

28 **The Strategic Role of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) in Counterinsurgency Operations: Lessons from the Boko Haram Conflict**

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INTRODUCTION

Terrorism continues to pose a significant worldwide security danger, undermining states, damaging economies, and intensifying humanitarian crises. The Boko Haram conflict in northeastern Nigeria is one of the most brutal insurgencies in recent history, significantly affecting regional security in West Africa. The group has exploited socio-political weaknesses to maintain its activities, resulting in widespread displacement, economic ruin, and considerable loss of life (Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2020; Nsirim, Clement-Abraham, & Yahaya, 2024). Although counterinsurgency initiatives have predominantly depended on military power and technology surveillance, the significance of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) in confronting asymmetric threats like Boko Haram is essential.

Human intelligence (HUMINT), encompassing intelligence collection via direct human encounters, has been an essential instrument in global counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts (Awortu, 2022). In contrast to Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) and Imagery Intelligence (IMINT), Human Intelligence (HUMINT) emphasises information acquired via informants, interrogations, infiltrations, and surveillance (Mahmoud, 2023). This type of intelligence is incredibly potent in insurgencies because opponents' function among civilian populations and elude conventional military identification (Lenshie, Nwangwu, & Ezeibe, 2024). The United States and Israel have effectively utilised HUMINT to deconstruct insurgent networks, underscoring its strategic significance (Divon, 2018; Nsirim et al., 2024). In Nigeria, the introduction of HUMINT has encountered several problems, such as a lack of confidence between security personnel and local people, logistical limitations, and systemic inefficiencies (Luqman, 2023).

The Boko Haram insurgency highlights the need for incorporating HUMINT into counterinsurgency strategy. Intelligence obtained from local sources, defectors, and community leaders has been crucial in locating rebel camps, interrupting recruitment pathways, and thwarting attacks (Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2020). The efficacy of HUMINT relies on establishing confidence within impacted communities and maintaining efficient collaboration between intelligence agencies and military personnel (Okolo & Akubo, 2019). Furthermore, the integration of

Human Intelligence (HUMINT) with Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) and Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT) might augment the accuracy and efficacy of counterinsurgency operations (Amaraeibu, 2013; Salleh et al., 2015).

This paper analyses the strategic significance of HUMINT in counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram, evaluating its achievements, constraints, and prospects for enhancing Nigeria's security environment. Based on an analysis of worldwide best practices and historical operations, the research underscores the necessity of a robust HUMINT framework for effectively combating insurgencies.

The Boko Haram insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria remains a persistent and escalating threat, exposing a critical weakness in the country's counterinsurgency strategy: the gross underutilisation of Human Intelligence (HUMINT). Despite prolonged military interventions, Boko Haram continues to launch deadly attacks, demonstrating the fundamental failure of force-centric approaches that prioritize direct combat over intelligence-driven operations (Falode & Faseke, 2023; Musa & Olowonibi, 2024). This is a serious problem. Tactical victories have yielded only short-term gains, while the absence of a practical HUMINT framework has crippled efforts to dismantle insurgent networks and address the underlying socio-political factors fuelling extremism (Suleiman & Omojuwa, 2025).

Research overwhelmingly supports the notion that HUMINT is the cornerstone of counterinsurgency success, particularly in asymmetric warfare where insurgents rely on covert networks, local informants, and adaptable tactics (Hickie et al., 2018; Tar & Bala, 2019). However, in Nigeria, HUMINT remains underdeveloped and critically underfunded. Counterinsurgency efforts have heavily favoured military hardware and kinetic operations for decades, neglecting the essential role of intelligence-led strategies (Falode, 2019; Oche, 2013). This failure has been costly. Deep-seated distrust between security forces and local communities—exacerbated by allegations of human rights abuses and inadequate cultural engagement—has severely hampered intelligence collection, depriving the military of crucial ground-level insights (Ward, 2024; Yalmi, 2020).

Even more alarming is the lack of a unified intelligence-sharing mechanism. Nigeria's security agencies operate in fragmented silos, leading to duplication of efforts, intelligence delays, and missed pre-emptive opportunities (Obbo, 2018; Hickie et al., 2018). This is a glaring operational failure that directly undermines counterinsurgency effectiveness.

This study critically identifies major barriers to effective HUMINT deployment, including structural inefficiencies, operational limitations, and broken trust between security forces and civilians. This study examines the strategic role of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) in counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram,

focusing on its effectiveness in intelligence-driven security interventions. Using Counterinsurgency Theory, which emphasizes intelligence superiority, population-centric approaches, and adaptive strategies, the study analyzes how HUMINT can enhance counterterrorism efforts.

The paper seeks to answer two key questions: (1) How can HUMINT be effectively integrated into Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategy against Boko Haram? (2) What institutional and operational reforms are needed to strengthen HUMINT's role in counterinsurgency? Addressing these questions, the study aims to provide evidence-based policy recommendations for enhancing intelligence coordination, improving civil-military relations, and strengthening counterinsurgency frameworks.

The study's significance lies in its potential to bridge intelligence gaps in Nigeria's security operations. It offers policymakers and security agencies insights on leveraging HUMINT for long-term stability. Strengthening HUMINT will improve counterinsurgency outcomes and contribute to broader security sector reforms and national resilience against terrorism.

Definition and scope of HUMINT

Human intelligence (HUMINT) is a primary intelligence discipline that collects information from human sources. Its historical lineage dates back to ancient times. Its lasting strategic importance is demonstrated by its crucial influence on military strategy, governance, and counterterrorism efforts throughout various historical periods. The progression from basic espionage techniques to advanced modern intelligence operations highlights the ongoing significance of HUMINT in tackling new security threats.

The origin of HUMINT dates back to the biblical story of the twelve spies sent to Canaan by Moses, to gather information about the country and even to ancient civilisations, where intelligence collection was an essential aspect of statecraft and military effectiveness. Egyptian pharaohs deployed clandestine agents to monitor internal threats and maintain political stability (Sadulski, 2023). Simultaneously, Sun Tzu emphasised the significance of understanding opponents through clandestine operations in ancient China, thereby establishing the basis for structured intelligence networks (Zhou, 2021). Likewise, the Hellenic and Roman civilisations widely employed informants and scouts to gain strategic advantages in combat (Johnson, 2021; Sims, 2021).

In the mediaeval and Renaissance eras, HUMINT evolved alongside the rise of nation-states, as rulers depended on clandestine operatives and envoys to gather intelligence on prospective threats. The Elizabethan era saw the establishment of intricate spy networks, notably through Sir Francis Walsingham's efforts to thwart conspiracies against Queen Elizabeth I (Walton, 2022). The escalating intricacy of diplomatic and military matters throughout this era further formalised intelligence-gathering techniques.

The 20th century marked a pivotal era for HUMINT, especially during the World Wars and the Cold War. Specialised intelligence units were created, and espionage emerged as a fundamental tool of statecraft for major powers, as demonstrated by the significant use of covert operations by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Richelson, 2020; Akinyemi, 2022). The Cuban Missile Crisis exemplified the essential function of HUMINT in delivering critical insights that technological intelligence, including satellite images, could not entirely clarify (Egger, 2023).

In the post-Cold War context, various security threats required the enhancement of HUMINT techniques. The rise of transnational terrorism, organised crime, and cyber warfare highlighted its persistent significance (Moffett et al., 2021). The September 11, 2001, attacks revealed significant intelligence vulnerabilities, triggering a renewed emphasis on HUMINT in counterterrorism operations (Sadulski, 2023). This strategic transition was especially prominent in asymmetric warfare, where non-state entities, such as terrorist groups, capitalised on technology deficiencies to avoid discovery.

The persistent Boko Haram insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria illustrates the enduring importance of HUMINT in modern counterinsurgency efforts. In contrast to traditional military operations, counterinsurgency necessitates detailed local intelligence and the ability to infiltrate rebel networks. In areas where technical monitoring is limited, human intelligence (HUMINT) remains essential for producing actionable intelligence (Abdulrahman & Salisu, 2021). Intelligence services are progressively emphasising community involvement and the development of local informant networks to thwart terrorist actions and oppose extremist ideologies.

Notwithstanding progress in cyber intelligence and signals intelligence (SIGINT), human intelligence (HUMINT) remains a source of distinctive, contextually rich insights. Adversaries frequently evade electronic surveillance by avoiding digital communication, making human sources essential for understanding their intents (Walton, 2022; Bringas Colmenarejo, 2022). The combined use of HUMINT, open-source intelligence (OSINT), and social media analysis has enhanced intelligence operations, allowing for a more thorough evaluation of security threats (Egger, 2023).

The historical development of HUMINT highlights its persistent importance in intelligence and security operations. HUMINT has continually evolved from historical espionage methods to contemporary counterinsurgency measures to meet emerging difficulties. Although technological advancements have enhanced intelligence capabilities, the human component is indispensable, offering vital insights for strategic decision-making. As global security threats grow more

intricate, the efficient amalgamation of HUMINT with other intelligence disciplines will safeguard national and international security in the 21st century.

Human Intelligence (HUMINT) constitutes a critical element of intelligence operations, especially within the departments of counterinsurgency (COIN) and counterterrorism (CT) initiatives. In contrast to Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) and Imagery Intelligence (IMINT), which depend on technological approaches, Human Intelligence (HUMINT) obtains intelligence directly from human sources via interrogations, informant recruitment, covert operations, and community engagement (Osagie, 2023). This human-centric intelligence collection method offers context-rich, real-time insights that technological surveillance frequently overlooks. It is essential in complex operational environments like the Boko Haram conflict in Northeastern Nigeria.

Human intelligence (HUMINT) is especially significant in asymmetric warfare, where insurgent groups function within decentralised networks integrated into civilian populations, making conventional intelligence approaches less effective (Crosston, 2021). NATO characterises HUMINT as intelligence acquired via direct human interaction, encompassing interactions with prisoners, defectors, and local informants (May & Granhag, 2016). It is frequently combined with SIGINT, Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT), Measurement and Signature Intelligence (MASINT), and Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT) to improve security operations (Villalón-Huerta et al., 2022).

One significant advantage of HUMINT is its capacity to offer insights into adversary intentions, motivations, and social dynamics, which are essential for anticipating and disrupting insurgent activities (Lehrs, 2019). Intelligence officers, working covertly, enlist informants to obtain actionable intelligence, whereas non-official cover agents face increased risks in developing relationships for intelligence gathering (Nashkova, 2024). HUMINT is a crucial intelligence discipline, capable of infiltrating insurgent networks and revealing strategic threats, despite challenges such as deception, misinformation, and operational security risks (Miller, 2021).

The role of HUMINT encompasses more than espionage and direct intelligence gathering; it is vital for fostering trust within local communities, a factor that is especially important in counterinsurgency efforts against organisations such as Boko Haram (Olukoshi, 2022). Integrating community-based intelligence gathering with military and law enforcement strategies enhances the effectiveness of national security frameworks (Adibe, 2021). The dependence on local informants in Nigeria has proven crucial for identifying extremist cells and preventing attacks (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2022).

Furthermore, HUMINT represents a more economical intelligence approach than advanced surveillance technologies. Extensive training in surveillance techniques, foreign languages, and interpersonal engagement is necessary; however, its capacity to deliver highly contextual, actionable intelligence renders it essential in addressing insurgencies such as Boko Haram (Tsagourias & Farrell, 2020). The socio-political complexities in Nigeria and West Africa require a strong HUMINT capability that incorporates local knowledge, improves intelligence-sharing frameworks, and bolsters counterinsurgency operations (Agbonifo, 2023).

The Role of HUMINT in Asymmetric Warfare and Counterinsurgency

Human Intelligence (HUMINT) is essential in asymmetric warfare, as insurgent strategies like guerrilla warfare, ambushes, and hit-and-run assaults frequently compromise traditional military dominance. Counterinsurgency operations against entities such as Boko Haram, in contrast to conventional warfare, necessitate intelligence-driven strategies that emphasise infiltration, covert surveillance, and the tactical employment of human assets to dismantle insurgent networks. In this environment, HUMINT has demonstrated its essential role in neutralising high-value targets, disrupting logistical networks, and enabling the defection of militants.

A notable deployment of HUMINT in counterinsurgency was the 2016 apprehension of Khalid al-Barnawi, a prominent individual linked to both Boko Haram and Ansaru. This operation depended on covert operators who effectively infiltrated his network, tracked his travels, and supplied actionable intelligence. The success of this operation, accomplished without a large-scale military onslaught, highlights the precision and efficacy of HUMINT in neutralising critical insurgency commanders (Adebayo, 2023).

In addition to direct military confrontations, HUMINT has been crucial in facilitating insurgent defections via clandestine operations. Operation Safe Corridor, a deradicalisation effort, has enabled the surrender of more than 3,000 Boko Haram combatants by utilising informants positioned within insurgent-dominated regions. Undercover agents, masquerading as mediators, created clandestine communication networks, progressively fostering trust and persuading militants to defect. The non-kinetic utilisation of HUMINT has markedly diminished Boko Haram's operational capacity (Ibrahim & Abubakar, 2023).

Human intelligence has been essential in undermining Boko Haram's logistical operations. In 2022, Nigerian intelligence authorities effectively exposed an unlawful supply line that directed weapons and resources to the terrorists. Undercover operatives masquerading as guns dealers penetrated the supply network, acquiring intelligence that resulted in the apprehension of pivotal facilitators and the disruption of supply channels in Borno State. This operation considerably diminished Boko Haram's capacity to conduct extended assaults, demonstrating the efficacy of HUMINT in disrupting militant logistics (Yoroms, 2023).

A significant application of HUMINT occurred during the continuing rescue operations for the Chibok schoolgirls abducted in 2014. Nigerian intelligence agents, masquerading as residents, penetrated Boko Haram encampments to collect intelligence regarding the whereabouts of hostages. These clandestine initiatives facilitated precise military operations that successfully rescued many detainees without inflicting extensive collateral damage (Adeleke, 2021). This underscores the dual role of HUMINT in fulfilling both combat objectives and humanitarian imperatives in crisis zones.

One of the most critical applications of HUMINT was in the 2023 leadership decapitation strike against Boko Haram. Nigerian spies infiltrated Boko Haram ranks, supplying real-time intelligence on the whereabouts of senior commanders in conjunction with international intelligence partners. This intelligence facilitated precise airstrikes and ground operations, resulting in the elimination of numerous high-ranking individuals and a substantial disruption of Boko Haram's command structure. This operation undermined insurgent leadership, impairing Boko Haram's capacity to coordinate assaults, demonstrating the enduring strategic significance of HUMINT in counterinsurgency warfare (Menkhaus, 2023).

These instances of HUMINT-driven clandestine operations illustrate that human intelligence continues to be critical in combating insurgencies. In asymmetric warfare, when militants integrate into civilian populations and utilise challenging terrain, HUMINT presents distinct advantages that technological intelligence—such as satellite photography or signals intelligence—frequently does not offer. The capacity to penetrate rebel networks, establish confidence, and gather actionable intelligence has significantly transformed Nigeria's counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram.

Boko Haram

Boko Haram, formally referred to as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, was established in 2002 in Maiduguri, Nigeria, by Mohammed Yusuf. The group developed as a religious movement promoting the enforcement of strict Islamic law (Sharia) while rejecting Western-style education and governance (Akinbi & Sholademi, 2024). Boko Haram's ideological foundations are closely linked to Salafi-jihadist doctrines, influenced by radical Islamic movements that oppose secular governance.

In 2009, tensions between Boko Haram and Nigerian authorities intensified, resulting in violent confrontations with security forces. The extrajudicial killing of Yusuf in police custody represented a pivotal moment, leading to the group's evolution into a fully developed insurgency under Abubakar Shekau's leadership (Dosmo, 2024). Shekau's leadership implemented increasingly extreme and violent strategies, such as mass abductions, suicide bombings, and assaults on civilians.

Boko Haram has shown strategic adaptability by altering its tactics to include guerrilla warfare, targeted assassinations, and urban terrorism in response to Nigerian military operations (Otegwu, Nwachukwu, & Nwosu, 2024). The group initially targeted government institutions and security forces; however, as counterinsurgency efforts escalated, its targets broadened to encompass civilians, places of worship, and international aid organisations.

In 2015, Boko Haram declared allegiance to ISIS, resulting in the formation of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) as a splinter group (Sholademi, 2024). In contrast to Boko Haram, ISWAP implemented a more organised governance strategy, aiming to gain local support while focusing on military targets. The ideological and operational distinctions between Boko Haram and ISWAP have led to internal conflicts, thereby complicating counterinsurgency efforts.

Boko Haram's operations have expanded beyond Nigeria, impacting Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The group has utilised porous borders, inadequate regional security frameworks, and economic vulnerabilities to enhance its influence (Mazrui & Kanyangara, 2023). The emergence of this transnational threat led to the formation of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF); a coalition of regional security forces designed to combat insurgent activities.

Boko Haram has been designated as a terrorist organisation by the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union, underscoring its connections to international jihadist networks (Olawole & Baloye, 2025). The group's digital strategies for recruitment and propaganda have expanded its global reach, with social media significantly contributing to radicalisation and information warfare (Bramah, Makoni, & Correa, 2024).

Counterinsurgency

Counterinsurgency (COIN) refers to military and political strategies aimed at combating insurgent movements. It encompasses a range of tactics designed to address the immediate threats of insurgents and the underlying conditions that foster such movements.

The Nigerian government's counterinsurgency strategies targeting Boko Haram and its affiliate, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), encompass military operations, intelligence collection, civil-military engagement, and socio-economic initiatives. The initiatives are designed to diminish insurgent capabilities, re-establish governance, and enhance stability in the impacted regions. Nonetheless, despite these interventions, the insurgency continues, resulting in ongoing displacement, economic destruction, and humanitarian emergencies (Udochukwu & Uchenna, 2024). The dynamic nature of the conflict necessitates the importance of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) in improving intelligence-led operations by

providing real-time insights into insurgent activities, recruitment patterns, and operational strategies (Ogbozor, 2025).

Nigeria's counterinsurgency framework has predominantly been military-oriented, heavily depending on kinetic operations like Operation Lafiya Dole, which targets the dismantling of Boko Haram strongholds. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which includes troops from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, enhances regional intelligence-sharing and border security initiatives (Ward, 2024). Despite these initiatives, Boko Haram's adaptability and exploitation of local vulnerabilities require transitioning to intelligence-driven strategies, primarily through human intelligence (HUMINT) and community-based intelligence networks (Falode & Faseke, 2023).

The socioeconomic conditions in Northeastern Nigeria are closely linked to the ongoing insurgency. High unemployment, poverty, political marginalisation, and weak governance foster conditions that facilitate the recruitment of vulnerable individuals by Boko Haram and ISWAP (Musa & Olowonihi, 2024). Insurgent groups capitalise on these challenges by providing financial incentives, ideological indoctrination, and a sense of belonging to marginalised communities and disenfranchised youth (Udochukwu & Uchenna, 2024). The Kanuri ethnic group, prominent in Borno State, has been a key recruitment focus for Boko Haram, which exploits historical grievances and socio-political marginalisation to maintain its movement (Hickie, Abbott, & Clarke, 2018). Furthermore, certain Fulani herders, displaced by economic instability and resource conflicts, have become involved in the insurgency, underscoring the relationship between economic fragility and radicalisation (Ogbozor, 2025).

Boko Haram's attacks have resulted in significant displacement and humanitarian crises, with millions compelled to reside in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, facing insufficient resources and security issues (Falode & Faseke, 2023). The disruption of traditional social structures due to displacement intensifies poverty and perpetuates cycles of instability, thereby creating conditions that insurgent groups exploit (Ward, 2024).

Comprehending the regional socio-political landscape is essential for effective counterinsurgency. Insurgencies flourish in contexts characterised by weak governance, limited economic opportunities, and ideological narratives that align with local grievances. HUMINT functions as a crucial resource for security agencies, facilitating the infiltration of insurgent networks, fostering trust within local communities, and acquiring actionable intelligence (Udochukwu & Uchenna, 2024).

Challenges to Counterinsurgency Efforts

Despite sustained military operations, Boko Haram has demonstrated remarkable resilience, continuously adapting to counterinsurgency measures through decentralized command structures, local alliances, and asymmetric warfare tactics (Obasi, 2024). These adaptations have enabled the group to evade direct military confrontations, regroup after major setbacks, and maintain its operational effectiveness. Several key factors continue to sustain the insurgency and hinder effective counterinsurgency efforts.

One of the most significant challenges is weak governance and corruption. The Nigerian government's failure to address socio-economic disparities, inadequate security structures, and administrative inefficiencies has created an environment where Boko Haram can thrive (Eme, 2024). Corruption within security agencies has further compromised counterinsurgency operations, with reports of mismanagement of defense funds and the diversion of resources intended for counterterrorism efforts. This lack of institutional capacity undermines the effectiveness of military operations and fosters distrust among the local population, limiting intelligence-sharing and community cooperation.

Youth unemployment and radicalization also contribute significantly to Boko Haram's recruitment strategies. Widespread poverty, limited access to education, and a lack of economic opportunities in Northern Nigeria have left many young people vulnerable to radicalization (Acuro, Furong, & Tatiana, 2024). The group exploits these vulnerabilities by offering financial incentives, a sense of belonging, and ideological narratives that resonate with marginalized communities. The absence of viable alternatives for socio-economic advancement makes Boko Haram an attractive option for disillusioned youth, perpetuating the cycle of insurgency.

Additionally, environmental degradation has exacerbated economic hardships in Boko Haram-affected regions, increasing susceptibility to insurgent narratives. The rapid shrinking of Lake Chad, a vital resource for millions of people in the region, has disrupted traditional livelihoods such as fishing and agriculture, leading to displacement and economic instability (Bangura & Mbawa, 2024). As competition for scarce resources intensifies, insurgent groups exploit these grievances to recruit fighters and strengthen their influence in affected communities.

Human rights violations by security forces represent another critical challenge to counterinsurgency efforts. Reports of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances, and military abuses have severely damaged public trust in the Nigerian government and security forces (Zango, 2024). Such violations fuel resentment among local populations and deter civilians from cooperating with authorities by providing valuable intelligence. The erosion of trust between the state and its citizens has created an intelligence gap that Boko Haram continues to exploit,

further complicating counterterrorism strategies.

Theoretical Framework

Counterinsurgency (COIN) Theory

Counterinsurgency (COIN) theory, articulated by David Galula, offers a vital framework for analysing the strategic role of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) in counterinsurgency operations, especially regarding the Boko Haram conflict. Galula's theory, informed by his experiences in the Algerian War of Independence and other conflicts, asserts that insurgents gain strength from the population through active support or passive acquiescence (Galula, 1964). Effective counterinsurgency must prioritise securing the local population's support while concurrently neutralising insurgents through intelligence-driven operations (Smith, 2022).

Galula argues that effective counterinsurgency requires a multidimensional approach, integrating military, political, and socio-economic measures to diminish insurgent influence and strengthen government legitimacy (Abuza, 2020). This is especially pertinent in Nigeria, where Boko Haram capitalises on economic deprivation, political marginalisation, and a limited state presence to maintain its activities (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2021). Conventional military operations, although essential, have not succeeded in dismantling the group's networks or preventing its resurgence, highlighting the necessity for intelligence-driven strategies.

Central to Galula's COIN framework is the importance of intelligence gathering, especially HUMINT, in undermining insurgent operations. Human intelligence (HUMINT) enables counterinsurgency forces to infiltrate insurgent networks, identify pivotal leaders, anticipate attacks, and execute precise responses (Jones & Williams, 2023). The situation in Northeastern Nigeria is particularly challenging due to rugged terrain, inadequate infrastructure, and the insurgency's dependence on local support networks, which impede the efficacy of technological surveillance methods (Clark, 2024; Zenn, 2023). Counterinsurgency operations are likely to be reactive rather than proactive in the absence of effective intelligence gathering via local informants, defectors, and community engagement.

Galula underscores the importance of integrating civil and military efforts in counterinsurgency operations. Although security forces prioritise neutralising insurgents, initiatives aimed at civilians are crucial for addressing the socio-economic conditions contributing to insurgency (Lyall & Wilson, 2020). A counterinsurgency strategy that overlooks development and governance reforms may alienate the population, thus perpetuating the insurgency's recruitment base.

A key component of Galula's theory is the significance of establishing partnerships with local actors. Community leaders, religious figures, and local security groups have a deep understanding of the socio-cultural landscape, rendering them essential partners in intelligence collection and counterinsurgency strategy (International

Crisis Group, 2022). Enhancing local intelligence networks and fostering community trust enables security forces to undermine Boko Haram's influence, improve information-sharing, and strengthen counterinsurgency efforts in remote areas.

Galula's COIN framework offers a thorough perspective for analysing the Boko Haram conflict. The principles of securing population support, prioritising HUMINT, integrating civil-military efforts, and fostering local partnerships are crucial for developing a more effective counterinsurgency strategy in Nigeria. Incorporating HUMINT as a fundamental element of counterinsurgency efforts enables security agencies to shift from a force-centric model to a more intelligence-driven and community-focused strategy, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of counterinsurgency operations.

Literature Review

The Role of Intelligence in Countering Boko Haram

The ongoing threat from Boko Haram has revealed significant deficiencies in Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy, especially regarding the use of intelligence. Ofongo (2018) analyses the role of intelligence in countering Boko Haram in his study, *Defence Strategy: Intelligence and Management of Boko Haram Terrorism in Nigeria* and emphasises the institutional and operational shortcomings within Nigeria's defence framework. This study utilises a qualitative research methodology to synthesise secondary data from governmental reports, international organisations, and academic literature, assessing the integration of intelligence, specifically Human Intelligence (HUMINT), into Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts.

Ofongo's research reveals a significant shortcoming in the integration of intelligence within Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy. The research indicates that security forces predominantly depend on traditional military tactics, including extensive offensives, while employing limited strategic intelligence to predict insurgent activities. The identified gap raises significant concerns due to Boko Haram's adaptable and covert operational framework, characterised by sleeper cells, decentralised command networks, and advanced utilisation of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The lack of an intelligence-driven strategy has enabled Boko Haram to evade conventional military responses, reorganise, and adapt its tactics, consequently weakening sustained counterinsurgency initiatives.

Ofongo identifies systemic mismanagement and corruption as significant barriers to the efficacy of intelligence operations. Despite significant budget allocations to the defence sector, ineffective resource distribution, inadequate interagency coordination, and bureaucratic inefficiencies have markedly impaired intelligence effectiveness. The research highlights that Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy is

predominantly reactive, marked by responses following attacks instead of proactive, intelligence-driven measures. This reactive strategy has hindered the prevention of attacks and has bolstered Boko Haram's resilience in the region.

Ofongo's research highlights the essential function of HUMINT in counterinsurgency operations, especially in acquiring actionable intelligence from local communities. The research highlights that confidentiality and caution are essential components of intelligence operations, particularly in areas where informants encounter significant risks of reprisals from insurgent groups. The study indicates that Nigeria does not possess a well-structured HUMINT framework, resulting in missed opportunities for essential intelligence collection at the grassroots level. The ineffective utilisation of community-based intelligence networks has undermined the country's counterinsurgency strategy and restricted its capacity to pre-empt Boko Haram's actions.

Ofongo's study, while contributing to the field, exhibits significant deficiencies in the examination of counterinsurgency dynamics. The analysis of Nigeria's intelligence framework emphasises operational and institutional deficiencies but fails to adequately consider the socio-political factors that affect community collaboration in intelligence collection. Historical mistrust between security forces and local populations, along with concerns regarding human rights abuses, results in civilians frequently being hesitant to share intelligence. The dimension critical to understanding the limitations of HUMINT in Nigeria is insufficiently addressed in Ofongo's work. Additionally, the study does not sufficiently consider the role of socio-economic conditions—such as poverty, unemployment, and marginalization—in sustaining Boko Haram's recruitment strategies. The study's emphasis on intelligence as a technical and operational tool neglects the wider structural factors influencing the insurgency's resilience.

Saka (2024) offers a detailed examination of the systemic weaknesses that have hindered Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategy, particularly to intelligence failures in the fight against Boko Haram. Saka employs a qualitative research methodology that integrates official reports, academic studies, media articles, and policy documents to provide a comprehensive analysis of the structural and institutional barriers hindering Nigeria's capacity to effectively address the insurgency.

Saka identifies several critical weaknesses in Nigeria's counterterrorism approach. One of the most significant findings is that Nigeria's security framework is largely reactive, focusing on immediate threats rather than long-term prevention through intelligence-led strategies. The study also highlights weak civil-military relations, eroding community trust and making intelligence gathering from local populations challenging. A major deficiency in Nigeria's intelligence architecture is the lack of inter-agency coordination, which results in duplication of efforts, intelligence

delays, and ineffective dissemination of critical information. These structural inefficiencies create a fragmented security environment, making it difficult for security agencies to pre-empt and counter Boko Haram's asymmetric warfare strategies effectively.

Another key finding in Saka's study is the inadequate development of intelligence networks due to cultural barriers, fear of insurgent retaliation, and a lack of structured community engagement. The study suggests that security forces have struggled to establish reliable grassroots intelligence networks, limiting their ability to infiltrate Boko Haram's operational cells. Additionally, the research underscores that inter-agency rivalries within the Nigerian Armed Forces, police, and intelligence agencies have further weakened intelligence-sharing mechanisms. The lack of a centralised intelligence framework has hindered security forces from implementing a unified counterinsurgency strategy, enabling the continuation of insurgent activities.

The study highlights Saka's valuable insights into Nigeria's security failures and acknowledges specific limitations. A significant shortcoming is the insufficient focus on grassroots community engagement as an essential element of intelligence collection. HUMINT relies significantly on trust-based relationships between security forces and local populations; however, Saka does not adequately address how security agencies can close the trust gap to enhance intelligence gathering. The study inadequately explores the ideological and socio-political factors contributing to Boko Haram's resilience. The discussion of radicalisation, religious extremism, and historical grievances against the Nigerian state is insufficiently addressed, resulting in an analytical gap in comprehending the susceptibility of certain communities to insurgent recruitment and influence.

Ofongo (2018) and Saka (2024) 's research provides essential insights into Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategies, emphasising notable intelligence deficiencies that have facilitated Boko Haram's ongoing presence. Both studies support the assertion that HUMINT is crucial for addressing Boko Haram's asymmetric warfare tactics, as it delivers on-the-ground intelligence unattainable through technological surveillance alone. Furthermore, both researchers highlight that institutional failures, corruption, and inadequate intelligence coordination have considerably weakened Nigeria's counterterrorism initiatives.

Nonetheless, significant differences are present between the two studies. Ofongo (2018) primarily addresses operational and institutional failures, including budget mismanagement and insufficient interagency coordination, while Saka (2024) emphasises systemic structural weaknesses within Nigeria's security architecture. This study expands on existing findings by combining both perspectives and emphasising community trust-building as a critical element of HUMINT operations.

This research examines how intelligence agencies can enhance collaboration with local populations to strengthen grassroots intelligence networks and improve pre-emptive counterterrorism strategies, in contrast to the approaches of Ofongo and Saka.

Additionally, this study extends beyond the technical aspects of intelligence collection by examining HUMINT's potential role in addressing the ideological foundations of the insurgency. While Ofongo and Saka primarily discuss HUMINT in an operational context, this research highlights its role in de-radicalization initiatives, community engagement, and socio-political interventions.

This paper seeks to enhance understanding of HUMINT's strategic role in counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram by addressing gaps identified in existing studies, specifically the insufficient emphasis on community relations, socio-political factors, and intelligence-driven prevention strategies.

Both Ofongo (2018) and Saka (2024) contribute significantly to the discourse on counterinsurgency intelligence in Nigeria. Their findings substantiate the primary assertion of this study: that HUMINT is an essential element of Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy. However, their narrow emphasis on institutional and operational challenges overlooks the role of community-based intelligence networks in fostering trust and improving intelligence collection. By addressing these gaps, this research offers a more nuanced and strategic perspective on integrating HUMINT into counterinsurgency operations, providing valuable insights for policy formulation and security sector reforms in Nigeria.

Methodology

The article presents a structured methodology for analysing the strategic role of HUMINT in counterinsurgency operations. This study utilises a descriptive research design and involves a diverse population to capture intelligence collection's operational, institutional, and community-based aspects. The qualitative, multi-source methodology guarantees that the results inform evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at enhancing intelligence-led counterinsurgency strategies. This study seeks to address deficiencies in the current literature and provide actionable insights to improve Nigeria's security framework.

Results

The research employed interviews and a structured questionnaire as the main data collection tool, administered to 385 participants, resulting in 369 fully completed responses for analysis. The elevated response rate yielded a substantial dataset, thereby improving the study's reliability in evaluating the strategic function of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) in counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram. Data analysis utilised Microsoft Excel, incorporating frequency distributions and percentage calculations to ensure a thorough representation of findings. Tables and charts were utilised to depict essential trends, enhancing comprehension of HUMINT's effectiveness, limitations, and operational challenges

within Nigeria's counterinsurgency framework. The findings support previous research highlighting the essential function of HUMINT in addressing asymmetric threats (Udochukwu & Uchenna, 2024; Ogbosor, 2025).

Occupational Background of respondents
Table 1 Respondents' Occupational Background

CHARACTERISTICS	RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES
Military	37	10%
Intelligence Officer	44	12%
Community Leader	18	5%
Civilian	192	52%
Others	78	21%
Total	369	100%

Source: Field data 2024

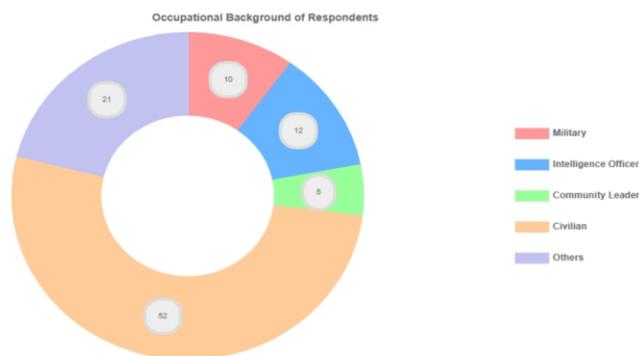


Figure 1.

Figure 1 reveals different points of view on HUMINT in counterinsurgency from the respondents' occupational backgrounds. While community leaders (5%) contribute local sociopolitical background, military and intelligence professionals (22%) offer operational information. Emphasising the significance of creating confidence, the civilian majority (52%) provides essential first-hand knowledge. The "Other" group (21%), comprising legislators and professionals, emphasises how holistically successful HUMINT must be. This information emphasises the need for integrated HUMINT, therefore promoting cooperation among security forces, community actors, and multidisciplinary experts to improve counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram.

Research Question 1: How can HUMINT be effectively integrated into Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategy against Boko Haram?

Table 2. Respondents' Perceptions of the Contributions of HUMINT to Counter-Insurgency Success

CHARACTERISTICS	RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES
Greatly Contributed	96	26%
Moderately Contributed	192	52%
Slightly Contributed	66	18%
Did not Contribute	15	4%
Total	369	100%

Source: Field data 2024

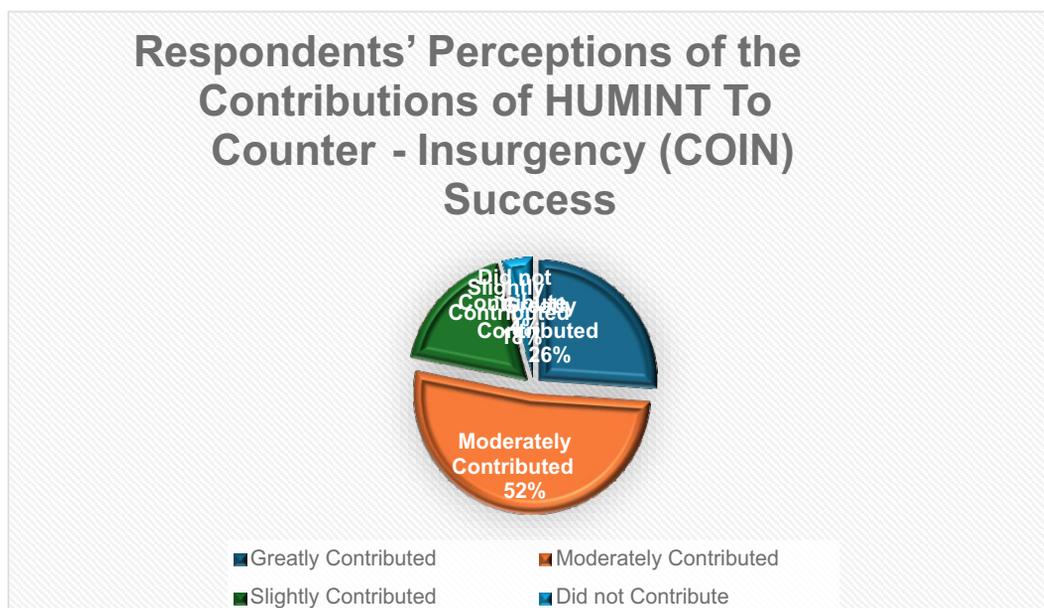


Figure 2

Figure 2 shows how well HUMINT contributes to counter-insurgency (COIN). Most (52%) think HUMINT adds just, implying acknowledged utility with some limits. 26% see a significant contribution, therefore underscoring its strategic relevance. However, 18% say they contribute, and 4% say they do not, pointing out areas where HUMINT performance can use some work. The results show that HUMINT's importance in COIN is acknowledged, with a sizable fraction realizing its major influence.

Presentation of Qualitative Data

To what extent does the integration of HUMINT contribute to the success of counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria?

Table 3. **Integration of HUMINT in Counterinsurgency**

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Contributions of HUMINT to Operational Success	Identification of high -value targets and insurgent hideouts.
	Preemptive action based on actionable intelligence.
Information Categories Most Valuable to HUMINT	Insights on insurgent movements and logistics.
	Information on recruitment strategies and community vulnerabilities.
Role of Defectors and Informants	Insider knowledge provided by defectors.
	Community informants as a critical link between civilians and the military.

Source KII

Table 3 shows that HUMINT's strategic importance in three primary areas—Operational Success, Valuable Information Categories, and the employment of Defectors and Informants—is clear-cut. Boko Haram conflict, HUMINT helps to identify high-value targets and hiding places, therefore enabling focused operations including preemptive strikes. Crucially for knowledge and disruption of Boko Haram's activities, it provides intelligence on insurgent movements, supplies, recruitment, and community vulnerability. Essential insider knowledge and local insights offered by defectors and informants help close the distance between security

personnel and the community, facilitating effective counterinsurgency.

The integration of HUMINT has significantly enhanced the precision and effectiveness of counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram. Community leaders and members consistently highlighted its role in guiding military strategies, with one respondent stating that,

Local informants have helped the military identify safe routes and hideouts, making their operations more precise.

Another community member stressed that,

Without our input, many insurgents would go undetected because they blend into the community.

These perspectives underscore the essential role of HUMINT in ensuring targeted operations that minimize civilian risks and optimize resource allocation. Quantitative data corroborates these observations, with 66% of respondents rating HUMINT as either 'very effective' or 'effective.'

Security personnel and intelligence experts attributed several successful preemptive strikes on Boko Haram camps to actionable intelligence gathered through HUMINT. One expert remarked that,

HUMINT has led to successful preemptive strikes on Boko Haram camps.

Humanitarian workers also highlighted instances where HUMINT collaboration prevented mass displacements. One humanitarian worker noted that,

Collaboration between communities and the military has sometimes prevented mass displacements.

These examples demonstrate HUMINT's capacity to enable proactive and context-sensitive counterinsurgency measures, moving the military's approach from reactive to preventive. Despite these successes, 37% of respondents expressed neutrality regarding HUMINT's quality, reflecting room for improvement, particularly in integrating HUMINT with advanced technologies.

Research Question 2: What institutional and operational reforms are needed to strengthen HUMINT's role in counterinsurgency?

Table 4. Enhancing HUMINT Integration

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Training and Resource Development	Advanced training in cultural sensitivity and ethical intelligence practices.
	Investment in technology and secure communication tools.
International Collaboration	Knowledge-sharing through joint training with international allies.
	Access to advanced surveillance and intelligence tools.
Policy Reforms	Formalization of HUMINT frameworks and dedicated units.
	Policies ensuring the protection and anonymity of informants.

Source KII

Table 4 shows that improving HUMINT's strategic contribution in the framework of the Boko Haram fight calls for policies reform, international cooperation, and training and resource development plans. Investment in technology combined with specialised instruction in cultural sensitivity and ethics enhanced HUMINT capacity. Cooperation internationally helped to share information and provide access to cutting-edge tools. Policy changes guaranteed systematic integration and promoted community involvement, which are vital to increase HUMINT's effectiveness in counterinsurgency. They also included formalised HUMINT frameworks and informant protection procedures.

Developing robust training programs and ensuring adequate resources are vital for optimizing HUMINT in Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategy. Community leaders underscored the importance of cultural and linguistic training for military personnel to improve interactions with local populations. One community leader noted that, The military needs to train more officers to understand our culture and language so they can communicate effectively.

This focus on cultural sensitivity can significantly enhance trust and make communities more willing to share intelligence. The quantitative data supports this, with 76% of respondents agreeing that cultural and linguistic understanding is crucial for HUMINT operations.

Security personnel and intelligence experts highlighted the need for specialized HUMINT training programs, including interrogation techniques and community liaison skills. One security expert explained that,

We need specialized HUMINT training programs focusing on interrogation techniques and community liaison skills.

The need for better surveillance equipment and secure data-sharing platforms was also emphasized. One security officer remarked that,

Better surveillance equipment and secure data-sharing platforms are critical for modern HUMINT operations.

These tools ensure that intelligence is gathered, stored, and transmitted securely, reducing risks of data breaches while enhancing operational efficiency.

Discussion of Findings

This study conducted a retrospective analysis of the strategic role of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) in counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria, identifying its contributions and persistent operational limitations. According to the study, systematic inefficiencies hampered HUMINT's full potential even though it greatly supported intelligence-led military operations.

The study underlined how important HUMINT has always been in delivering actionable intelligence and improving military operations' accuracy. Respondents said it helped spot high-value targets, upsetting rebel logistics, and allowing pre-emptive strikes against Boko Haram (Udochukwu & Uchenna, 2024). Insider knowledge, a crucial component of asymmetric warfare (Ogbozor, 2025), and community informants and defectors proved very helpful.

However, the study found a mixed view of HUMINT's efficacy; 52% of respondents said it somewhat helped offset counterinsurgency success. This matched other studies that indicated, although valuable, HUMINT's influence was generally limited by operational inefficiencies, resource constraints, and intelligence-sharing difficulties (Musa & Olowonihi, 2024). Scholars have observed that effective counterinsurgency requires combining HUMINT with technology intelligence fields such as SIGINT and GEOINT to maximise operational efficacy (Yoroms, 2023).

The analysis found some operational and structural problems compromising HUMINT's performance. One major challenge was the mistrust between local populations and security personnel. Fear brought on by claims of extrajudicial killings, abuses of human rights, and indiscriminate military operations hampered civilian intelligence-sharing (Zango, 2024). This mistrust greatly restricted ground-

level intelligence flow, compromising security agencies' capacity to enter rebel networks (Ward, 2024).

Moreover, the investigation underlined that a major flaw was the fragmentation of Nigeria's intelligence systems. Without a single intelligence-sharing system, efforts were duplicated, intelligence was delayed, and pre-emptive chances were lost (Obbo, 2018). Several scholars assert that effective intelligence coordination was crucial for counterinsurgency, especially in complicated operational settings with dispersed insurgent command structures and unorthodox tactics (Falode & Faseke, 2023).

Underfunding and poor training of intelligence staff presented still another major obstacle. The study revealed that officers frequently lacked advanced interrogation tactics, cultural sensitivity training, and safe communication tools required for successful HUMINT operations (Osagie, 2023). International best practices have shown that efforts at counterinsurgency were more successful when security personnel were well-versed in community involvement and intelligence gathering techniques that supported civilian participation (Bangura & Mbawa, 2024).

Recommendation

As underlined in this paper, below are practicable recommendations for the strategic role of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) in counterinsurgency operations aimed at Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria.

1. Fostering Trust and Collaboration between Security Agencies and Local Communities:

First of all is the development of a symbiotic relationship between residents and security forces. Given the rebels' inclination to entrench into civilian populations, sustained and deliberate interaction with community leaders, defectors, and informants is vital. From individuals to security agencies, institutionalised, community-based intelligence networks can help to enable safe information flow. Reaching these calls for security staff with culturally appropriate training, building relationships, resolving historical grievances, and reducing mistrust. Moreover, firm adherence to civilian protection policies—including guarantees of informant anonymity and safety—is essential for motivating community involvement in information sharing.

2. Enhancing Inter-Agency Intelligence Coordination

Maximising inter-agency intelligence coordination is vital to minimise intelligence delays and duplicate efforts. The scattered intelligence scene among several security organisations makes efficient responses to Boko Haram's asymmetric warfare strategies difficult. Establishing a centralised intelligence-sharing network would help military, intelligence, and law enforcement organisations exchange real-time

data. This would allow more exact and fast counterinsurgency actions. Furthermore, a single command structure would simplify decision-making procedures and improve operational efficiency in intelligence usage.

3. Institutionalizing Advanced HUMINT Training

Improving the quality of intelligence collecting depends on capacity development using institutionalised advanced training programs for HUMINT agents. HUMINT operations must be more reliable using specialised training in interrogation tactics, covert surveillance, source management, and ethical intelligence practices. Moreover, improving communication and intelligence-gathering effectiveness depends on language and culture education, especially in indigenous languages most used in Boko Haram-affected regions. HUMINT training courses should include ethical issues to avoid breaches of human rights that might alienate local people and degrade intelligence accuracy.

4. Integrating Technological Enhancements:

Integration of technology can increase operational effectiveness and HUMINT capacity. HUMINT provides context-rich, real-time insights, but its usefulness can be much enhanced by integration with Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT), and Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT). Protecting private data against breaches and insurgent counterintelligence initiatives depends on safe digital platforms for intelligence collecting and analysis. Moreover, funding encrypted data-sharing systems and safe communication tools would help to improve cooperation between field agents and command centres and enable flawless information flow.

5. Implementing Legislative and Regulatory Reforms:

Official integration of HUMINT into Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategy requires systematic legal and regulatory reforms. Essential is establishing a disciplined HUMINT infrastructure with well-defined procedures for information gathering, source security, and inter-agency cooperation. Strong government laws ensuring intelligence agents' protection and informants' protection should accompany this to inspire civilian involvement in counterterrorism projects. Nigeria could also enhance international information-sharing alliances to use the best world practices in counterinsurgency and obtain technical support in surveillance, training, and intelligence analysis.

Conclusion

The Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria makes abundantly evident how urgently counterinsurgency driven by intelligence—especially HUMINT integration—is needed. HUMINT is still underused despite its efficiency in target identification and network disruption; inadequate resources, broken coordination, and community mistrust all help to explain this.

Handling these challenges demands a diverse approach. Sharing intelligence depends on community trust-building; centralised coordination raises efficiency. One has to build capacity with a view towards advanced ethics and training. Including technology raises HUMINT accuracy. Policy improvements create procedures, protect informants, and support worldwide collaboration.

A technologically advanced, community-centered strategy supports counterinsurgency efforts. Best methods, coordination, and systematic improvements maximise HUMINT.

Further research is needed to explore innovative intelligence methodologies, the socio-political dimensions of intelligence collection, and ethical considerations, ensuring that HUMINT remains a sustainable and adaptive tool in modern counterinsurgency warfare.

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