

## Insurgency, Banditry and other Forms of Terrorism in Northern Nigeria: An Assessment



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### **Abstract**

*Nigeria has faced myriads of security challenges ranging from the Boko Haram insurgency to farmer-herder conflict, kidnappings and banditry, resuscitation of the secessionist movement, militia activities, ritual killings, piracy, and attacks on security personnel and installations, among others. The paper examines the dynamics of insurgency, banditry, and other forms of terrorism activities in some of the northern states of Nigeria that share boundaries with neighbouring West African countries. Despite government efforts to resolve some of these security challenges, they persist. This is due to so many dynamics and elements that are working against the government's war on terrorism and banditry. Using both qualitative and descriptive methods, generated from primary and secondary sources, the article reveals that the factors that fuel insecurity challenges in the area of study include; high level of corruption among security agencies, Nigeria's porous borders, accommodation and appeasement of terrorists, and bandits, and above all Nigeria geographical features. The study concludes that to resolve the security challenges confronting the region the government needs to effectively deploy both kinetic and non-kinetic methods of warfare.*

**Keywords:** - Banditry, Corruption, Insurgency, Terrorism, Porous borders

## Introduction

Nigeria recently, particularly in Northern Nigeria is facing prolonged activities of insurgency, banditry, kidnapping for ransom, farmer-herder conflicts, social unrest, and transborder criminal and smuggling activities because of Nigeria's porous border as well as political instability, even though the country has made considerable advances in democracy, economic development in the past two and the half decades of civilian rule. Nevertheless, since the return to civilian rule in 1999, there is apprehension about serious internal security challenges – the most critical ones are the *Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Li-da'wa waal Jihad*, known as *Boko Haram*, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS); and the *Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) insurgency. They are predominantly in the Northeast and Northcentral states of Nigeria where they perpetrated various crimes ranging from banditry, kidnapping for ransom, and the Fulani herdsman attacks in states like Benue, Plateau, Zamfara, Taraba, Kebbi, Katsina Niger, Sokoto, and Kaduna; Niger-Delta militancy and spates of insecurity all over the country.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, there is concern about the rise of terrorism activities and its adverse effects on peace, security, development, and political stability in Nigeria. The occurrence and nature of such attacks by bandits, kidnapers, insurgents, and terrorists in some parts of Nigeria in recent periods confirm the increasing superiority and complexity of outlaw- groups in the country. Despite the measures taken by Nigeria's government and the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS), they still pose serious security threats to the region. The United States 2011 Country Report on Terrorism indicated that Africa experienced 978 attacks in 2011, an 11.5% increase over 2010.<sup>2</sup> According to the Reports, the Boko Haram group had conducted one hundred and thirty-six deadly attacks on communities and people.<sup>3</sup> Also, in 2012 *Boko Haram* had coordinated deadly attacks of over three hundred and thirty, which led to the death of over one thousand one hundred and thirty-two people.<sup>4</sup>

The nature of banditry activities in Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, and Zamfara States bears the operational footprints of the terrorists groups in the country, especially in the abductions of school children, and demands for ransom, killings of security operatives, traditional rulers (Sarkin Gobir in Sokoto state), banks robbery for money and demand for the release of their gang members. Bandits in the study areas are the same as terrorists. What is the distinction between banditry and terrorism? Are there any links between bandits, Boko Haram, and international terrorist cells, especially in the West African region? Is corruption among

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<sup>1</sup> James Barnett, "Investigating the 'Boko Haram' Presence in Niger State," *Hudson Institute*, 2021, <https://www.hudson.org/research/16878-investigating-the-boko-haram-presence-in-niger-state>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Country Report on Terrorism-2012* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State), May 30, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Country Report on Terrorism-2012", 15.

<sup>4</sup> United States Congress, *Boko Haram: Emerging Threat to the U.S. Homeland* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011).

security agents and accommodation and appeasement of criminals by government officials playing roles in fanning the proliferation of banditry and terrorism in Nigeria? Are Nigeria's porous borders and illegal transactions on the periphery of Nigeria's borders serve as a beacon against the war of banditry and other insecurity in the country? These and many other aspects of insecurity in Nigeria, especially in the northern part of Nigeria are what the paper investigates through the use of qualitative and descriptive methods, generated from primary and secondary sources.

### **Evolution of Banditry in Northern Nigeria**

Banditry is the major insecurity problem in Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, and Zamfara States in the Northwestern Nigeria. However, there are contextual differences in its origin and manifestations. In Zamfara state, for example, at least ten thousand armed bandits, kidnapers, and cattle rustlers operate in over twenty major camps.<sup>5</sup> Some sources trace banditry's origin in the states to poorly managed resource conflict between pastoralists and farmers. Others linked it to illegal mining activity as the origin of the armed phase of banditry, which is currently witnessed in the state. According to the former Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, there were strong and glaring links between the activities of armed bandits and illicit miners.<sup>6</sup>

Those who sponsor illegal mining also fund banditry and cattle rustling in mining communities to incite violence among cattle breeders. Niger state is the least affected state among the four states studied. While the origin of banditry in Niger state is not directly traceable to farmers-pastoralists conflict but rather the state's invasion by dislodged bandits from the Kaduna side of Birnin Gwari forest, which connects Niger and Kaduna States in 2014 and the influx of Islamic terrorist groups from Zamfara, Sokoto and Katsina States along Nigeria's porous border with Mali and Niger republics as well as gun runners. In short, banditry was imported into Niger state and has since spread to various communities in the state. About eighteen local governments have witnessed attacks, with most attacks concentrated in Shiroro, Munyan, Rafi, Mashegu, and Paiko. Bandits have reportedly killed over three hundred and eighty persons in the state, over a hundred persons were kidnapped, and more than a billion naira was paid as ransom.<sup>7</sup>

In Katsina state of Northwestern, Nigeria, banditry activities in the state were imported from neighbouring Zamfara State in 2010.<sup>8</sup> Seven Local Government areas shared boundaries with Zamfara state, namely- Jibia, Batsari, Safana, Danmusa, Kankara, Faskari, and Sabuwa Dutse

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<sup>5</sup> John Campbell, "Kidnapping and Ransom Payments in Nigeria," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/>.

<sup>6</sup> For more details on this see, *The Guardian Newspaper Report* on April 7, 2019., "Nigeria suspends mining in troubled state to halt armed banditry", and also the *Vanguard Newspaper*, Report of February 13, 2021 which says "Seven years of banditry in Niger State: 380 killed, 71 abducted, N79m paid as ransom".

<sup>7</sup> *Vanguard Newspaper*, "Seven Years of Banditry in Niger State: 380 Killed, 71 Abducted, N79m Paid as Ransom," February 13, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Trust*, "10,000 Bandits, Cattle Rustlers Operating in Zamfara – Yari," 2019.

Ma.<sup>9</sup> Bandits often use these locations to perpetuate their activities. The bandit groups utilise motorcycles to raid border communities and return to their base. The origin and evolution of banditry in Kaduna State follow the orthodoxy of historical out-of-control conflicts between farmers and pastoralists over resources. Kaduna state has a long history of violent disputes between Fulani pastoralists and settler communities in southern Kaduna. Some of these events occurred in 2000 and expanded in 2013. There are reports that 33 vigilantes and community members in Dogon Dawa in Birnin Gwari Local Government area were killed in 2013.<sup>10</sup>

### **Trends and Motives of Banditry in Nigeria**

Banditry in Nigeria can be classified based on the principal reasons and established trends. The dominant reasons for banditry in Nigeria are largely economic, and most bandits operate independently and are self-involved. Sources reveal that criminal gangs are principally dominated by Nigerian citizens indigenous to the areas ruined by banditry.<sup>11</sup> The information was certified by a key informant interview with a community leader that pointed out that most of the bandits were youths below 35 years of age and were Fulani as well as Hausas, Kanuri, and other ethnic nationalities based on their appearance and the language they speak.<sup>12</sup> Also, another source from Niger State reveals that bandits, who attack the communities in Niger State were Hausas, Fulanis, Gungawa, Kambari, Kabawa, or Dakkarawa ethnic groups.<sup>13</sup> The primary base of operations of these gangs was rural communities, with bases deep in forest reserves and mountains - providing great shelter and hideouts for their criminality. They did not have structures and identities, nor were they cohesive with a discernible command structure like most militias. Instead, they operate in informal and independent clusters. The uniting factor between and among bandit groups is the opportunity for pillage and intergroup and territorial conflicts, which are regular among bandits. Profit and personal enrichment forced them into banditry rather than political, ideological, or any sectional interest, like the terrorists. In a region where poverty and lack of economic opportunity were common reasons for banditry, which offers tempting prospects that farming and herding cannot. Moreover, extortion, ransom, and other criminal funds from banditry drive the regional trade in small arms and light weapons and lubricate transnational crime in the Sahel.<sup>14</sup>

Further investigations reveal that the driving motive for banditry activities in Nigeria includes a total exclusion of pastoralists in governance in Nigeria. Moreover, most of the herdsmen live in the bush with their animals and have no basic formal education completely ignorant of government functions, civic duties, or any code of conduct. Also, the failure of the Nigerian government to create an appropriate conflict resolution framework to manage the conflict

<sup>9</sup> *Desert Herald*, "After Several Attacks, Gov. Matawalle Concedes That Bandits Still Operate in Zamfara," 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Abdulgafar Alabelewe, "Living Dangerously with Bandits in Kaduna," *The Nation Newspaper*, July 24, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Alabelewe, "Living Dangerously with Bandits in Kaduna".

<sup>12</sup> *Zamfara Traces the Origin of Hostilities*, Key Informant (name withheld) interview with a senior journalist of the Zamfara State Media Cooperation.

<sup>13</sup> Senior Journalist of the Zamfara State Media Cooperation, Interview.

<sup>14</sup> For details, see <https://www.cfr.org/blog>.

between farmers and nomadic herdsmen contributed to the emergence of banditry in Nigeria. The lack of enough security personnel in every part of the country to monitor the activities of the criminals also contributed to the rise of banditry. This was further mystified by no adequate intelligence gathering, which the success of the security was dependent on timely and accurate information.

### **Insurgency in Nigeria and Territorial Interests**

In December 2020, the abduction of more than 300 schoolboys in the Kankara area of Katsina State in the Northwest, Nigeria and the claim of responsibility by the late leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, had brought to the fore the links between bandits and insurgency groups in Northern Nigeria.<sup>15</sup> While *Boko Haram* remains largely the face of Islamist extremism in Nigeria, there has been an evolution in the leadership structure, modus operandi, and outlook of the Jihadist group. However, in 2016, there was a split in the leadership of *Boko Haram*, which led to the emergence of a faction that swore allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The second faction remained under the late Abubakar Shekau (*Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Daw'ah wal-Jihad* or JAS), who was reportedly killed in a conflict with another terror faction and has since been succeeded by Bakura Modu.<sup>16</sup>

The third faction, known as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), was formed under Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, one of the sons of the founder of Boko Haram.<sup>17</sup> The split in the terror franchise has further complicated the already burdened Nigerian state and worsened security and public policy challenges for the government and other regional stakeholders. Due to deteriorating security and social disequilibrium conditions, the Northwest and north-central regions are increasingly becoming their areas of operation. The presence of fundamentalist groups is further validated by disseminated video recordings of messages of greetings sent by Boko Haram fighters to their colleagues in Zamfara and Niger states. Three weeks later, the greeting was reciprocated by fighters in Niger State.<sup>18</sup> There were numerous reasons for Shekau's forays into the Northwest and north-central areas. These include the desire to create an Islamic state beyond the Northeast, recruitment and financial gains from ransom payments, and other activities like illegal gold mining.

### **Socio-Political and Economic Drivers of Terrorism and Banditry in Nigeria**

Many factors and conditions contributed to the rise of banditry, kidnapping for ransom, terrorism, and other form of crimes in Nigeria in particular and the West African region in general. One of these factors is the geographical nature of northern Nigeria. It provided a

<sup>15</sup> "Banditry: It's Hausa-Fulani war, Zamfara traces origin of hostilities", *Punch Newspaper*, April 3, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> For details, visit <https://www.cfr.org/blog/kidnapping-and-ransompayments-nigeria>.

<sup>17</sup> Boko Haram claims kidnapping of hundreds of Nigerian students" *Aljazeera News*, December 15, 2020 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/15/boko-haram-claims-kidnapping-of-hundreds-of-nigerianstudents>).

<sup>18</sup> James Barnett, "Investigating the 'Boko Haram' Presence in Niger State," *Hudson Institute*, 2021, <https://www.hudson.org/research/16878-investigating-the-boko-haram-presence-in-niger-state>

haven ground for terror groups. The whole of the northern region of Nigeria has vast and rugged forestlands, some areas aside porous borderlines across state frontiers that bandits have colonised and were mainly made ungovernable.<sup>19</sup> For example, Kuyanbana forest links Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Niger states. Also, the Kamuku forest or game reserve covers an area of 1,121 kilometres square from Kaduna to Zamfara, Katsina, Niger, and Kebbi states. Rumah/Kukar Jangarai Forest Reserve is also another area that covers about 800 kilometres from the Northwest of Katsina state to Zamfara state, and the Rugu forest stretches from the Birnin Gwari area of Kaduna state into Katsina and Zamfara states.<sup>20</sup> Bandits have occupied these forestlands and are now staging grounds for attack and refuge from security attacks.

Mutual usage of logistics and arms among the bandits and terrorists. There have been records of arms trade between bandits and terror groups, particularly the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The progressive sophistication of arms borne by bandits points to a network of international arms smuggling that services the merchants of death in Nigeria. Looking at how contiguous the focal states are, the flow of arms is understandable.<sup>21</sup> Mastery of the political economy of kidnap for ransom. Both bandits and terrorist groups have tasted the benefit of using ransom benefit to acquire more arms and therefore mastered the political economy of kidnapping for ransom. Bandits fund their operations mainly from the lucrative nature of kidnapping for ransom mainly targets school children. This tactic is similar to the one earlier deployed by Boko Haram with the kidnapping of school children in Chibok and the subsequent ransom payment before a number of these schoolgirls were released.

Accommodation and appeasement tactics introduced by the government and the public towards bandits and terrorist groups also help to fuel the activities of the bandits and terrorists. This is done through amnesty, payment of ransom, and deradicalisation of the terrorist. Nigeria's porous borders contributed in no small in enhancing the activities of terrorists and other criminal activities, because there was no adequate management of the country's border. This made the terrorists cross into Nigeria's land without any problem because the immigration and other security agents were inadequate to manage Nigeria's borders.<sup>22</sup> This stressed the need for the Nigerian Government and ECOWAS in general to increase cross-border cooperation against arms and cash smuggling. To also, strengthen security at their national borders and address corruption within the public institution charged with the responsibility of manning the international borders.

Furthermore, nepotism and smuggling of small arms / light weapons trafficking across porous borders by gun runners to terrorists and banditry groups across the sub-region and beyond made it impossible for the Nigerian Government to adequately control weapon trafficking to

<sup>19</sup> Barnett, "Investigating the 'Boko Haram' Presence in Niger State'".

<sup>20</sup> Egbejule, Eromo. "Death, Anguish and flickers of hope: 10 years of Boko Haram." *Aljazeera News*, July 30, 2019. <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/30/death-anguish-and-flickers-of-hope-10-years-of-boko-haram>.

<sup>21</sup> See, <https://issafrika.org/iss-today/boko-haram-teams-up-with-bandits-in-nigeria>.

<sup>22</sup> *Daily Trust*, "10,000 Bandits, Cattle Rustlers Operating in Zamfara – Yari," 2019.

terror groups. Intermediaries, who arrange the purchase and delivery of the weapons facilitate this. To this end, ECOWAS Member States and Nigeria in particular need to strengthen their response against illicit trade in weapons in the region including re-strategising cross-border cooperation and collaboration which is the only sure way of controlling terrorism and banditry.<sup>23</sup>

Another factor that assisted in the proliferation of banditry and terrorism in Nigeria and the West African region is corruption. Corruption is so entrenched among the security personnel in Nigeria, which made it impossible to checkmate the activities of banditry because many times some of the security agents connive with the criminals by either giving them arms to carry out their notorious actions or providing them with intelligence report. Hostage taking by terrorist groups like Boko Haram in Borno, Katsina, and even Zamfara, Kaduna, and Kebbi states of foreign citizens and payment for the release of the hostages is another way of an act of terrorism and a significant source of financing their activities in Nigeria. This also shows the weakness of the Nigerian government and member states of the West African community in grappling with the phenomenon of corruption and frequent payments system for ransom, especially using foreign currencies which facilitate criminal activities.<sup>24</sup>

### **Distinguishing Between Banditry and Terrorism: Conceptual and Operational Variations**

Banditry is mainly encouraged by the tempting prospects of wealth in a region like Northern Nigeria blighted by poverty and poor socioeconomic outcomes. Bandits have realised the enormous millions of naira that can be extorted from rural communities and road users as ransom. Consequently, they have used the funds to promote further and create efficiency in their very lucrative criminal enterprises. There is no discernible ideological persuasion underpinning banditry beyond theft, extortion, and wanton violence. Communities of all faiths, ethnicities, and socioeconomic status across the Northern Nigeria states have been victims of attacks by these criminal groups. Hundreds of rural farming communities have been sacked by bandits, with thousands of people killed.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the motivations driving terrorism tend to be ideological or political. Most definitions outline the following key criteria: target, objective, motive, perpetrator, and legitimacy or legality as the fundamental hallmark of acts of violence categorised as terrorism.<sup>26</sup>

The media and people alike have interchangeably used the terms 'bandits' and 'terrorists' to refer to the criminal gangs that communities have accused of being responsible for rising cases of killings, kidnapping for ransom, and sexual violence, among others. This tends to shift security and political focus from the issues, particularly brutal incidences of attack with high casualty

<sup>23</sup> *Daily Trust*, "10,000 Bandits," 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Barnett, "Investigating the 'Boko Haram' Presence in Niger State'".

<sup>25</sup> *Africa Report*, no. 288, Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem. International Crisis Group, 2020., and Malik Samuel, "Boko Haram teams up with bandits in Nigeria", in *Institute of Security Studies*, (2021), (<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/boko-haram-teams-up-with-bandits-in-nigeria>).

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

rates, as the basics for classifying the concept of terrorism and banditry. This is not to exclude the fact that fundamentalist terrorist groups operate on the same page as bandits, and there is the possibility that some bandit groups might have adopted more of some fundamentalist modus operandi on their initiative or through limited contact with extremist groups.<sup>27</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Despite the limitation of this study in getting the key actors of banditry and terrorism interviewed, the occurrence of terrorism, banditry, kidnappings for ransom, and other forms of criminal activities in Northern Nigeria in particular and West African regions in general is indisputable with negative effects on the security, political stability and development of Nigeria nation. The insecurity and political, economic, and social instability within the Nigeria nation in particular provide an enabling environment for extremism terrorism, bandits, and kidnapping for ransom to thrive in the country. Geographical, nepotism, corruption porous borderland factors, and illegal ways such as ransom, hostage taking, bank robbery, trade trafficking in arms, borders smuggling, corruption, and courts e.t.c were being used by the bandits and terrorists to raise money or move them to the hands of bandits and terrorist groups and individuals in Nigeria.

This is because the long years of military rule in Nigeria led to the undermining of individual liberties, safety, and security. Also, the legacies of colonialism, military incursions into politics, and corruption have all contributed to the present security situation in the country, undoubtedly the absence of a robust security sector governance architecture is central in explaining the poor response in addressing security challenges in Nigeria. Nothing highlights the climaxes for the security reform system in Nigeria than the apparent ineffectiveness of state security agencies in the face of escalating terrorism and banditry by non-state actors. Banditry and terrorism across northern Nigeria are essentially a local problem, and, unsurprisingly, the current centralised command and control structure is overwhelmed by it. This is why there is an urgent need for all stakeholders in security and good governance to collaborate and cooperate in combating terrorism and banditry in Nigeria.

## **The Way Forward**

Regularisation and support of existing vigilantes and community-based security outfits. There is a need for a system that responds to the contextual security needs of local communities appropriately in the whole region. Appropriate funding model for security services in the affected states. It is essential to state that while funding is critical, throwing money at the problem without reforming the current policing system will worsen the security situation, as the case of Zamfara State has proven.

Reintroduction of informal and traditional institutions. One of the identified root causes of banditry and terrorism in the region and West African states is the failure of informal/ traditional

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<sup>27</sup> Barnett, "Investigating the 'Boko Haram' Presence in Niger State", 8.

systems of conflict resolutions that have managed conflicts fairly and efficiently between farmers and pastoralists for generations. These informal systems have been made ineffective, politicised, and undermined by formal governance structures, particularly local government administrations. Unfortunately, reducing the involvement of these informal institutions in governance issues at the local level allowed conflicts to fester into crisis. The outcome is banditry and emergent terrorism in the Northern region. Resuscitation and strengthening of Emirates conflict resolution Systems and processes in the affected areas would a long way in enhancing security.

Providing forums of engagement between communities and policing actors.

The impact of the disconnect and distrust between communities and securities agencies in the worsening of banditry in the focal states cannot be overemphasised. They are in the best position to provide a platform of engagement that encourages the consolidation of peaceful and constructive relationships between security institutions and civilian populations across the areas affected by banditry and terrorism activities. Government and international organisations should target their assistance towards socioeconomic interventions to ameliorate poverty and lack of opportunities. Some of the states in northern Nigeria, have some of the worst governance indicators in Nigeria, highlighting the role of unemployment, poverty, lack of opportunity, and climate change in worsening the crisis. Unfortunately, many young persons who form the largest bulk of the population in the states have witnessed the enormous wealth that can be made from criminal activities.

Supporting border management bodies in Nigeria, Niger Republic, and the Benin Republic: Due to extensive network and reach on ongoing international development interventions on border security (EU, FCDO, DFID, GIZ, USAID, etc.), there is the need to develop targeted capacity development interventions focusing on border management organisations in Nigeria and adjoining countries as one of the strategies to contain banditry and terrorism. In short, improving border surveillance and security at national borders and developing synergy with neighbouring countries would check border encroachment by terrorists gun runners, and drug smugglings.

Finally, the government and the public should always examine the social support structure of bandits(people) and terrorism in its cultural and social context, especially by security agencies to develop specific responses to specific terrorist financing situations. For the control to be effective government at all levels must establish an early warning system within security and intelligence services that could serve as a vigilance tool in identifying and countering real threats of terrorism and banditry. Nigeria's government must review and amend the legislation and regulations relating to terrorism, terrorists' payment of ransoms to terrorists, and the accommodation and appeasement of criminal gangs to effectively combat the threats.

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