



BANDITRY AND KIDNAPPING IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: AN INTERROGATION OF SECURITY GOVERNANCE AND EFFORTS AT NATION BUILDING.

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Abstract

Emerging security challenges are undermining Nigeria's checkered history. These challenges can be gleaned from the threats posed by activities of Boko Haram and its splinter elements in the North East, the North West, and the North Central. This includes other threats from separatist groups operating in other regions of the country, such as the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and, later, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Lately, there has emerged another security threat from the age-old herder-farmer conflict, which has morphed into widening cases of kidnapping for ransom and banditry in the Northwest and the North Central, and is gradually seeping into other regions of the country. Using materials from secondary sources, this paper examines the effectiveness of Nigeria's counter-terrorism and internal security governance and its impact. The paper contends that the persistent threat from bandits reflects part of the broader rot in the country's security governance, which has continued to undermine efforts at nation-building. In conclusion, the paper recommends a comprehensive reform of Nigeria's security governance and policing architecture, as well as the state's interventions to address youth unemployment and the country's structural poverty.

Keywords: Banditry, kidnapping, ransom, security governance, nation building

1. INTRODUCTION

New emerging security challenges have continued to undermine Nigeria's cohesion and attempts at nation-building. These threats can be gleaned from the activities of Boko Haram and its splinter elements, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (ANSARU), the arm of al-Qaida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Nigeria (Office of the Director National Intelligence, 2025), and, lately, the Lakurawa group. It is important to note that, while the latter two operates mainly in the North West, the former had their epicenter in the North East, with pockets of presence in the North West, North Central, and have reportedly extended their activities into other parts of the South, especially the South West (Adebayo, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2022; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023; Osun State Government, 2025; Punch Newspapers, 2025). Additionally, there are reports of other threats from the activities of separatist groups, such as the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), later, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), and other militant groups in the South East and the South-South.

In the midst of these, there have emerged new security challenges from the herder-farmer conflict, which has metastasized into widening cases of kidnapping and banditry (Aruwan, 2026)



in the North West and the North Central, gradually seeping into the other regions of the country. Resultantly, in 2024 alone, about 75% of fatalities resulting from violent incidents, such as insurgency and rural banditry, occurred in Northern Nigeria (Nigeria Watch, 2024, p.7). Similarly, in the same period, fatalities from rural banditry, cattle rustling, have claimed the lives of 1,452 people across 9 states of Northern Nigeria, up from 892 deaths in 2023 (Nigeria Watch, 2024, p.9).

In the context of these, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2024), World Bank Group (2024), and other contemporary studies on conflict and state fragility have extensively examined the long-term effects of insecurity on social cohesion and national development trajectories. They agree that insecurity not only weakens the foundation for economic growth but also induces long-run growth losses that are critical to achieving national development and the aspirations of states. This general observation notwithstanding, there remains a notable gap in the literature on the nexus between rising cases of banditry and the challenges of security governance in Nigeria, and on the implications of these for the nation-building process.

This study aims to unpack, first, the reasons for the rising cases of banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria. Second, assess the effectiveness of the country's security infrastructure in addressing the widening cases of banditry and kidnapping and determine its impact on nation-building. The paper proceeds with the following research questions as a guide: What are the reasons for the rising cases of banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria? What are the challenges faced by Nigerian security governance? How have these impacted Nigeria's nation-building efforts?

The paper seeks to offer policy-level recommendations, including reforming Nigeria's security governance and policing architecture, to ensure community participation in enhancing national security and achieving the country's development aspirations.

The paper is presented in ten sections, with this introduction as section one. Section two, firstly, reviewed literature on the menace of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria and, in the second part, reviewed the connection to national development. Section three of the paper developed a theoretical framework, while section four examined the sources of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria. Section five interrogated the impact of banditry, while section six highlighted the state's response to armed banditry. Section seven discussed issues arising from the state's response to armed banditry, while section eight reviewed security governance and nation-building. Section nine presents the recommendations, while section ten is the conclusion of the paper.

Armed Banditry in Northern Nigeria: An Interrogation

Available literature on banditry, such as the Institute for Economics and Peace (2025) and the Center for Strategic Studies (n.d), points out that sub-Saharan Africa has become the epicenter of violent extremist activities. Resultantly, violent extremism has continued to spread across the



region, with devastating consequences for lives, livelihoods, and prospects for peace and sustainable development (UNDP, 2023). This situation thus underlines the need for a rigorous interrogation of the structural and the proximate factors driving the menace of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria.

On the one hand, UNDP (2023) conceptualizes terrorism, which banditry forms part of, as a phenomenon emerging from long-term structural conditions, including geographical location and historical experience; religious factors shaped by context-specific grievances and identity politics; and economic constraints such as limited access to opportunities. Embedded in this context is the erosion of social contracts, which has generated widespread distrust in government institutions and increased the appeal of extremist groups that present themselves as viable alternatives to the state.

In the same vein, banditry need not be seen as a random criminal activity but as an outgrowth of resource-based conflicts, weak state security and justice systems, and profitable rural illicit economies. In Nigeria's case, however, the broader sources of banditry can be located in the deterioration of farmer–herder relations that have metamorphosed into organized criminal networks; the vacuum in rural governance; the emergence and consolidation of a criminal political economy; and the perceived vulnerability of border communities to militant infiltration (International Crisis Group [ICG] 2020).

There are also immediate triggers of terrorism, which are located in a complex array of factors, including state-related grievances, economic deprivation, marginalization, and the dynamics of local conflict ecosystems (UNDP, 2023). Other factors are the lure of illicit economies, which facilitate recruitment and organizational endurance; access to small arms and light weapons; and persistent state weakness, which has created entrenched insecurity traps (Ojewale, 2021).

Nevertheless, Ojewale (2021) has argued that any rigorous interrogation of Nigeria's security governance must situate terrorism and banditry as twin phenomena, jointly rooted in porous borders, arms trafficking, and systemic governance deficits. These conditions have collectively provided the enabling environment in which both threats continue to flourish.

This analytical context reinforces the argument that terrorism and banditry in Nigeria should be understood both as causes and consequences of weak state capacity, a fractured state, citizen relationships, and widespread human insecurity. Within this framework, the integrated analytical approach adopted in this paper is not only relevant but imperative.

Banditry and National Development: Establishing the Nexus

While security ensures human safety, it is also fundamental in meeting the development aspirations of states. Hence, apart from undermining development, Aderayo et al. (2025) note that the absence of security, usually described as insecurity, which includes acts of banditry, is



disruptive and serves as a major barrier to sustainable development. This is because it discourages investment and economic productivity, increases government expenditure on security rather than development, and disrupts education, health systems, and infrastructure. In this context, insecurity needs to be seen and treated not only as a cause but also as a consequence of underdevelopment.

Akindoyin and Obafemi (2025) have identified banditry as a multi-dimensional threat, as it affects the economy, politics, and social systems of states by weakening governance, fostering corruption, and eroding public trust in state institutions. The threat goes on to disrupt business and create unemployment. Importantly, this establishes a strong linkage between insecurity and macro-level development outcomes of states.

Meanwhile, Sadiq et al. (2025) reveal the direct consequences of banditry on national development. They see banditry as undermining development in many ways. It is disruptive to agriculture and has particular economic implications, as farms and rural livelihoods are destroyed, leading to declining agricultural production, worsening food insecurity, and increasing rural poverty. It has caused humanitarian and social crises through mass displacement of communities, closure of schools and health facilities, and a breakdown of social cohesion. In addition to entrenching governance and institutional weaknesses that ensured weak state presence in rural areas, poverty and unemployment among youths fuel inter-communal conflict and regional tensions, and overstretching security forces.

The foregoing perspectives are not only consistent but also further reinforce the study's theoretical framework in many ways. For instance, while development is seen to have been hindered by the threat posed by banditry, these views have further reinforced the importance of the theoretical framework for understanding the challenges to Nigeria's national development aspirations.

Theoretical Review

This paper is premised on the integrated analytical framework that draws on three theories: The State Fragility Theory, the Social Contract Theory, and the Human Security Paradigm. First, the State Fragility Theory (Arioz and Topda, 2024; Martin-Shield and Koester, 2024; Roberts, 2024; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2025) paradigm rests on the assumption that a state's fragility tends to render it weak in fulfilling its *raison d'être*: providing security, justice, and basic services. The state's legitimacy, therefore, is rooted in its ability to maintain a monopoly on the use of force within its territory. By implication, the persistence in the cases of banditry and kidnapping symbolizes a weakened state authority, increasingly being exploited by non-state armed groups. This has led to the erosion of public trust in government institutions, the fragmentation of national cohesion, and the undermining of nation-building efforts.



The second framework is the Social Contract Theory, advanced by thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Gaubas, 2003; Johari, 2018; Mahajan, 2014; Okoli & Okoli, 1990). This theory is premised on an implicit agreement between the state and its citizens, whereby individuals surrender certain freedoms in exchange for protection, order, and welfare. Within this perspective, the growing threat to security posed by terrorism and banditry in Nigeria can be interpreted as evidence of a breakdown of the social contract. This situation, by implication, reflects the state's inability to guarantee the safety of its citizens and to sustain public confidence in governance structures. Two fundamental consequences arise from this situation.

First, it has generated a sense of alienation that has encouraged the emergence of community-based and self-help security arrangements, in some cases, collaboration with non-state armed groups, often referred to as vigilantes. Second, as a consequence of the first, this has weakened national integration and threatened the foundations of nation-building. The theory, therefore, explains how persistent threats not only undermined the state's legitimacy and the citizen's loyalty but also deepened the country's crisis of nation-building.

The third framework is the Human Security Paradigm (Koundouri and Delis 2020; UNDP, 1994; Tad bakhsh and Chenoy, 2007/2008), which emphasizes a shift in focus of security from the state to the individual, by prioritizing freedom from fear and freedom from want. This approach represents a paradigmatic expansion of the concept of security beyond military threats to include economic, food, health, environmental, personal, and political security. Accordingly, as terrorism and banditry generate widespread human insecurity, disrupting livelihoods, displacing populations, destroying infrastructure, and limiting access to education and healthcare, these inevitably intensify poverty and inequality, thereby fueling the recurring cycles of violence that obstruct the consolidation of a sustainable nation-building process.

It is important to note that the combination of these approaches enables an evaluation of Nigeria's security governance not only in terms of military effectiveness but also in relation to its impact on human development and social stability. This integrated framework conceptualizes terrorism and banditry as both causes and consequences of weak state capacity, a fractured state, citizen relationships, and widespread human insecurity. These dynamics perpetuate a vicious cycle of insecurity and underdevelopment, undermining nation-building outcomes. In this context, the effectiveness of Nigeria's security response must be assessed by its capacity to restore territorial control, rebuild public trust, and enhance human security.

Locating the Sources of Banditry in Northern Nigeria.

According to Osasona (2023), banditry remains the "gravest security threat Nigeria currently faces, and it is driving her worst national humanitarian crisis in decades." At this point, it is pertinent to ask, what are the underlying causes of banditry in Nigeria?



While the cases of armed banditry are widening in scale in Northern Nigeria, it is pertinent to note that the problem of banditry is not new. For instance, a written reference to banditry in the region used in a colonial correspondence dates back to the cases of banditry more than 120 years, effectively from the 1901 attack on a 12,000-camel trade caravan that resulted in the death of around 210 traders (Rufai, 2018).

Proceeding further on the root of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria, three competing theories have sought to provide answers to this. There is the narrative, which attributes banditry to out-of-control farmer–pastoralist conflicts in some of Nigeria's volatile geopolitical zones (Kuma & Jibrin, 2016). There is also another narrative that considers banditry as a new form of terrorism and a continuation of the historical Fulani *Jihad* of the 20th century that targeted farming communities across Northern Nigeria (Osasona, 2023). There is a third narrative that seeks to argue that banditry is a government-sanctioned violence geared towards depopulation of communities and the Islamization of the extended northern Nigeria, particularly non-Hausa- and Fulani-dominated regions. This third perception coheres around public discontent with the government's handling of pastoralists' violence in northern Nigeria (Assessment Capacity Projects (ACAPS), 2020).

As contested as many of these perspectives are, they nonetheless fit into the narrative that seeks to locate armed banditry to multiple sources, such as political, socio-economic, and environmental factors. For instance, central in the discourses on banditry is socio-economic deprivation linked to poverty, high rural unemployment, and the near absence of economic opportunities, which has created great incentives for criminality and recruitment into armed groups.

Specifically, to this, Okoli and Abubakar (2021) and Rufus and Ogbe (2025) have opined that poverty and unemployment have directly contributed to fueling the menace of banditry. Furthermore, Nigeria's weak governance structure and fragility, while contributing to weak law enforcement and corruption, have limited the state's presence in rural areas (Sadiq et al., 2025), leaving a wide vacuum that enables banditry to flourish. ACCORD (2021) has lent credence to this perspective, asserting that the state's failure to provide security or justice has created ungoverned spaces and weak security apparatuses, allowing bandits to operate with impunity.

Similarly, armed banditry in Northern Nigeria has often been rooted in resource-based conflict, environmental crisis, and competition over land and natural resources. These have often been linked to environmental change; for instance, Omakoji et al. (2024) see banditry as arising from unresolved conflicts between farmers and pastoralists over scarce resources, induced by climate variability, desertification, and shrinking grazing land. The transformation of these isolated conflicts to intensified cases of conflict thus morphed into organized forms of violent crime by groups in the region.



Moreover, research has also shown that the proliferation of small arms and the country's porous borders (ACCORD, 2021; Utibe, 2025;), while providing easy access to arms, has also played a role by helping to transform many of the local farmer-herder grievances into large-scale violent criminality.

Lastly, there is the problem of structural marginalization and infrastructural deficits in rural areas. This problem, as Akanji (2025) has pointed out, not only deepens the absence of security and weakens communication in rural areas but also makes rural communities and areas safe havens for bandit operations and difficult terrain for state security operatives to intervene in. Thus far, attempts have sought to identify the root causes of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria. The widening cases of armed banditry thus prompt the need to understand their impact in the region.

Impact of Banditry on Nigeria

Two critical issues arise in the analysis of the subject under discourse. First, beyond the religious and ideological motivations traditionally associated with Boko Haram and its affiliated groups, the distinction between terrorist organizations and bandit groups in Nigeria has become increasingly blurred. Second, as a result of this convergence, the modus operandi of both terrorists and bandits has become largely indistinguishable, while the effects of their activities on society, security, and development overlap substantially. This convergence tends to render their impact mutually reinforcing, making any compartmentalized or isolated assessment analytically inadequate.

This section examines the impact of the multi-front security crisis of the jihadist insurgency in the North-East, criminal banditry and mass abductions in the North-West, and other violent threats in the North-Central and other regions. Together, these have produced overlapping humanitarian needs and displacement crises (ACAPS, 2025).

Empirical analyses of the activities of terrorist groups and bandits have shown that they have caused extensive human harm, as evident in many of the killings, injuries, abductions, sexual violence, psychological trauma, and widespread insecurity (Kleffman et al., 2024). In reference to these fatalities, for instance, Aruwan (2025), citing a report by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, December 2024), notes that between May 2023 and April 2024, Nigeria recorded more than 600,000 deaths attributable to insecurity. Specifically, 614,937 citizens were killed nationwide, with the North-West recording the highest figure (206,030), followed by the North-East (188,992), while the South-West recorded the lowest (15,693). The report further indicates that 2,235,954 Nigerians were kidnapped during the same period and that a total of ₦2,231,772,563,507 (approximately US\$1.44 billion) was paid as ransom. Aruwan (2025) further observes that the North-West remained dominant in Nigeria's kidnap-for-ransom landscape, recording 425 incidents (42.6 percent of total cases nationwide) and accounting for 2,938 victims, representing 62.2 percent of all abducted persons.



In addition, terrorist and bandit activities have generated large-scale population displacement as people flee attacks, intimidation, and coercion. This has resulted in reduced school attendance, declining household incomes, and limited access to healthcare among displaced populations. The growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has been documented by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2025). Excluding figures from the North-East, the IOM reports that as of November 2024, a total of 1,322,766 IDPs were identified in 225,458 households across Benue, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Sokoto, and Zamfara states.

Furthermore, terrorist and bandit activities have produced severe economic disruptions. Beyond reducing agricultural output, they have blocked trade routes, increased transport and transaction costs, discouraged investment, and fostered what has been termed “conflict taxation”, whereby communities are extorted in the name of protection. These dynamics have entrenched illicit economies, particularly kidnapping for ransom, which both finance violence and distort local economic systems (Madueke et al., 2024). Corroborating this, Fewer.Net (2025) reports that intensifying violence since early 2025 has continued to restrict household access to farmland and food sources while limiting income-generating opportunities.

Studies further link declining agricultural activity and worsening food insecurity in affected states to several interrelated trends, including: a. reduced access to farmland due to fear of attacks; disruption of farm inputs and labor; crop theft and livestock raiding; and extortion payments and abandonment of rural settlements (Ayinoko et al., 2024).

Moreover, insecurity arising from terrorist and bandit activities has generated four fundamental security governance and development challenges in Nigeria. First, it has placed severe pressure on public finance as security expenditures continue to rise. Second, escalating insecurity has weakened local administration and eroded state legitimacy where protection has failed. Third, particularly in the North-East, protracted terrorist violence has undermined stabilization and recovery efforts, producing long-term human and developmental losses. Finally, the overlapping humanitarian crises have strained governance systems, complicating coordination, prioritization, and trust in state protection mechanisms.

These dynamics are especially evident in the education sector, where schools have been closed due to fear of bandit abductions, teacher flight, and displacement in the health sector, as well as in broader areas of human capital development. This is not unrelated to damaged infrastructure, overwhelmed services, psychosocial trauma, and heightened protection risks, including gender-based violence associated with abduction.

Overall, deductions from sources, such as Eze, (2025); Fewer.Net (2025); International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2024–2025), Kleffman, et al. (2025) and UNDP (2021)



demonstrate that displacement has severely disrupted livelihoods and access to basic services. Conflict-driven food insecurity has reduced production, restricted mobility, and disrupted markets, while ransom payments and pervasive fear have deepened economic decline in affected areas. Collectively, these dynamics impose long-term human capital losses, weaken institutions, stall recovery, and remain a major impediment to Nigeria's development aspirations.

Overview of State's Response to Armed Banditry Threats.

Discourses on the threats posed by armed banditry and the challenges therefrom have brought to the forefront the destabilization it has caused in the North, and particularly the scuttling of Nigeria's long-desired development aspirations. It is needless to argue that Nigeria's response to this challenge has been multifaceted. However, what is clear is that the measures were largely kinetic and non-kinetic.

In other words, the measures followed the adoption of counterinsurgency strategies, which include military and other policy initiatives, such as oversight on the rule of law, civil-military relations, and community participation, among others. Specifically, the military response, as Aina et al. (2023) have argued, adopted a counter-banditry strategy under Operation Hadarin Daji, a Joint Task Force initiative deployed in the North-West. This involves troop deployment, airstrikes, and coordinated operations in most of the affected areas, conducting roadblocks, checkpoints, raids on suspected hideouts, mass arrest of suspects, and co-option of local non-statutory self-defense militia (borrowing from the operation of Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in the North East) to counter the activities of bandits in the affected areas backed by legal instruments.

Flowing from this was the setting up of similar outfits under different names in Zamfara, Kano, Katsina, and Sokoto. For instance, Katsina State established the Katsina Community Watch Corps (KCWC), and Sokoto State has the Sokoto Community Guard Corps (SCGC). While Kano has the Hisbah Corps, Zamfara State established what is known as the Zamfara Community Protection Guards (CPG).

Alongside the military strategy, the government responded with non-kinetic efforts, such as amnesty programmes, dialogue, and negotiation with bandits in states like Zamfara and Katsina. This is in addition to the adoption by state governments in the affected areas, with federal backing, peace deals, and reintegration initiatives, all aimed at reducing violence.

In the same vein, the Federal Government also reinvigorated the Forest Guards by graduating 7,000 of them. The guards are to be deployed, particularly in states with high insecurity risks, such as Borno, Sokoto, Yobe, Adamawa, Niger, Kwara, and Kebbi, to deny criminals sanctuary in forested areas. This initiative forms part of President Tinubu's broader security strategy to combat terrorists and bandits.



Beyond these, the Nigerian government, through the Central Bank of Nigeria and security agencies, introduced additional measures, including a financial control policy to weaken bandit networks and disrupt the backbone of their financial transactions. These took the form of freezing of bank accounts linked to suspected bandit financiers; restrictions on cash withdrawals in rural bandit-prone areas, and crackdowns on informal money transfer systems used for ransom payments.

The additional government's response includes the shutdown of telecommunications services in affected states to promote surveillance, disrupt communication and coordination among bandit groups; the proscription and the designation in 2022 of bandit groups as terrorist organizations under the Terrorism (Prevention), intended to allow for stronger legal prosecution frameworks, allow military escalation against them and the seizure of their asset, and to facilitate international cooperation on counter-terrorism. Others are the rural development and social intervention policies in the form of livestock and agricultural programs to reduce farmer–herder conflicts, the social investment schemes like N-Power under the National Social Investment Program of Nigeria, and infrastructure and employment initiatives in affected regions, and arms control and border security measures to curb the proliferation of small arms. This was done by strengthening the National Center for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, increasing border patrols, and cooperating with neighboring countries.

It is pertinent to note that, while some of these responses, their shortcomings notwithstanding, have affected the activities of the armed bandits, many have created bottlenecks that have made it nearly impossible to eradicate their activities.

Matters Arising from Anti-Banditry Measures

Research, such as Aina et al. (2023); Gana, (2025); Utsaha, (2025) have revealed that many successes have been recorded in the fight against armed banditry. Despite notable achievements, major issues have continued to shape and constrain efforts to address the menace of banditry effectively.

In the first place, a significant number of anti-banditry measures, such as the military-kinetic efforts, have attracted criticism due to their perceived high-handed and extra-judicial nature. This approach has raised serious concerns regarding civilian casualties and the erosion of public trust in security institutions, in addition to undermining long-term stabilization and peace-building efforts. The persistence of armed banditry, despite kinetic efforts, raises concerns not only about the institutional and operational limitations of Nigeria's military architecture but also about the ability to sustain whatever gains without complementary non-military strategies.



Furthermore, while the kinetic efforts have recorded limited successes, they remain constrained by poor intelligence, terrain difficulties, and overstretching of forces, thereby hampering the military's operational capacity and allowing the armed bandits to persist.

Moreover, related closely to this is the problem of prolonged detention without trial. Many individuals arrested on allegations of banditry reportedly remain in custody for extended periods without being formally charged or tried in court. This situation weakens the deterrent value of the justice system and raises fundamental questions about due process and the rule of law.

Additionally, while the states with the backing of the federal government initiated peace and reintegration initiatives, the process has often been undermined by human security, as armed groups have exploited the negotiations only to regroup again. Added to this, state amnesty initiatives have sometimes legitimized criminal actors, weakening deterrence and public trust and producing contradictory outcomes that tend to limit the long-term effectiveness of the strategy.

Similarly, the current anti-banditry operations have been predominantly kinetic in nature, with limited integration of modern technological tools, thereby creating two germane issues. Firstly, the reliance on conventional military confrontation, rather than intelligence-led operations, has reduced operational effectiveness and constrained the security agency's ability to anticipate and disrupt criminal networks proactively.

Secondly, the non-integration of technology into the counterinsurgency strategy has exposed the inadequate use of advanced surveillance systems, intelligence-gathering technologies, and data-driven security mechanisms, which are critical to modern strategies in the fight against insecurity.

Next, the bottom-up security initiatives, which include expanding community policing frameworks, collaborating with vigilante groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force, and integrating local intelligence networks into formal security structures, have the potential to lead to human rights abuses and weaken oversight and accountability.

Finally, as Musa (2026) has argued, the struggle against banditry is fundamentally asymmetrical. Unlike conventional warfare between states, it is a conflict involving non-state actors deeply entrenched within civilian populations, who benefit from insider support networks, particularly the growing informant industry associated with banditry. Such networks have enabled the bandits to conduct attacks and subsequently blend into civilian communities with relative ease. This operational strategy has significantly complicated detection and neutralization efforts, making purely military solutions insufficient. The complexity of this form of warfare necessitates a broader approach that extends beyond armed force.



Security Governance and Nation Building

Research in security studies, such as Abdullahi (2019); Oluyemi (2025); and Onyia, et al. (2024) reveals that weaknesses in Nigeria's security governance have not only enabled but also emboldened armed bandits to thrive in Northern Nigeria. This situation has led to the emergence of bandits as parallel authorities, particularly in the North West, where they impose levies, deny access to farmlands, and, in some cases, appoint district heads, exploiting the country's ungoverned spaces as operational bases. While this underscores the erosion of the state's monopoly on violence, it also signals the fragility of the Nigerian state and directly challenges Weber's concept of statehood, particularly the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Consequently, armed banditry has undermined Nigeria's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political stability.

Similarly, the persistent attacks and kidnappings perpetrated by armed bandits have diminished public trust in the government's capacity to protect lives and property. This has fostered cynicism and deepened frustration with state institutions, thereby undermining one of the fundamental pillars of the citizen–state relationship: legitimacy, an essential component of nation-building.

Furthermore, a central issue in discussions on the impact of armed banditry, especially in the North West, is the disruption of socio-economic life, particularly in sectors such as education and agriculture. This is evident in the mass abduction of schoolchildren and the displacement of rural populations, both of which have undermined efforts toward food security and human security. Supporting this view, Eze (2025) and Mikail et al. (2025) argue that armed banditry has resulted in mass displacement, economic disruption, and food insecurity, particularly in rural communities, thereby contributing to widespread underdevelopment. The persistence of these conditions reflects the failure of Nigeria's governance architecture to integrate marginalized populations into national development processes.

Moreover, armed banditry has become increasingly weaponized along ethnic and religious lines, giving rise to narratives of Fulani or Islamic terrorism, often amplified through social media platforms. These patterns of stereotyping have exacerbated ethnic tensions and fostered deep mistrust, further polarizing the polity and undermining efforts at nation-building.

Finally, institutional decay and inter-agency failures among national security operatives, coupled with economic marginalization, now weaponized by disaffected groups, and the weakening of national security policy frameworks, have collectively compromised security governance. These challenges are evident in inconsistent and largely ineffective government responses, such as the shutdown of telecommunications networks, grazing bans, peace agreements, and ransom payments. Additionally, the constitutional arrangement, whereby federal authorities control the police and military while state governors, designated as Chief Security Officers (CSOs), lack



operational control, has rendered states largely powerless to address the growing threat of armed banditry. This structural imbalance has hindered coordinated national security responses and poses a significant obstacle to effective nation-building.

Recommendations

This study highlighted the critical shortcomings in Nigeria's security governance, which have given way to armed banditry and its persistence in Northern Nigeria. Addressing these challenges requires a shift towards a more proactive integrated policy framework. This informed the following recommendations:

The adoption of a new integrated anti-banditry framework that:

- i. Addresses the root source of armed banditry in the region. Such a strategy must include policies to eradicate poverty and unemployment and to create educational opportunities for youth.
- ii. The adoption of a new military-kinetic strategy that embraces the deployment of the latest equipment and technology in intelligence gathering and combat operations.
- iii. A new approach that ensures community participation and ownership of the anti-banditry strategy, to promote confidence building and create legitimacy for the state's action or inaction, and further secure the cooperation of civilians.
- iv. Judiciously dispense with all cases of armed banditry still pending in the court system, to improve confidence, and as a deterrent mechanism.

The introduction of new and reinvigorated agricultural policy that addresses the roots of farmer-herder conflict by integrating the concerns of the interests involved to form part of the country's national economic objectives.

A deliberate policy that promotes the strengthening of governance in the conflict-affected zones, targeting people of the conflict-affected area. This would help to improve service delivery, reduce corruption, and restore the state's presence in recaptured territories. Additionally, there is a need to integrate an element that reconciles people and the state to address many of the local tensions and further reduce the socio-economic conditions that sustain banditry in the region.

Conclusion

Thus far, this paper has interrogated the rising cases of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria. Drawing on the state fragility, social contract, and human security frameworks, it situates the threats of armed banditry alongside structural outcomes that have weakened the country's security governance structure, within the context of the near absence of state legitimacy and the state's failure to fulfill its contractual obligations to citizens.



The paper also argues that the persistent nature of threats from armed banditry has not only destroyed the region's economy and social cohesion but also undermined the very foundations of Nigeria's unity, cohesion, and broader national development objectives.

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