like a pyramid:

- **At the bottom:** poor youths who believe they are dying for God.
- **In the middle:** commanders enforcing obedience through fear.
- **At the top:** leaders who live like kings while preaching martyrdom.

In jihadist groups, **death flows downward and reward flows upward.**

This is why sympathy is so dangerous: you are supporting a system designed to consume you or your children.

A Man Who Hides from Airstrikes Does Not Believe His Own Sermons

If jihadist leaders were eager to meet God:

- they would not dig bunkers,
- they would not flee bombardment,
- they would not disguise themselves,
- they would not switch safehouses three times a night.

Their actions reveal the truth:

They believe in power, not paradise.

They desire obedience, not salvation.

They worship control, not God.

And every follower who dies is simply fuel, a disposable sacrifice to maintain the illusion of divine authority.

Jihadist leaders do not lead their followers to paradise, they lead them to graves.

Their fear of death and love of earthly power expose their ideology as a trap, one designed to ensnare the poor, the uneducated, the angry, the humiliated, and the emotionally wounded.

The “Paradise Trap” is not a doctrine, it is a psychological weapon and the moment you see the leaders’ actions, the illusion collapses.

7.

Why This Trend Is Dangerous for Nigeria’s Future

The growth of jihadist sympathy in Nigeria is not merely a theological problem or a social-media phenomenon.

It is a **national security threat**, a **societal destabilizer**, and a **generational hazard** that could shape Nigeria’s future far more severely than any single insurgent group.

Countries do not collapse when militants become stronger.

Countries collapse when the *population’s psychological immune system* weakens.

Nigeria is approaching that threshold.

Below are the structural dangers that make this trend so alarming.

1. Radicalisation Without Joining a Group: The New Invisible Threat

Traditional counterterrorism models focus on:

- tracking recruits,
- monitoring training camps,
- identifying cell leaders,
- intercepting communication.

But sympathy does not require joining a cell.

A person can:

- believe jihadists “have a point,”
- quietly support their grievances,
- spread extremist propaganda,
- withhold cooperation from security forces,
- refuse to report suspicious activities,
- or justify violence against the state...

Without ever picking up a gun.

This is **passive radicalization**, and it is far more dangerous because:

- it is invisible
- untraceable
- socially acceptable in many areas
- and creates an environment where extremists can survive indefinitely

When a population begins to sympathise emotionally, the insurgents no longer need to “win.” They only need to avoid losing.

2. Identity Hardening - The First Step Toward Sectarian Polarisation

Jihadist ideology simplifies identity into binary categories:

- believer vs. unbeliever
- pure vs. impure
- us vs. them
- loyal vs. apostate

Once this mindset spreads among ordinary citizens, something dangerous happens:

religious identity becomes weaponized.

Historically, once identity becomes hardened:

- coexistence decays,
- compromise dies,
- suspicion grows,
- minor disagreements become existential disputes.

Case Study: Northern Mali

Fulani communities once lived peacefully with Dogon communities.

After extremist ideology infiltrated the region, identity hardened and massacres followed.

Nigeria is showing similar warning signs:

- rising suspicion between Muslim sects,
- Sunni vs. Shia tensions,
- Christians viewing northern Muslims with fear,
- Hausa-Fulani disputes intensifying,
- ethno-religious rhetoric escalating.

Every extremist movement thrives on identity hardening.

A society that cannot negotiate identity becomes psychologically fragile, ripe for exploitation.

3. Social Fragmentation: The Slow Death of National Unity

When extremist narratives grow, they create a fragmented society where:

- citizens trust armed groups more than the state,
- communities form parallel justice systems,

- regions drift ideologically apart,
- religious leaders gain more influence than the constitution.

Nigeria is already seeing this:

- Zamfara farmers paying bandit taxes,
- Sokoto villagers obeying jihadist warnings,
- Borno communities respecting ISWAP “courts,”
- vigilantes becoming local governments,
- pastors and imams arming themselves,
- ethnic militias acting as armies.

A country does not collapse when the state is defeated militarily. It collapses when the population no longer believes in the state.

Nigeria is slowly, quietly approaching that psychological threshold.

4. Jihadist Groups Gain Passive Support, Which Is More Dangerous Than Active Support

Active supporters fight. Passive supporters preserve safe havens.

In northern Nigeria, passivity means:

- not reporting movements,
- selling food to militants,
- withholding intelligence,
- refusing to cooperate with police,
- accepting jihadist governance in silence,
- normalizing extremist rhetoric in community spaces.

Insurgency requires two things:

- a motivated minority (the fighters),
- and a tolerant majority (the silent population).

Once the majority becomes sympathetic or indifferent, the minority becomes unstoppable.

Example:

In Borno (2015–2017), many villages did not join Boko Haram, they simply said nothing. That silence allowed Boko Haram to rebuild.

Sympathy is oxygen for insurgency.

5. The Next Generation Is Absorbing Extremist Thinking By Osmosis

This is the most alarming trend of all.

Children are:

- hearing extremist-friendly conversations at home,
- listening to radical preachers on TikTok and Facebook,
- seeing kidnappers portrayed as “freedom fighters,”
- absorbing anti-state narratives,
- watching videos of jihadists distributing food,
- witnessing armed groups negotiate with governors,
- learning that violence is rewarded and the state is powerless.

When a child grows up in an environment where:

- armed men look powerful,
- the state looks weak,
- religion is simplified into slogans,
- justice is sought at the barrel of a gun.

that child internalizes the worldview.

In 10–15 years, this becomes a generational crisis.

Extremism is not passed through ideology, it is passed through atmosphere.

6. The Northern Political Class Is Losing Control of Its Own Constituency

A subtle, dangerous shift is happening:

- northern politicians,

- traditional rulers,
- emirs,
- clerics,
- and local elites

are losing influence over youth.

The younger generation increasingly views:

- bandit leaders,
- extremist preachers,
- insurgent commanders,
- online influencers

as more “authentic” than their own leaders.

This means:

- political orders lose legitimacy,
- governance becomes impossible,
- extremist narratives become default frameworks for justice.

Once political elites lose moral authority, they cannot govern even if they retain office.

7. Nigeria Risks Becoming a Patchwork of Micro-States Ruled by Armed Actors

The rise of sympathy + the absence of state authority creates the perfect environment for:

- jihadist emirates in Borno/Yobe,
- bandit fiefdoms in Zamfara/Sokoto,
- ethnic militias in Plateau and Benue,
- criminal strongholds in Niger/Kaduna,
- vigilante enclaves across the North.

This is already happening:

- bandits collect taxes,
- ISWAP runs courts,

- vigilantes regulate markets,
- communities negotiate directly with armed groups,
- farmers pay militants for access to land,
- hunters enforce curfews.

This is what Somalia became in the 1990s, a land governed by dozens of private armed authorities. Nigeria risks moving in the same direction.

8. Once Sympathy Becomes Culture, Reversing It Requires Generations

De-radicalizing a fighter takes months.
De-radicalizing a society takes decades.

Once sympathy for jihadism becomes:

- normal,
- casual,
- emotional,
- socially acceptable,
- part of identity
- or part of grievance culture

it becomes deeply rooted in the national psyche.

At that point:

- military operations fail,
- negotiations fail,
- policing fails,
- development programs fail,
- counterterrorism messaging fails.

Because you are no longer fighting militants, you are fighting a worldview and worldviews cannot be removed by guns.

They require **psychological, political, educational, and cultural reconstruction.**

This is not just about insurgency, it is about the slow transformation of northern Nigeria into a region where:

- extremist narratives feel normal,
- identity becomes weaponized,
- communities lose faith in the state,
- young people internalize militant logic,
- and national unity erodes silently and steadily.

The rise of jihadist sympathy is not a fringe problem.

It is a national crisis and its consequences will define Nigeria's stability for the next 50 years.

Conclusion

The Real Battle Is Not on the Battlefield, But in the Mind

When nations confront insurgencies, they often fixate on terrain, firepower, and numbers. They count casualties, measure territory, and debate military strategy. But history offers a sobering truth: **No country collapses because insurgents are strong. Countries collapse when their people's minds become weak, divided, confused, or emotionally captured by narratives that corrode collective meaning.**

The crisis Nigeria faces today is not simply a war of bullets, it is a war of **perception, emotion, identity, and belief.**

Extremist groups understand something that the state often forgets:

the most decisive battlefield is not Sambisa Forest, Lake Chad, Zamfara forests, or the Sokoto-Maradi corridor.

It is the space inside the human mind where:

- fear becomes loyalty,
- humiliation becomes anger,
- anger becomes justification,
- and justification becomes allegiance.

The real danger is not armed jihadists hiding in forests, it is the millions of ordinary Nigerians slowly absorbing jihadist logic without ever realizing it.

A population radicalizes long before it ever picks up a weapon.

Long before a village accepts jihadist rule,
it accepts the idea that the state has failed.

Long before a young man joins an insurgent camp,
he learns that violence is the only language anyone listens to.

Long before a sympathiser supports extremism,
he convinces himself that “maybe they are not completely wrong.”

By the time the first shot is fired, the ideological victory has already been won.

What Nigeria must confront is not just the fighters in the field, but the conditions in the mind that make the fighters possible and this requires honesty.

We cannot pretend that:

- illiteracy does not shape belief,
- poverty does not erode dignity,
- injustice does not breed rage,
- failed governance does not create alternatives,
- and religious emotion cannot be weaponized by men who understand psychology better than theology.

The extremists did not create the wounds in northern Nigeria.

The wounds were already there.

The extremists merely infected them and now, the infection is spreading across generations.

If Nigeria does not address the psychological roots of this crisis, then no number of military operations will be enough.

You cannot bomb an idea.

You cannot arrest a narrative.

You cannot kill a grievance.

You cannot silence a worldview by destroying a camp.

The war Nigeria must fight is deeper: the war for **meaning, identity, and truth.**

A society becomes ungovernable when:

- pain replaces clarity,
- anger replaces thought,

- identity replaces citizenship,
- propaganda replaces education,
- and fear replaces hope.

When this happens, the state loses not just territory, it loses legitimacy and once legitimacy is lost, even victories look temporary.

The truest measure of Nigeria's future will not be how many insurgents are killed, but how many minds are liberated from the narratives that extremists have planted.

The real battle is not on the battlefield.

It is in the mind, where nations are either built or destroyed.

If Nigeria can reclaim that battlefield, everything remains possible.

If it cannot, no amount of military firepower will save it.