



# Over Two Decades of Lip Sticking Military Counterterrorism: Until Victims Are Turned into Supporters of Killers

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## Abstract

This paper argues that heavy reliance on military counterterrorism since 9/11 can weaken trust, disrupt local social order, and push affected communities toward noncooperation or support for armed groups. It uses a qualitative, conceptual discussion supported by case examples, policy documents, and secondary literature. Its main conclusion is that counterterrorism should be judged less by enemy attrition and more by whether it builds legitimacy, community trust, and resilience.

## Subject Areas

Military Science, Sociology

## Keywords

Lip Sticking Military Counterterrorism, Suspect Communities, Integrated Adaptation, Civilian-Led Counterterrorism, Community Sovereignty

## 1. Introduction

Countering terrorism adopted at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is no longer business as usual. This is because reacting to terrorist threats with military force is becoming business unusual. Evidence shows that it is not always military bidding that effectively decimates terrorists. Military approach creates a complex, disruptive, and dicey security situation detrimental to upholding or restoring community resilience. Attacks affect human rights and civil liberties among ordinary citizens, and more so, communities suspected of supporting terrorists. In response to shredded human rights through military-inspired violence, suspected local communi-

ties become part of a formidable force, joining hands with terrorist organizations to counter military pressure.

Therefore, balancing the integration of military counterterrorism protocols in the face of infringement of civil liberties of those living in or travelling between the affected areas becomes an ongoing area of controversy and argument [1]. It illuminates weakened trust, disrupts local social order, and creates “suspect communities” within the broader terrorist catchment areas. Mostly, whether out of fact or perception, or not, a group of people are placed under suspicion from members of the wider society. It is imminent, especially where ethnic divisions, marginalization, or poor-state relations exist, and quite prominent wherever conflict has been in existence. The media has contributed to the construction of imagined communities, especially in sectarian conflicts. In that sense, the media becomes a catalyst of suspicion narrative as terrorist atrocities provoke fear in the community and among the wider population. Social divisions emerge out of military violence, media “supported” suspicions, and socio-economic fragilities. For example, the research findings by Tufyal Choudhury and Helen Fenwick on “the impact of counterterrorism measures on Muslim communities” in the United Kingdom (UK), attest to the impact of the military approach to counterterrorism. The findings revealed that Muslims and non-Muslims from the same locality appeared to live parallel lives. Counterterrorism measures contributed to a wider sense among Muslims that they were treated as a “suspect community”. They were targeted by authorities simply because of their religion [2].

However, more relevant to this paper, is the impact of cumulative factors associated with the execution of counterterrorism security measures by the state. They constitute clusters of circumstantial conditions that drive the local population towards a non-cooperative stance or choice of support. These factors include misidentification of suspects, civilian casualties, forced displacements, institutional mistrust, exclusion, coercion, ideological affinity, fear of armed groups, weak local governance, patronage networks, and cross-border dynamics. In that regard, enlisting community support and achieving legitimacy of military counterterrorism operations requires integrating all these circumstantial conditions and military adaptation to local and regional conflict management dynamics. Hence, when properly done, there is an increased prospect of producing a civilian-led counterterrorism but still permeable to national security measures that respect community sovereignty.

Nevertheless, this author acknowledges that the study findings may not be conclusive, as community responses vary across settings and that some military operations may improve security when paired with accountable civilian governance. Despite acknowledging the limits of this paper, the perennialism of security volatility associated with countering terrorism militarily, enables local communities to proactively make decisions on their support choice. Where community choice is skewed for a terrorist group, communities momentarily and directly turn military role into a symbolic tool rather than a strategic one in brokering sustainable peace. This paper demonstrates, therefore, that while the military has in some cases

been a panacea for affected communities, the general assessment indicates military counterterrorism has been less effective since 9/11. Instead, it has been viewed as a disruptive tool as it unintentionally suppresses community identity, independence, and sovereignty that form pillars of a socially organized and resilient society.

### **The Goal and Significance of This Paper**

The goal of this article, therefore, is to debate the contextual circumstances in which absolute military hard power in countering terrorism creates numerous unintended consequences. Through qualitative information, the paper demonstrates that when kinetic approaches are not integrated into the socio-economic fabric of affected communities, they culminate in disruptive outcomes rather than restorative achievements. The paper's significance to the practice of counterterrorism, is that several researchers have studied the causes and effects of terrorism, but little research has been done to establish why victim communities tend to align themselves with the perpetrators of terrorism violence as a response to disruptive military intervention.

The paper identifies non-kinetic strategies that must be applied to win community engagement, mobilization, and support. Whether or not communities are discussed as identity or social formation, they can be utilized for effective counterterrorism within a framework of civil-military relations. It is crucial to consider the importance of civil-military relations, especially in the absence of mechanisms to mitigate the unintended consequences of military intervention on community social order. Critical debate will seek to provide qualitative evidence needed to liberate military from its ineffective brand of counterterrorism.

Reflective assessment and review of community participation is core. The study lobbies for an integrated approach that could yield effective stabilization in terrorism affected areas.

Additionally, the paper stresses that the measure of military efficacy should not be how often terrorists are captured or killed, but how successfully the military creates communities in which fewer people harbor sympathy to support terrorist organizations. Therefore, the role of the military in fighting terrorism requires a new set of teeth involving elastic conflict resolution policies and frameworks. It is also worth noting that the paper is not meant to evaluate any specific military counterterrorism operations. It limits itself to a general overview of the issues in the relationship between military and terrorist organizations and how they shape the community's choice of non-kinetic support to terrorists.

## **2. Method of Study**

Methodologically, the paper uses a narrative literature review to provide a comprehensive overview of the available knowledge on military counterterrorism since the 9/11 incident. Ahmad Numan Mousa argues that, unlike systematic reviews, which follow rigid methodologies, a narrative review offers a more flexible

and qualitative approach, allowing researchers to synthesize and interpret the findings of different studies. It is particularly valuable in fields with a high literature diversity, as it can help identify trends, gaps, and emerging themes. Its key strength is the ability to provide a broader context, integrate insights from diverse disciplines, and enable a deeper understanding of complex issues. It also facilitates the exploration of theories and frameworks, often leading to new hypotheses and research questions. This method helps practitioners and policymakers to extract key research findings that can inform practice and decision-making [3].

Theile and Andrea provide a complementary sentiment that narrative review involves an analysis of scientific information on a specific topic, which also allows the researcher to present their own unique perspective on the same topic [4]. It is a method that resonates well with the paper's objective to rethink the practice of military counterterrorism. This author, therefore, identifies relevant studies, evaluates them, and synthesizes and interprets their contributions to the paper's main conclusion; that counterterrorism should be judged less by enemy attrition and more by whether or not it builds legitimacy, community trust, and resilience.

### **Rationale for Military Pursuit of Terrorists**

The rationale behind military response in conflict situations remains an indispensable component of countering terrorism. Although the term "terrorism" is not subject to a universally agreed-upon definition, the basic definition entails that terrorism is an action or threat designed to influence the government or intimidate the public for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, or ideological cause. Hisarlioglu and Yalcinkaya in Haldun (2021) highlight that agreeing on a universal definition of terrorism is becoming much harder, though stressing it is more essential than ever to understand it. A clear definition would determine the success of counterterrorism policies and facilitate strategic international cooperation [5].

Michael Moncrieff *et al.* state that before the 9/11 attacks, terrorist organizations were largely seen as criminal groups, who did not matter a lot but were handled by law enforcement agencies and not under the conduct of hostilities paradigm [6]. However, the seminal concept of Global War on Terror (GWOT) declared by the USA administration in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks changed the world's view on terrorists. It became the symbol of modern-day endorsement of military use against terrorism. Politicians and policymakers see military use as needed for the immediate protection of civilians. It is also conceived as vital to protecting other vulnerable targets against emerging terrorists.

Additionally, the military could also be deployed to support humanitarian responses and perhaps help to identify risks that need to be addressed to overcome the fragility associated with terrorism. These constitute noble causes to deploy the military.

In 2006, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, adopted by consensus, a Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy ([A/RES/60/288](#)) that included implementing

society-led counterterrorism elements [7]. It is a unique global instrument to enhance national, regional, and international efforts to counter terrorism. The adoption implied that all United Nations Member States agreed to a common strategic and operational approach to countering terrorism, individually and collectively. Through the Strategy, the General Assembly reaffirmed that Member States have the primary responsibility to implement the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism. The Strategy has four pillars involving measures to address the i) conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, ii) prevent and combat terrorism, iii) build States' capacity to prevent and combat terrorism, including to strengthen the role of the United Nations system, iv) measures to ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis of the fight against terrorism.

Simply put, the military is perceived as contributing to rebuilding the resilience of the local communities facing security challenges posed by terrorism. Overall, in the eyes of many (victims, practitioners, policymakers, donors, etc.), the presence of military signals hope for progress towards peace. When a coalition or multinational force is formed, the military is perceived as a multilateral effort to create new opportunities to further consolidate resilience in local conflict management. To sum it up, it is viewed as a transitional mechanism aimed at achieving relative peace and a more sustainable, resilient society. In this regard, the use of military force in retaliation for terrorist activities has since been seen as a formidable security stabilizing force. These goals were thought to give effect to both effective protection of human rights for resilient societies and security stabilization for sustainable development. Promoting good practices, respect for human rights, and the rule of law among security forces while preventing and countering terrorism fosters positive relations between security forces and local communities [8]. The gap that sits in basic understanding of terrorism as it relates to its antagonistic nature or motivations is how military pursuit of terrorists agitates the community's role in countering terrorism.

This view is supported by Hisarlioglu and Yalcinkaya, who further argue that in the current circumstances, relative success achieved by hard power counterterrorism policies must be supported by smart defense strategies. They must be anchored on principles of political ownership, community-based policies, multinational and multi-sectoral cooperation, and societal support. This would broaden a universal awareness on the brutality of terrorist activities and how to counter them. It involves the application of measures designed to combat or prevent terrorism, including the use of military. When we talk of effective counterterrorism, the number of terrorists captured or killed do not fully reflect a success story. Instead, effectiveness must be seen by the extent to which military intervention is accepted by local population, its drive to build institutional trust among them and ultimately the level of resilience produced within communities.

It is crucial, especially when traditional peacekeeping is gradually expanding its

scope of work to pursue counterterrorism operations. Theo Neethling rightly puts it, a growing emphasis on stabilization and counterterrorism in international peacekeeping operations has increasingly become apparent [9]. While UN peacekeeping operations are extending beyond traditional principles and doctrine to pursue terrorists, it is proving to be an open-ended episode of lip-sticking military operations. For example, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was the first-ever UN peacekeeping operation that conducted military operations against terrorist groups. Similarly, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) was mandated by the UN Security Council to neutralize and disarm rebels such as the M23 and Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the strife-riven eastern parts of the country. In both missions, military operations remain subject to serious scrutiny because of the failure to neutralize non-state armed groups. Enhancing institutional trust through capping military counterterrorism to inclusive participation remains elusive. Dawit Yohannes and Meressa Dessu argue that violent protests against peacekeepers in DRC and Mali highlight local dissatisfaction and fundamental aspects of peace missions that need reform [10].

Actually, Theo states that MONUSCO's approach made it a party to the conflict. Also, Karlsrud sees these expansionist agendas as undermining the UN's impartiality and legitimacy [11]. Theo also observed that, in 2013, the African Union (AU) explicitly required its peacekeeping mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to tackle the threat posed by al-Shabaab and other armed movements. This was done despite not being a peacekeeping mission in the UN sense of the term. These policy decisions had unintended consequences. Despite notable progress made, these missions were more and more perceived as partial in conflicts. Their strategies were hollow in the sense that they did not embrace the principle of a population-centric approach, hence a lack of legitimacy, participation, and inclusion.

### 3. The Troubling Side of Military Counterterrorism

The stagnation of military counterterrorism revolves around a bulk of policy and practice challenges. First, its "billboards" of what really constitutes effectiveness, especially in areas of partisan violence, is a big issue. Currently, how often terrorists are captured, or the number of those killed, represents a successful operation, at least from the military viewpoint. Yet, success can not be achieved without making communities refrain from supporting and stimulating sympathy for terrorist organizations. The other challenge relates to constant in and out movements of forces and the impact on maintaining objectives. For example, the allocation of decision-making authority is tied to certain positions within the hierarchy but not bound by what predecessors committed for affected communities. In short, inheritance of leadership roles occasionally goes without inheriting the required obligation. The practice is easily outpaced by fluid security changes on the ground. Therefore, prospects to achieve military objectives are placed at arm's length with practice. Structurally, the mismatch between practice and security conditions erases

the long-term purpose of deployment. Precisely, the purpose tumbles as the military attempts to address immediate concerns.

When the purpose of deployment erodes gradually along with leadership changes, the endgame is that institutional memory fades quickly, especially in the midst of funding pressures. What it means is that the institution survives but no longer effectively illuminates its original function. Consequently, the implicit contract between the military and stakeholders that includes affected communities erodes. Locals withdraw trust from the military institution, and in response, the military views them as “suspect communities” where compliance with military demands becomes a coerced matter rather than voluntary. Sandy complements that when confidence is lost in the manner in which the state exercises its responsibility, its legitimacy is weakened, and people turn to violence to achieve their goals [12]. The spiral effect is that military legitimacy is thrown out of community support as pre-existing social ties are likely to help facilitate militant mobilization and recruitment.

This, however, Moncrieff *et al.* argue, does not necessarily indicate the formation of a fighting role in the conventional sense. On a grand scale, it just implies that active distrust in public institutions creates different psychological beliefs that play into and potentially lead to different political attitudes and behaviors [13]. As such, Conzo and colleagues argue that individuals or communities may choose to simultaneously delegate problem-solving tasks both to capable institutions and to competent actors within grassroots organizations. This can be done without necessarily relying on trust and cooperation with unknown people [14]. In this case, the design of military counterterrorism has the potential to create a backlash or draw community support for its operations. The psychological impact is that uncooperative behavior feels more authentic when it is believed to have been caused by external pressure rather than by one’s true self.

The general assessment indicates that the sense of purpose in counterterrorism efforts has consistently been subjected to politics and not aligned with military counterterrorism to the security conditions on the ground. Therefore, military use is a tool that must align itself with political correctness and not ground-level conditions. The contest around how terrorism is pursued remains controversial. Dennis Jett notes that terrorism is a complex security challenge that occasionally breeds unintended risks in terrorism affected areas. Controversies around the definition of terrorism further complicate counterterrorism operations, as many in the United Nations and elsewhere prefer to use the term “violent extremism” [15]. By implication, the military pursues terrorism in line with the political authority that sanctions the intervention. This makes their tools ineffective in dealing with terrorism as they are not condition-based.

Theo still reminds us that terrorism denotes a clear intrusion of highly dangerous non-state actors in the domain of the state. He adds that even those deployed are not necessarily equipped and trained to deal with terrorist threats. In recent years, we have seen an increasing convergence between UN peacekeeping opera-



tions and counterterrorism discourse seemingly done on an *ad hoc* basis. But such convergence is likely to be counterproductive in the long term. Despite a notable confluence of several strategic shifts in security management, policy frameworks for enhanced civil-military integration are still weak. Karlsrud raises an important point that stabilization and counterterrorism have replaced peacebuilding as key operative terms in policy discussions. This requires institutional reforms to drive counterterrorism towards achievable goals.

The Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) constitute another troubling dimension of military counterterrorism. As terrorists are indistinguishable from non-combatants, they also have access to Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) at their disposal, which they use without complying with prescribed protocols. Their objective is to kill innocent people to call attention to their cause. As such, communities find themselves on the thin line between fear and vigilance, whose ramifications show up in the form of uncooperative relations with the military. Terrorist organizations adapt to these toxic relations between communities and the military to provoke local support. It becomes vivid when community participation is deliberately omitted at the design stage. It is evident that when politics and military doctrine erode the significance of community participation, the process of building community resilience is unfortunately dwarfed. In many instances, regrettably as it may be, the use of military force bruises the national social cohesion. It fragments the very social fabric needed for the sustainable resolution of conflict.

Even in its aftermath, the military fails to consolidate the political and social gains made during the mission's presence. Research has shown that the deadlock must be disentangled within the broader spectrum of conflict resolution. Monopoly on violence perpetuated by the military permits communities to work quietly in terrorists' shadows and wrap their position against the military into the narrative of exercising autonomy. It explains the view that communities have increasingly exercised veto power over military use in recent years. The equation has shifted, with communities becoming jugglers in the vein of societal stability. In short, when community input is not considered at the planning stages of a military-driven anti-terrorist campaign, it is, by default, setting a strategic defeat even before the campaign is launched.

Military intervention rarely incorporates socio-economic development considerations into discussions when planning the interventions. Embedding the fabric of social and economic development of recipient communities must be part of transitional military processes. If deliberately decided so, it can increase the prospect of collaborative effort for transformative peace. However, some commentaries suggest the military approach is in its chaotic dilemmas because its doctrine mismatches it with the relevant legitimacy to craft a condition-based transition operation. This author laments that terrorism has pushed conflict resolution into a period of networked deterrence where communities are no longer military launchpads for liberalist causes.

Even in times of geopolitical contests, authorities must refrain from determin-



ing the outcomes of military operations before deployments take place. This is the flipside of geopolitical contests in the anti-terrorism sphere. Ignoring this reality, it permits kinships to be crafted and strengthened by terrorist organizations among people of the same social grouping, or with those facing military pressure as “suspect communities”. As this case can happen among those living along both sides of international borders, community kinships eventually have spiral effects for regional considerations in counterterrorism. Irritation consolidates the identity of each party against the other, hence harming the legitimacy of the intervening entity. Carl Jung captures this tension succinctly: “Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves”. Therefore, peace is only real if it makes communities rediscover themselves and become stable. Building community sovereignty that facilitates self-discovery resonates with the idea that every community’s inner determination can outweigh challenges, circumstances, or even the opinions of others.

Military operations are state-centric, often conducted at the detriment of strengthening service delivery, representation, and inclusion at local levels. These are key elements of a long-term peacebuilding strategy. When communities join terrorists fighting the military by being uncooperative, it is a declaration of defiance to protect community sovereignty. Williams Dodeye Uduak offers a complementary suggestion that addressing socio-economic grievances is crucial, as it paves the way for further inroads that could influence the resolution of conflict dynamics [16].

Framework deficiencies in counterterrorism effectively widen the gaps in tackling a multidimensional and inter-sectional threat like terrorism. Military practice pays little or no attention to this aspect. Its isolationist tendencies erode organizational order, which terrorists exploit with the support of their kinship communities. The practice is so rigid, with no elasticity to accommodate other stakeholders. It takes a long time for the military to adapt to rapidly changing security dynamics, let alone to how terrorist groups are adaptively constraining military strategy to their advantage. In their interview with a Kenyan government official in 2014, Lind *et al.* established that the Al-Shabaab threat level was high, but that was mostly from Al-Shabaab sympathizers. They were taking advantage of the existing insecurity to cause mayhem. Sympathizers created more concerns because ideology mattered less to them, but they believed in the tactics of the terrorist group [17]. The incidence of copycat attacks or vendetta veiled by other violence is an important development that points to the entangling of Al-Shabaab with local politics and vernacular understandings of security. Security or insecurity must be deeply understood from the perspectives of those most marginalized in society or from perceived or genuine fears of “suspect communities”.

Selective human rights violations mark the start of the fallout of community support for military forces. Thus, poorly crafted counterterrorist policies reproduce and reinforce the differentiated layers of society. For example, Ragazzi informed that research on the impact of counterterrorism on Muslim communities

is dominated by the idea that these policies produce a “suspect community”. Yet counterterrorism is about protecting some of our most basic human rights through eliminating terrorist threats [18]. But more often, human rights violations blur counterterrorism as a noble cause, depicting inadequate memorization of collective experiences.

Despite emphasis on human rights protection in the provisions of the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy, Member States tend to opt for military rather than community-led initiatives to address the threat. Consequently, a narrative about military violence is born out of this approach, and it doesn’t need to be true for the narrative to effectively produce public anger. Also, if the conduct of the military is resented, it weaves into social, economic, and political dynamics and triggers remembrance of killed comrades in communities. As such, a non-conflict sensitive approach has been weak in adhering to respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis of the fight against terrorism. Institute for Security Studies (ISS) research findings show that large-scale military operations often trigger the return of voluntary and involuntary associates of Boko Haram in all four of the Lake Chad Basin countries [19]. These include Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and Cameroon.

Terrorism is a threat that requires an integrated policy of engagement. Any intervention not adapted to local memories and experiences simply means it is not developed based on existing security pillars of solidarity and community cohesion. In other words, when a military approach is applied without adaptation, it simply means creating a tragic trajectory for itself. Delivering effective conflict management requires understanding that peace is not only achieved when it is achieved militarily. Perceived stalemate in the military-civilian integration can also be anchored on inadequate strategic messaging to local communities. Modern dominance in the terrorism landscape is shaped by the one controlling the appealing message to the security-strawing congregants. The current standoff symbolizes the detachment of sacrifices and the long-term endurance of populations facing a security deficit. New collaborative tactics must support organizational order, strengthen military legitimacy, and realign collaboration and partnerships for the whole of society’s stakeholding.

In a crisis, perception is the oxygen in which facts on the ground are contested to mirror the resilience of terrorist groups. The physical battlefield and information space have become indistinguishable. Any attack from either side is wrapped in competing claims. In 2017, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) interviewed 495 young African men who had voluntarily joined violent extremist groups. The study found they were motivated by a sense of grievance toward, and a lack of confidence in, their governments. For them, extremist ideologies were a way to escape a future with no possibility of positive change. The study concluded that improved public policy and governance were a far more effective response to violent extremism than a military one [20].

Military operations that indirectly decommission local social order have serious

implications for the military. The big question within this reflection, is how the decommissioning of community order becomes a military vulnerability. The fact is that when the military power grid remains coiled in rigidity, peace terminals that exist in the whole of society's discourse become unstable. In that case, the concept of "whole of society" entails harnessing grassroots-based opportunities. It involves mobilizing a wide array of community groups to counter radicalization and recruitment to violent extremist ideologies without stigmatizing any particular social identity. Unfortunately, instability resulting from state-sanctioned violence chokes military effectiveness. Instead, communities win concessions that change perceptions on the role of the military. Simply, the law of unintended consequences is applicable. Changes in the strategic balance of power and alliances among actors in the kill zone take place. Clusters of civilian casualties no longer depict politics but the sunrise of emerging multilayered conflict resolution structures. The community's uncooperative stance in modern conflicts is a testament to rejecting military violence, which has been unleashing a spiral of violence across counterterrorism spheres.

Coercive peace is not peace in all definitions. Humiliation of locals is not peace but a loud failure in silent peace. The net effect is the conflicting confluence of military objectives and the optics of genuine conflict resolution. Wanting communities to be neutral in a conflict theater, is by default wanting to be untruthful with valuable ingredients that support sustainable stability. In fact, terrorists' strategy is not to decisively outmatch the adversaries with an advanced arsenal. It is to impose costs, strain military-civilian relations, and exhaust military planners' ability to adapt to evolving threats. This puts community involvement at the centre of functional counterterrorism policies, building trust among all the relevant participants.

Undisputably, for several centuries, the military has been a reliable tool for managing conflicts. They have been deployed both in international and civil wars. The configuration of military schemes has been seen as the most effective tool to tackle terrorism since the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite this posture, growing evidence suggests that insistence on military use is, in fact, decoupling it from emerging stabilization frameworks that incorporate counterterrorism. Counterterrorism requires the participation of local people, conceived as a local peace zone upon which military intervention will be built. This means counterterrorism must go beyond law enforcement to prevent the military from drowning itself in strategic vulnerability. In fact, Prunckun adds that programs that offer alternative sources of belonging and meaning through community engagement, youth initiatives, or deradicalization pathways have the potential to undercut the appeal of extremist identity [21]. Localized conception of counterterrorism has the potential to shift the practice where military doctrine shapes the design of the intervention, and not the local context determining the design of the operations.

Another factor contributing to military vulnerability is the lack of tools to prevent or mitigate military-induced displacements. The pushback is created by dis-

placements caused by the military, which produces an anti-military narrative by terrorist organizations. Additionally, the resentment is exacerbated by the secretive nature of military doctrine, which places local inputs on the sidelines of its operations. More so, this approach to counterterrorism is increasingly presenting a long-term strategic vulnerability of military deployments in conflict zones. In recent years, studies have shown that “military venturism” with terrorists plays into the local narrative that military intervention has become a community destabilizing factor. While this paper is not pursuing an alarmistic approach, it draws inspiration from Dennis Jett, who asserts that the military in general has become a dangerous tool with the rise of terrorism.

Soiled by anti-military narratives, military planners fracture anti-terrorist campaigns when they assume pain creates compliance of “suspect communities”. Even where communities are militarily forced into submission over local realities, this promotes radicalization and toxic power constructs fomenting vertical resistance. Two decades of lip-sticking military counterterrorism symbolize a punchline in the terrorist-military equation. In the larger scheme of resolving conflicts, countering terrorism for societal resilience must aim at preparing the public to survive an attack and recover strongly in the aftermath of any attack. But more often, the military looks for obedience while terrorists are searching for strategic partnerships with local communities. Where such relationships have been achieved, the strategic levels turn the threats into terrorists’ leverage. Therefore, insensitivity to social order, especially in times of serious insecurity, is a direct ignorance of the fact that every thread holds the weight of the whole.

Overreliance on the military has implications for collaborative or joint efforts on terrorism. For example, CTED amplifies that the fight against terrorism and violent extremism is characterized by hard military approaches, as opposed to soft approaches in Africa [22]. It is a failure to recalibrate conflict-affected communities. It is also affording terrorists favorable grounds to explore the available opportunities. Ultimately, a stalemate usually becomes the result of prolonged military counterterrorism. The sticking points are in the transition, which is blind to the fact that a community is a collection of communities. Each community is bestowed with a role of maintaining some “sacred” authority and psychological influence on its survival. When this authority is entangled with political ambitions, presented to them in the form of military interventions, it becomes a potent force for joint violence and uncooperative resistance to the forces. As such, deploying militarized counterterrorism, which is insensitive to adaptation, is inevitably an intervention geared for defeat on the battlefield. This is how such operations are not just security contests but also a referendum on public trust and engagement.

Collateral damage that comes in the form of civilian casualties and displacements affects military legitimacy. The costs to human life spike up when military action produces retaliatory attacks from terrorists and their supporting communities. During this period, contemporary terrorism is characterized by an increasing frequency and magnitude of indiscriminate violence. It is a security matter

usually discussed in the form of headlines and according to the eyes of policy makers sitting around high tables. This practice has put prospects for effective counterterrorism policies at the razor's edge. According to UNODC, terrorist attacks can be broadly categorized into two areas: focused and indiscriminate. However, history indicates that terrorism has largely fallen under the former category. An indiscriminate attack involves victims who are not usually specifically selected based on their individual characteristics. Instead, they are "chance" victims who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time [23].

In addition, the military is blind to effective conflict resolution approaches that involve engaging in dialogue with members of terrorist organizations and the communities that support them, on whatever scale. It is always rewarding to address the legitimate grievances of these actors and counter the alienation felt by those on the margins of society. For example, military action against Boko Haram and surrounding communities has often created greater sympathy for the group within those communities. It becomes a recipe for further recruitment and, at the same time, eroding trust between these communities and the Nigerian state. Furthermore, Remadji Hoinathy argues that military operations after the deployment of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in 2015 considerably rolled back Boko Haram's territorial gains. But a failure to hold these spaces and win the hearts and minds of the communities meant the groups were never totally eradicated [24]. Context-informed assessment demands that the grievances that feed into the narrative of uncooperative conduct or support for terrorism are given serious attention. For years, multilateralism around condition-based terrorism threats operated under fiction conflict resolution. Such understanding doesn't pay attention to the fact that peace is lived by communities of communities. Strategic capacity building for resilience is about harnessing community support, which resonates for long-term reciprocity and not hierarchy.

### 3.1. How Do End Lip Sticking Phase?

Conflict resolution wisdom entails developing counterterrorism policies that recognize the veto powers that exist in the military-terrorist equation. This recognition extends our understanding that drumbeats of military intervention are not effectively shaped by the size of their budgets alone. It is about the new *modus operandi* that prevents disruptive military operations from continuing without goal attainment. New thinking is about communities validating conflict-resolution strategies in light of fresh nature and contemporary terrorist trends within the broader security domain. Dismantling liberalist-framed military interventions could pave the way for a restorative story of local conflict management structures. Making the military a smart tool against terrorism, considerations must focus on the following:

**Memorializing the victims:** It involves establishing programs aimed at offering support to families and communities affected by insecurity, including victims of terrorism. They may be in the form of joint efforts with CSOs, religious leaders,

and other peace actors. Putting into perspective, dead people sitting in the archives of conflict zones are a testament to the gaps in stabilizing efforts. Through their families and communities, the voices of dead people have been amplified, but memorializing them in totality instills a sense of joint efforts with affected communities. Enhancing community role in civilian-led counterterrorism is an amalgamation of community-based support structures that crystallize the call for a whole-of-society counterterrorism model. In other words, it is a call for transformation where local voices represent a revisionist agenda in the perspective of conflict resolution, not mere peace handshakes.

**Acknowledge shifting balance of power:** In some social spaces, communities consider military intervention as a game of impunity that has escalated to the edge in recent years. Therefore, communities now sit somewhere between victims of terrorism and the axis of reforms. The hybridity is a conversation on the emerging, shifting balance of power in areas invaded by terrorists. Those who see terrorism as justified often have strong feelings to declare the rightness of the use of violence. As such, countering terrorism is not a coherent story without recognizing the importance of communities and the “escalation trap” they create for the military if not involved. Within this uncertainty, terrorists misuse advanced technologies to launder money and finance terrorist activities. Other factors that stimulate destabilization of the already strangled social order through radicalization, local grievances, and national or regional fragilities.

**Integrated adaptation** could be an effective tool, as it brings together the strengths of each method and realigns them with the shifting power balance in conflict resolution. Failure to manage the integration of both hard power and soft power that facilitates the smart application of counterterrorism strategies largely accounts for the ineffective elimination of terrorists. Stephen Harley acknowledges that little consideration has been given to implementing these concepts in counterterrorism. As a result, there are few examples of coordinated, consistent, and effective implementation of hard and soft power approaches in unison in counterterrorism [25]. This is despite the fact that they do not substitute military doctrine but allow them to retain their traditional doctrine while engaging collaboratively with cohorts of civilian actors of counterterrorism. This is how to actualize a sense of ownership and achieve the intended objectives of an intervention.

**Connecting social networks with emotional dimensions:** Accordingly, de-commissioning social order amidst terrorism threats starts when the military lacks strategic support and connection with local civilians. In such cases, both controversial and emotional dimensions associated with terrorism become a common denominator for communities’ choice of support. Hisarlioglu and Yalcinkaya argue that the vacuum created by terror actions and subsequent military kinetic force decreases the sense of political ownership, lost prospects of reinforcement of societal resilience, professionalization of risk management systems, and multi-sectoral and multidimensional strategic cooperation.

As reported in the Global Terrorism Index of 2025, while the deaths from ter-

rorism fell in 2024 to 7,555, representing a 13 percent decline from the previous year, terrorism remains a persistent global threat [26]. The costs, consequences, and outcomes of military counterterrorism, which had drawn a lot of international support since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States of America (USA), are increasingly becoming a source of concern. A hollow ring exists between the noble military aspirations and the awareness of its propensity for self-destruction in pursuit of terrorists. Imperial overreach in conflict resolution, which has been in use through military deployment for several decades, is now overstretched. This blowback negatively creates insecurity due to diversity, particularly with the misuse of advanced technologies.

**Narrowing information gaps:** Experience has shown the worsening information dissemination contest between military and terrorist groups. Strategic information dissemination space has become the function of the smartest and not what the world demands. Terrorists use hard and soft power, typified in information warfare. So, public confidence could be a reliable variable to efforts ending the lip-sticking of counterterrorism. In fact, inspiring public confidence in the state's ability to deal with terrorism is clearly crucial [27].

**Strengthening advocacy:** The other factor contributing to military vulnerability relates to a lack of strong advocacy for a new approach. The inadequacy has been replaced by military deniability of its unintended consequences on anti-terrorist campaigns. The deniability presents an opportunity for communities to become "proxies" of resilient terror groups. It also implies that conflict theater is not monolithic, while the unstructured stand-by of communities against the military, as may be viewed, symbolizes the demilitarization of conflict resolution. Inputting military concessions into conflict resolution could strengthen advocacy for an inclusive process. Civilian populations in a conflict space need not be other people's standard of success. Rather, the degree of involvement should serve as the measure of collaborative work, a basis for legitimacy, and a springboard for transitional counterterrorism.

**Enhancing adaptive strategies:** This means gradually increasing space to embrace community-centered counterterrorism beyond political and military headlines. It could mean developing new foundations for achieving sustainable, peaceful communities. Communities must not only be recognized as "present" in the peace process but as integrated peace actors and by its essence. If it follows the logic of essence, lip-sticking mutates the purpose of intervening. It becomes a tool of intimidation and submission of local people, and is simply wrapped in the language of counterterrorism. The military hegemonic blueprint is being challenged by communities as new powerhouses of sovereignty and unity. Despite communities operating ordinarily outside the orbit of military structures, counterterrorism policies must address the confluence of interests of all actors. It is a phenomenal time to search for suitable strategies and grounds to keep military relevance afloat. This is because terrorists mutate rapidly when threatened by the military. The mutation could elongate to include non-violent actors. According to Tom Hastings,



non-violent insurgencies are approximately twice as likely to succeed as violent struggles [28].

**Identifying pressure points:** As controversies around the use of military force are relatively unnoticed in terms of repercussions and implications, it is also important to highlight the pressure points it creates. In general, counterterrorism has for several decades suffered from convenient conclusions due to insufficient connections with locals. Communities make progress by rejecting those who attempt to undermine the independence and sovereignty of their inclusive local conflict management mechanisms. These could include men, women, youth of intra-community or external actors. For example, research conducted in Ghana by Amedzrator and Mensah states that because women are generally perceived as weak and non-threatening, Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) tend to deploy them to facilitate illicit activities. Women are sometimes embedded within communities to gather intelligence since they can access sensitive areas without arousing suspicion [29]. Based on the research findings, it is argued that the ability of the military to project its power to decisively deal with terrorism requires the military to rebalance its portfolio. It is vital because episodic memories of military violence among locals distort avenues for effective conflict resolution.

**Switch to military-civilian driven counterterrorism:** Anti-military driven security is not a contract but a mere signature call for an elastic conflict resolution framework. Focusing on preemptive and short-term violence reduction amounts to blurring efforts to address the roots of socio-economic and political causes of terrorism. Structural factors contributing to the rise of terrorism are ignored. For example, Elizabeth Schmidt pointed out that Africa is a continent where military solutions do not work. She added that prescriptions imposed from above and outside often fail. In some cases, military operations have, alongside them, co-opted civilians to fight terrorists [30]. It demonstrates dynamics around community roles that may be multifaceted. For example, the ISS reported that in October 2022, the Government of Burkina Faso recruited fifty thousand (50,000) Burkinabe civilians who voluntarily joined the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP) to fight the violent extremists [31].

**Utilize the United Nations Office of Counterterrorism (UNOCT):** Established in June 2017, it is an important step in consolidating the transformative fight against terrorists. The Office leads the UN's efforts to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism. Headquartered at the UN in New York, it provides leadership, capacity-building, and policy coordination to Member States while promoting international cooperation. It focuses on implementing the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and enhancing security worldwide. An "all-of-UN" approach to combat terrorism, including preventing violent extremism and managing counterterrorism financing among other initiatives, UNOCT is methodically suitable to facilitate the transition of counterterrorism practice from military-centric to a people-centered approach. Also, it remains a promising mecha-

nism to offer multi-sectoral technical assistance to Member States to enhance their capacity to address terrorism.

### 3.2. What Else Can Be Done to Counter Terrorism

Current counterterrorism efforts present us with a moment where ordinary military norms meet extraordinary community roles. This does not mean communities are sufficient substitutes for military application. What must be done is the much-needed integrated adaptation approach. Integration presents an opportunity for structural upgrade of peace actors that must come with an elastic framework. When integrated adaptation leads to civilian-led counterterrorism, the benefits are enormous.

For instance, community institutional connection to the conflict resolution framework is enhanced. Elasticity created through an integrated framework could hugely support civilian and military collaboration against terrorism. Cosmetic tactical victories that overshadowed adaptive counterterrorism have been tested and proven counterproductive. It is a moment to raise the adaptation of counterterrorism as the heartbeat of security consciousness, going forward.

Upgrading communities into accommodative counterterrorism frameworks implies recognizing that behaviors relating to community security must be influenced by local peace values and not foreign policies. Therefore, an integrated approach could limit military backlash and vulnerability to the social and political dynamics of conflict. This is how legitimacy is secured and maintained in a conflict-related calculus. Additionally, integration reduces psychological alienation among locals, especially those who resort to veiled violence as a response to marginalization or political and economic exclusions. Instead, it strongly connects local knowledge to multilayered strategic nodes of managing conflicts and creates an adaptive environment. This is how the military can become a stabilizing “oxygen” in a conflict situation.

When communities start experiencing integration upgrade, confidence levels build up, and momentum for collaborative effort rises. An open conflict resolution architecture allows multiple actors to occupy the peaceful space. It prevents invisible layers of terrorists from emerging from the social strata. This redefines how to deal with terrorists. It simply means that military victory is not only about capturing terrorists but repositioning it to increase the collaboration with victims of terrorism.

Thus, in the words of Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, images associated with conflicts influence how we view, understand, and respond to violence and how we find solutions to entrenched problems. Simply, more kinetic strikes against terrorist organizations push communities to increasingly be governed by the terror justifications for the violence [32]. Of course, the military has been successfully used in some places despite its shortcomings. The observed rupture is a sign of the military being replaced by many centres of power. During his address to the UN General Assembly on 24 September 2025, President William Ruto of Kenya

expressively highlighted that “institutions rarely fail because they lack vision or ideals; more often, they drift into irrelevance when they do not adapt, when they hesitate to act, and when they lose legitimacy. To remain relevant, institutions must be re-imagined, reformed, renewed, and aligned with emerging realities” (Government of Kenya) [33].

Further, during a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting on 21 January 2025, Amina J. Mohammed, the UN Deputy Secretary-General, highlighted that fragmentation of counterterrorism efforts only serves the perpetrators who thrive by sowing divisions. She called for united and urgent responses focused on fostering dialogue, trust, and coordinated action [34].

In line with Clements’ view, legitimacy is determined by whether the contractual relationship between the state and citizens is working effectively or not. When such welfare is not forthcoming, legitimacy diminishes, and rulers often find themselves forced to move from persuasive to coercive governance [35].

Ezeanyika *et al.* validate the arguments in this paper as they also claim that while military operations can potentially facilitate the disruption of imminent terrorist threats, in most cases, they produce unintended outcomes involving civilian casualties and displacements [36].

#### 4. Conclusion: Integrated Adaptation Leads to Effective Counterterrorism

This paper has carried the burden of demonstrating that the kinetic approach to counter terrorism has gone through a troubling trajectory since the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though sanctioned through constitutional and legal provisions, the endgame of military counterterrorism has recorded more disruptive outcomes and not restorative achievements that build community resilience to terrorism. Numerous military operations have faced community backlash due to frustrations resulting from civilian casualties, displacements, ineffective policies, and non-elastic frameworks that are impermeable to integrated conflict resolution practices.

With communities now yielding some “veto” powers, exercised through waging uncooperative attitudes against intervening military forces, reforms must accompany the community role. The paper has also enlisted information that rigidity stimulates community social resistance, which becomes a formidable bunker against military objectives. The current military compass in pursuit of terrorists is strategically flawed. In short, lip-sticking strategic disasters of the last two decades, with minor tactical victories, signal a pressing need to develop tangible counterterrorism policies.

In this regard, an integrated adaptation presents an opportunity for structural upgrade of peace actors that include affected communities. It will enhance community institutional connection to the peacebuilding framework while reducing psychological alienation among locals. Frustrations that add to the veiled violence can be strongly connected to broader local knowledge to build confidence and

raise momentum for collaborative effort. Adaptive counterterrorism can increase prospects for the military to identify entry points for working with communities, increase military adaptation abilities, and strengthen public confidence for joint counterterrorism actions.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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