

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: HOW GLOBAL COUNTERTERRORISM DISCOURSES FUEL LOCAL RADICALISATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the phenomenon of Islamophobia as both a global and local security concern and explores how international counterterrorism discourses contribute to social alienation and radicalisation in Nigeria. Drawing on recent literature, the study demonstrates that Islamophobic narratives embedded in global security policies, political rhetoric, and media representations intensify discrimination against Muslim communities, undermine trust in state institutions, and create conditions that extremist groups exploit for recruitment and legitimacy. Using a qualitative content synthesis of academic literature, policy documents, and case studies from Nigeria's insurgency context, the article finds that Islamophobia functions not only as a consequence of terrorism but also as a driver of socio-political exclusion and insecurity. The findings further reveal that securitised approaches that associate Islam with extremism weaken counterterrorism effectiveness by deepening grievances, marginalisation, and identity-based tensions within affected communities. The study concludes that sustainable counterterrorism strategies in Nigeria require inclusive, culturally sensitive, and rights-based frameworks that address both violent extremism and the structural conditions that fuel radicalisation. It recommends the adoption of an inclusive counterterrorism framework, reform of security and law enforcement practices, responsible media reporting and counter-narratives, promotion of interfaith dialogue and social cohesion, addressing socio-economic drivers of radicalisation, development of context-sensitive counterterrorism policies, strengthening academic research and policy dialogue, encouraging community participation in security governance, strengthening human rights and democratic institutions, and Educational Reforms and Peace Education.

Keywords: Counterterrorism discourse, discrimination, Islamophobia, radicalisation, violent extremist

INTRODUCTION

One of the most heated contemporary socio-political and security debates in the international system is that of Islamophobia. Islamophobia broadly refers to stereotyping, prejudice, hostility, or discrimination towards Islam and Muslims, though it can also take the form of exclusionary policies, hate speech, social marginalisation, and institutionalised discrimination against them (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2020; Hussain, 2025). While sentiments against Islam and Muslims have existed long before now, since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in America, Islamophobia is considered to have gone global, given its increased focus by international security actors, security narratives, and the media, portraying Islam as

inherently dangerous and extreme and a threat to international security (Kundnani, 2020). Since then, Muslims globally have been susceptible to surveillance, racial profiling, restriction of religious freedom, denial of immigration, and public distrust under the rationale of battling terrorism (Awan, 2022).

Globally, the 'War on Terror' heavily influenced Muslim identity in both international political discourse and public perception; due to the continuous framing of terrorism by state actors and global media through a religious perspective, thus framing the entire Muslim population as potential terrorists (Lean, 2021). According to many Scholars, this had effectively institutionalised Islamophobia in state rhetoric and counterterrorism discourses. In the context of Europe and North America, increased incidents of crimes against Muslims, mosques attacked, and restrictions placed on the hijab, among other restrictions, resulted in greater public debate on racism, religious intolerance, and multiculturalism (Bayrakl & Hafez, 2020). It is suggested that such discrimination, beyond the individual, also resulted in Muslim minorities experiencing an identity crisis and increased feelings of exclusion, alienation, and lack of trust in the state, thus leading to concerns about a tendency to nurture conditions for radicalisation (Kundnani, 2020).

However, Africa provides a unique and complex case in point for Islamophobia, considering its colonial history, diverse ethnic configuration, state fragility, and growing insecurity linked to extremism and violent extremism. In Africa, the rise of insecurity in states like Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and the Sahel regions due to insurgency waged by groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Al Shabaab has led to Africa becoming an epicenter for global counter-terrorism activities. The increased use of securitised rhetoric by Western institutions and state actors on the African Muslim population through an association with extremist ideas and lack of state security on the continent has also led to the emergence of various ethno-religious conflicts within these societies (Mustapha, 2020). This external labeling, some scholars argue, has brought distrust in some African states towards Muslims, leading to discriminatory practices in security operations, and some level of inequality with the state actors against them. Counter-terrorism operations in Africa have thus also attracted accusations of human rights abuses, illegal detentions, targeting Muslims with special treatment or scrutiny, religious profiling, and heavy militarisation of Muslim-populated areas (Kalu & Ijiomah, 2026).

In the case of Nigeria, the concept of Islamophobia is also interwoven with other historical, socio-religious, and political intricacies. Nigeria is a multi-religious nation, dominated by two major religions (Islam and Christianity), along with indigenous beliefs; the two having shared a long and at times antagonistic history within the country, as well as influences from the colonial administrative framework, power struggle and ethnicity (Adesoji, 2021). The emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-east of Nigeria from 2009 has significantly transformed inter-religious dynamics as well as public perception of security, as it provided a new angle to the perception of Islamic extremism and insecurity in Nigeria and beyond (Onuoha, 2023). This consequently put the Nigerian Muslims at high risk of suspicion, stigmatisation, and profiling, among others. In both public and official narratives, and at a greater risk of Islamophobia in security operations. The impact of the global discourse on counter-terrorism on Nigerian Muslims is quite pronounced in their stereotyping in the media, political narratives, and security practices. This may lead to an increase in suspicion, distrust, and marginalisation of the Muslim population within Nigeria and have potential negative consequences, such as hindering inclusive counter-terrorism measures and indirectly reinforcing the perception of state injustice, which could fuel radicalisation (Mustapha, 2020). It has been argued that "once Muslims or groups of Muslims are labelled stigmatised it makes other groups feel more secure but it also breeds alienation and resentment that might actually be counter-terrorism conducive by driving more susceptible individuals to extremism." (Kalu & Ijiomah, 2026). Extremist groups could then exploit this resentment, "framing themselves as defenders of the 'oppressed' Muslims against unjust state actors" and thus bolstering their support base and narratives. Several empirical studies have explored varying dimensions of Islamophobia and religious tension within Nigeria. For example, in a study by Ottuh and Otuyemi (2023), their work on the idea of "Procreative Jihad" explored some Christian communities' fears of a strategic plan of radical Muslims to convert Christians to Islam through marriage. Their study highlighted that such stereotypes/fears, regardless of factual accuracy, were a significant contributing factor in interfaith distrust and Islamophobia. In a report by the International Christian Concern (2025) on the increasing attacks against Christians by extremist Fulani herdsmen, the state's inability to provide security for them and bring perpetrators to book led to

worsening Christian-Muslim relations within Nigeria. Despite growing scholarship on insurgency and inter-religious tensions in Nigeria, literature concerning how counter-terrorism discourses are responsible for fostering local perception of Muslims as terrorists and, in turn, contributing to the phenomenon of radicalisation within the context of Nigeria is scarce.

The central problem this study intends to address is the apparent deficiency in scholarly discourse on Islamophobia and counter-terrorism in Nigeria, where focus has remained largely on countering violent extremism while downplaying how discourses that are used to fight terrorism can indeed be instrumental in instilling Islamophobia that perpetuates alienation, grievance, and ultimately contributes to radicalisation. The tendency in current scholarship to perceive Islamophobia as a result, instead of a catalyst for radicalisation in Nigeria, needs critical evaluation to foster alternative counter-terrorism frameworks that ensure inclusion, thereby promoting societal harmony and sustainable peace building.

Based on this problem, this study sought to explore the mechanisms through which global counter-terrorism discourses influence the spread of Islamophobia and, subsequently, local radicalisation in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Islamophobia has been extensively scrutinised as both a form of social prejudice and a structural phenomenon embedded in institutions and power relations. Contemporary scholarship highlights that Islamophobic sentiments are sustained and reproduced through media representations, political rhetoric, and global counterterrorism narratives that construct Muslims as inherent security risks (Bayraklı & Hafez, 2020; Lean, 2021; Hussain, 2025; Kalu & Ijiomah, 2026). These narratives are often amplified by digital media ecosystems and geopolitical discourses, reinforcing homogenised and negative portrayals of Muslim identities (Awan, 2022; Kundnani, 2020). Such framing contributes to processes of marginalisation, stigmatisation, and identity insecurity among Muslim populations, which, in turn, may heighten susceptibility to radical ideologies that promise dignity, belonging, and agency (Onuoha, 2023; Kalu & Ijiomah, 2026).

In the Nigerian context, Islamophobia assumes distinct local dimensions shaped by historical, socio-political, and inter-religious dynamics. Stereotypes about Islam often intersect with domestic security narratives, particularly in relation to insurgency and communal conflict, thereby reinforcing suspicion toward Muslim communities (Mustapha, 2020; Adesoji, 2021; Yusuf & Azeez, 2025). Empirical studies point to misinformation, biased media framing, and entrenched prejudice as key drivers of inter-religious mistrust and uneven policy responses (Yusuf & Azeez, 2025; Mohammed *et al.*, 2024). These dynamics can deepen social fragmentation and contribute to perceptions of systemic exclusion among Muslims in certain regions of the country.

Moreover, extremist groups strategically exploit narratives of injustice, marginalisation, and Islamophobic discrimination to legitimise their causes and attract recruits. By framing their struggle as a defence against oppression, such groups can resonate with individuals who feel alienated or targeted by both local and global discourses (Mohammed *et al.*, 2024; Onuoha, 2023). This underscores the complex interplay between perception, identity, and security in contexts affected by violent extremism.

Critical analyses of counterterrorism literature further reveal that many policies-particularly those influenced by post-9/11 global security paradigms, often lack sufficient empirical grounding and risk reinforcing stereotypes by presuming a causal link between Islam and radicalisation (Kundnani & Hayes, 2018; Kundnani, 2020; Groothuis, 2026). Recent studies argue that such approaches can produce counterproductive outcomes, including community alienation and reduced cooperation with security institutions (Awan, 2022; Groothuis, 2026). These concerns are especially salient in Nigeria, where global counterterrorism frameworks are frequently adapted into local security strategies without adequate sensitivity to the country's complex socio-political and religious landscape (Mustapha, 2020; Adesoji, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory was first introduced in 1972 by Henri Tajfel, with further elaborations made by John Turner in the late 1970s and 1980s. The theory asserts that individuals derive a significant portion of their identities and feelings of belonging from the social groups they belong to (religion, ethnicity, nationality, culture, etc.). According to this theory, people spontaneously categorize themselves and others into 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' and have strong positive emotional attachments to their in-group, viewing out-groups as different, and potentially threatening (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, as cited by Kalu & Ijiomah, 2026).

The theory also states that if an identified group faces discrimination, marginalisation, stereotyping, and exclusion, this can lead to a stronger identity and solidarity among members of the targeted group in response to a threat (Hogg, 2021). Studies have shown that if Islamophobia and biased counter-terrorism discourse continue to be prevalent, it may increase a sense of victimisation and exclusion among Muslim communities, creating grievances which extremists may capitalise on for recruitment and radicalisation (Awan, 2022; Onuoha, 2023). In this perspective, Islamophobia is seen as not just prejudice against Muslims, but a factor capable of mobilising group identity, leading to action and reaction.

Relevance of Social Identity Theory to this study: Social Identity theory is relevant in this study because it enables us to understand how Islamophobia, along with exclusivist counter-terrorism discourses, can foster radicalisation and identities among Muslims in Nigeria. It allows us to explore how constant stereotyping, marginalisation, and negative profiling of Muslims, by others and potentially the state, can promote a strong sense of in-group identity and hostility towards out-groups such as the state and security forces. The theory explains why and how individuals may become susceptible to the recruitment efforts of extremist groups based on feelings of discrimination and injustice.

Critical Security Studies

The notion of Critical Security Studies was put forward by Ken Booth in 1991, offering a challenge to orthodox state-centric approaches to security. Unlike traditional security theory that is often concerned with issues of military power, defense of territory, and state survival, CSS takes a human security approach, advocating for social justice and protection of the individual and the community from the multitude of threats such as political oppression, discrimination and inequality, poverty, and other forms of insecurity (Booth, 2020). Within this theory, the purpose of security should not only be the protection of the state, but also of individuals and groups from the numerous threats mentioned above.

It is argued by CSS scholars that counter-terrorism that is based on profiling, surveillance, and suspicions targeting specific groups of people (ethnic or religious) may paradoxically fuel insecurities instead of reducing them (Kundnani, 2020; Awan, 2022). When counter-terrorism policies caused groups of people to feel persecuted, targeted, and excluded and injustice at the hands of the state, the level of distrust towards public institutions grows and solidifies feelings of victimhood among the targeted population (Lean, 2021; Groothuis, 2026). CSS thus argues that lasting security can only be found through the recognition of and engagement with social justice, inclusivity, negotiation, and dialogue rather than through securitisation and excessive militarisation.

Relevance of Critical Security Studies to this study: CSS is relevant to this study because it allows us to understand how discourses and practices of counter-terrorism around the world and the Islamophobic attitudes that often shape it, contribute to security and radicalisation processes within Nigerian society. The theory helps us analyse how the tendency of state-centric security to rely on securitisation, state surveillance and profiling against the Muslims may increase their distrust of government institutions. This may lead to Muslims perceiving a systematic injustice and vulnerability that terrorist organisations might exploit. This concept of securitising Muslim identities, therefore, makes it useful for examining how Islamophobia affects the construction of identities among Muslims and encourages their mobilisation towards violent activities in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design because the research problem centers on understanding perceptions, narratives, discourses, and socio-political meanings associated with Islamophobia and radicalisation in Nigeria. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for studies that seek to explore complex social phenomena, interpret human experiences, and analyse the ways in which ideas and narratives shape social realities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since the study investigates how global counterterrorism discourses influence local radicalisation processes, a qualitative approach provides the flexibility and depth required to critically examine these interrelated dynamics.

The choice of qualitative research design is justified by the nature of the data and the objectives of the study. Islamophobia and radicalisation are multidimensional concepts that are often embedded in political rhetoric, media representations, security policies, and academic debates. Quantitative methods alone may not sufficiently capture the ideological constructions, symbolic meanings, and contextual interpretations associated with these issues. Qualitative content analysis enables the researcher to systematically interpret textual materials and identify recurring themes, patterns, and discursive representations within scholarly and policy-oriented literature (Schreier, 2020). This makes it particularly suitable for analysing how Muslims and Islamic identities are framed within global counterterrorism narratives and how such framing may contribute to feelings of marginalisation and radicalisation in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the study relies on secondary data sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and academic books published between 2020 and 2026. A qualitative design is appropriate because these sources contain rich descriptive and analytical information necessary for understanding the ideological and structural dimensions of Islamophobia. Through thematic coding and interpretive analysis, the researcher can critically evaluate how different authors, institutions, and policymakers conceptualise terrorism, security threats, and Muslim identities across global and local contexts (Elo *et al.*, 2021).

Another justification for the adopted design is that the research topic involves sensitive socio-political and religious issues. Qualitative methods are effective in exploring socially constructed realities and uncovering hidden assumptions within dominant discourses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In the context of Nigeria, where religious identity, insecurity, and counterterrorism policies are highly contested, qualitative analysis allows for a nuanced understanding of how international security narratives may unintentionally reinforce exclusion, discrimination, and extremist recruitment narratives. The design therefore supports a contextual and critical interpretation of the relationship between Islamophobia and local radicalisation.

The selected research design also enhances the comprehensiveness of the study by enabling the synthesis of diverse scholarly perspectives across disciplines such as criminology, security studies, sociology, and political science. Through thematic analysis, the researcher can compare and integrate different viewpoints, identify gaps in existing literature, and generate broader insights into the Nigerian experience within the global counterterrorism environment.

In conclusion, the qualitative research design is justified because it provides the most suitable framework for critically examining the complex relationship between Islamophobia, global counterterrorism discourses, and radicalisation in Nigeria. Its emphasis on interpretation, thematic analysis, and contextual understanding allows for an in-depth exploration of the socio-political processes through which discriminatory narratives and security practices may contribute to local radicalisation dynamics.

FINDINGS

Global Counterterrorism and Islamophobia

Recent scholarship demonstrates that global counterterrorism frameworks have persistently framed Muslims as disproportionate security threats, thereby shaping public perceptions, institutional practices, and policy discourses in ways that reinforce Islamophobic stereotypes (Kundnani, 2020; Bayraklı & Hafez, 2020; Hussain, 2025; Kalu & Ijiomah, 2026; Groothuis, 2026). These narratives are often reproduced through political rhetoric, media representation, and security policies, creating a generalised suspicion of Muslim identities (Lean, 2021; Awan, 2022;). As a result, counterterrorism strategies may

unintentionally legitimise discriminatory profiling, surveillance, and exclusionary practices, further entrenching systemic biases against Muslim communities (Hussain, 2025; Groothuis, 2026).

Local Impacts in Nigeria

Within Nigeria, Islamophobic sentiments manifest through locally specific dynamics that intersect with global narratives and domestic socio-political conditions. Studies indicate that the misrepresentation of Muslim identities in media and political discourse contributes to societal polarisation and reinforces existing ethno-religious divisions (Mustapha, 2020; Adesoji, 2021; Yusuf & Azeez, 2025). These portrayals often align with security narratives that associate Islam with extremism, thereby deepening mistrust between Muslim communities and state institutions (Mohammed *et al.*, 2024; Yusuf & Azeez, 2025). Furthermore, uneven or biased security responses may exacerbate perceptions of marginalisation, particularly in regions already affected by conflict and underdevelopment (Onuoha, 2023).

Consequences for Radicalisation

The findings suggest that Islamophobic discourses contribute significantly to the formation of identity-based grievances. Such grievances can be instrumentalised by extremist groups, which frame their ideologies as responses to perceived injustice, discrimination, and systemic exclusion (Onuoha, 2023; Mohammed *et al.*, 2024; Kalu & Ijiomah, 2026;). By exploiting narratives of marginalisation and victimhood, these groups can resonate with individuals seeking recognition, dignity, and belonging (Kundnani, 2020; Awan, 2022;). This dynamic reinforces recruitment pathways and sustains cycles of radicalisation, particularly among populations experiencing socio-political disenfranchisement.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings reveal a cyclical and mutually reinforcing relationship between Islamophobia and radicalisation. While acts of terrorism understandably provoke both global and local security responses, the framing of Muslims primarily as suspects or threats contributes to patterns of socio-political exclusion (Kundnani, 2020; Groothuis, 2026;). This exclusion, in turn, creates fertile ground for extremist narratives that capitalize on grievances related to discrimination and injustice (Onuoha, 2023; Kalu & Ijiomah, 2026).

In the Nigerian context, the localisation of global counterterrorism discourses often occurs without sufficient cultural and socio-political sensitivity. This can lead to policies and practices that alienate communities, weaken trust in state institutions, and undermine cooperation in security efforts (Mustapha, 2020; Adesoji, 2021). Rather than mitigating threats, such approaches may inadvertently exacerbate the very conditions that facilitate radicalisation. Thus, Islamophobic discourse operates not only as a social and cultural issue but also as a critical factor influencing the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies (Lean, 2021; Awan, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Islamophobia, particularly as embedded within global counterterrorism narratives, has significant and far-reaching implications for Muslim communities in Nigeria. Far from being isolated expressions of prejudice, these discourses shape local security dynamics, reinforce systemic mistrust, and contribute to socio-political conditions that extremist groups exploit for recruitment and mobilisation (Mohammed *et al.*, 2024; Kalu & Ijiomah, 2026; Groothuis, 2026). The interplay between global narratives and local realities underscores the need for more context-sensitive approaches to security and social cohesion.

To mitigate these effects, counterterrorism policies must move beyond securitised and exclusionary frameworks toward more inclusive, community-centered strategies that emphasise trust-building, dialogue, and the protection of civil liberties (Kundnani, 2020; Awan, 2022). Addressing underlying grievances such as marginalisation, inequality, and misrepresentation is essential for reducing vulnerability to radicalisation and fostering long-term stability. Future research should prioritise empirical investigations into community experiences of Islamophobia and counterterrorism in Nigeria, providing evidence-based insights to inform more effective and equitable policy interventions (Onuoha, 2023; Groothuis, 2026).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adopting a comprehensive framework for counter-terrorism: Counter-terrorism measures should not equate Islam with terrorism or connect it with any particular ethnicity. A security framework inclusive of communities will counter religious discrimination, build confidence in the Muslim community, and curb grievances that lead to radicalisation.
2. Reforming security sector and law enforcement practices: Counter-terrorism practices by security agencies should be professional, respectful of human rights and law. Reduced arbitrary arrest, profiling and excessive force will improve public confidence and minimise perceptions of injustices in the Muslim community.
3. Responsible media reporting and counter-narratives: Reporting on Islam should not equate it with violence and extremism. Balanced media reporting and positive counter-narratives can curb Islamophobia, counter hate propaganda and foster inter-religious peace.
4. Fostering inter-religious dialogue and social cohesion: Religious and community leaders should enhance inter-religious and peacebuilding initiatives. An atmosphere of mutual respect and trust between Christians and Muslims will diminish mistrust, stereotypes and inter-religious antagonism.
5. Addressing socio-economic drivers of radicalisation: The government should address poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and inequality, particularly in conflict areas of the country. Availability of economic and social opportunity will make individuals less susceptible to recruitment by extremist organisations .
6. Policies must be context sensitive: Counter-terrorism policies must reflect Nigeria's own religious and cultural context and not be direct replication of foreign policies that could increase mistrust and social division if not appropriate to the Nigerian context.
7. Strengthening academic research and policy dialogue: There is need for greater research into the connections between Islamophobia and radicalisation in Nigeria. Evidence-based research can inform more humane, fair and effective security policies.
8. Encouraging the involvement of the community in the governance of security: Muslim groups, youth associations and religious leaders should engage in community security initiatives and peacebuilding efforts. Inclusion of the community will increase confidence in security agencies and preventive action.
9. Upholding human rights and democratic institutions: Counter-terrorism must not result in the violation of human rights, freedom of religion, and the rule of law. Defence of civil liberties can alleviate alienation and reduce the opportunity for extremist groups to capitalise on public resentments.
10. Educational reform and peace education. Schools should introduce programmes that instill civic responsibility, religious tolerance and respect. Teaching youth about inter-religious amity and the harms of extremism will reduce prejudice and promote national unity.

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