

Banditry, Violence, and Insecurity in Northwest Nigeria

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Abstract

With large tracts of ungoverned spaces across Northwest Nigeria, under their control, bandits have virtually destabilized the region. The loss of lives and property has been on the increase. The humanitarian crisis has been high, and the economic costs are unquantifiable. The fear that jihadists are increasingly linking up with these bandits persists. Tracing the origins and implications of banditry, the paper argues that the government's inability to address underlying sociocultural and economic challenges faced by the population, especially in the north, is the reason why this phenomenon has reached its current stage. It concluded with recommendations for crafting a solution.

Keywords: Banditry, kidnapping, ransom, Ungoverned spaces, jihadist, insurgency, entrepreneurial banditry,

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1. Introduction

Northwest Nigeria is been ravaged by armed banditry since 2011ⁱ. The local news headlines have been awash with reports of their attacks and carnage since then. This phenomenon, largely ignored in Western policy circlesⁱⁱ, has evolved from being "the bogeyman of insecurity in Nigeria"ⁱⁱⁱ, to now being to blame for 40% of the country's overall national insecurity^{iv}.

Numbering in the low 10,000s and dispersed across more than 120 gangs, this "loose collection of gangs, operating in areas of limited statehood"^v, now controls huge swathes of territory in northwest and central Nigeria. Their activities are responsible for estimated 12,000 deaths, more than a million displaced people, and the closure of hundreds of schools and colleges in the area^{vi}. They have also evolved to a sophistication hitherto unknown, gaining the ability to strike military installations and shoot down military aircraft^{vii}. Graduating from cattle rustling to human rustling^{viii}; they created a cottage industry out of abductions-for-ransom, with allied structures of middlemen, negotiators, gun-runners, and human mules transporting guns^{ix}, filling a niche opened up and sustained by violent crime. This crime, in the absence of State intervention, has gone entrepreneurial and lucrative, because kidnappers netted at least 18.34million⁹⁷⁴ dollars as ransom- paid mostly by families and the government- between June 2011 and March 2020^x.

Their activities include a repertoire of sexual violence, village raids, killings, cattle rustling, and of course kidnapping for ransom; all of which have put the socio-economic and political stability of not only the region but the entire country at risk. Over and above endangering Nigeria's food security^{xi}, this insurgent mixture of banditry, terrorism, militancy, and kidnapping has produced a humanitarian catastrophe of enormous proportions throughout the region^{xii}. Close to 77,000 people have fled their homes to neighboring countries like Niger and Chad, leading also to humanitarian emergencies in those places.

This wave of banditry originated in Zamfara State in 2011. Riding on motorbikes, most of these bandits operate out of ungoverned spaces and forested regions connecting most States in the northwest, facilitating their movements across the region, since Zamfara shares borders with Kaduna, Kebbi, Katsina, Niger, and Sokoto. And research^{xiii} is increasingly uncovering links between terrorists and bandits in the area; an alliance with serious security implications for a nation struggling economically and plagued by conflicts and widespread instability.

There are so many factors responsible for the rise and evolution of banditry in northwest Nigeria. Criminal gangs are not new to Northwest Nigeria. The area has historically drawn cattle rustlers and slave raiders due to its location as crossroads of sorts along the Trans-Saharan trade and caravan routes^{xiv}. But the present scourge, which began in Zamfara in 2011, started as a traditional farmer-herder conflict or insignificant rural unrest and then evolved into a full-blown conflict, that has risen to engulf most parts of the Northwest^{xv}. The role of local elites and politicians at all levels is also one of the factors that have fuelled this phenomenon, while the government's inability to rise to its law enforcement duties and create effective policies in this regard, compounded the problem. The porous land borders Nigeria shares with countries in the Sahel region, and the proliferation of small arms in the region, which that necessitates; have created a lucrative economy that sustains and nourishes banditry.

The Nigerian government's response has been notoriously inadequate, while the region is being devastated. This paper will be exploring the origins of this phenomenon, the major

dramatis personae, and the government's responses so far. It will look at the role of local politicians and elites as factors fueling the problem, and the general failure of governance in this area. It will in conclusion highlight recommendations that could be considered for ameliorating this problem.

2. Objectives and Methodology

This paper aims at tracing the origins and implications of the banditry, which has ravaged Northwest Nigeria and greatly contributed to the general climate of insecurity experienced all over the country at the moment. It does this, with the objective of interrogating the government's response to it and suggesting ways out of the quagmire.

Our methodology is a qualitative review and analysis of literature and news articles, since this episode of banditry is current and still evolving in Nigeria.

3. Factors Responsible for the rise of Banditry

There have various attempts at explaining the factors responsible for the current banditry scourge, in northwest Nigeria.

1. The **Climate-Change-Adversity** Narrative argues that banditry developed, as a result, of ecological challenges brought on by climate change, such as desertification, drought, flooding, and famine, which have caused instability in the agropastoralists' livelihoods in the Sahel and driven some of them to resort to criminal activity.
2. The **Crime-Terror nexus thesis** is of the view that banditry has a lot to do with terrorism. It contends that terrorists and insurgents often resorted to cattle rustling, abductions, and bank robbery to finance their operations.
3. The **Farmer-Herder conflict theory** argues that banditry logically issues from the conflict between farmers and migrant herders. And that armed bandits originated from the hired militants, who fought on the side of the herders in their confrontation with farmers. They later defected to opportunistic criminality, which then evolved to full-scale banditry.
4. The **Un (der)governed regions notion** contends that the state's failure to assert territorial control within its jurisdiction is to be blamed for criminals exploiting that absence to peddle their trade^{xvi}.

What emerges from these points of view is that the conflict between Hausa farmers and Fulani agropastoralists over land and water resources, combined with ecological degradation brought on by climate change and global warming, combined with the proliferation of the small arms trade in the region, made it possible for organized gangs operating out of ungoverned spaces to stomp their feet on armed robbery, cattle rustling, kidnappings for ransom, and destruction of local communities^{xvii}.

The present wave of banditry could be traced to Zamfara State in 2009, where "frequent theft of domestic animals by local bandits, across many local government areas, led the affected communities into forming a local vigilante group known as the YANSAKAI, to protect themselves from the bandits.^{xviii} The excesses of the vigilante group led the Fulanis into forming their various groups called DABA, to exact revenge on their tribesmen killed by the Yansakai^{xix}

The competition over land and water resources between Fulani nomadic herders and Hausa farmers forms the backdrop. These two groups over time, raised armed groups to defend their interests in this perennial competition which has turned violent in many instances.

These armed groups came to be known as “bandits” and “vigilantes”. Climate change has also contributed to complexifying this conflict. The proliferation of small arms in the Sahel at the fall of Gaddafi joined the mix and facilitated the rise of gangs, whose sole ambition was to get a piece of the pie. They visited mayhem in the region, in the form of cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, rape, and pillage.

Other factors identified as causes of banditry include unemployment, poverty, injustice by traditional fathers, drug abuse, vulnerability, disperse settlement, huge financial benefits, the proliferation of firearms, poor nature of security at the border, cultural conflict, and out-of-court/police settlement^{xx}. It is also “driven by the criminal quest for economic accumulation in an environment that more or less condones crimes”^{xxi}, and “worsened by the prevailing socio-economic discontent and attendant livelihood crisis across the region, plus the seeming indolence of relevant government agencies towards arresting the ugly situation”^{xxii}.

Corruption and cutthroat politics of the elitist class also played a role, in adding fuel to the fire.^{xxiii} Barnett (2021) noted, for instance, that: “venal leaders in the northwest opportunistically sold land on restricted grazing areas and encouraged the rise of ethnic militias to advance their ambitions, creating a climate in which, by the early 2010s, the state was helpless to control tit-for-tat violence between Hausa farmers and Fulani herders”^{xxiv}. Rufai (2021) citing a Zamfara State government 2019 report on insecurity in the State, mentioned that “substantial parts of the first-class Emirs in Zamfara State are allegedly deeply involved in banditry”^{xxv}.

2.1 The Evolution of Banditry in the Northwest

Banditry in no time outgrew the land disputes and conflict between the Hausa farming communities and their Fulani pastoral neighbours in Zamfara. It assumed a life of its own and spread to neighbouring States such as Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Niger. It then took on a new garb and became motivated by economic reasons. Disgruntled herdsman, entrepreneurial bandits, and crooks, realizing that they could attack these communities, formed themselves into bandit cells and started attacking farming communities.

The jihadist groups operating in the north also saw opportunities and began exploiting them, gaining a foothold in the lucrative kidnapping-for-ransom enterprise there, and using the networks offered by that as they attack security forces^{xxvi}.

The situation also offered entrepreneurial bandits a platform. They then went about “conscripting young herders through appeals to ethnic solidarity, promises of wealth, wives, and revenge. Other herders formed militias for self-defense and subsequently drifted into criminality as a means of sustaining themselves, leading to a gradual convergence of bandits and ethnic Fulani militias. The gangs became flush with weapons from Libya by the mid-2010s while Nigeria’s security forces were largely absent..., the military busy fighting Boko Haram and the police serving as praetorian guards to the country’s elites”^{xxvii}.

From those “humble” origins in Zamfara State in 2011, in the first criminal gang formed by Kundun and Buhari Daji, it blossomed into more than 120 gangs across six states of the northwest in 2021 and has emerged as a serious security threat for the rest of the country^{xxviii}. Today, they have grown sophisticated with access to high-tech weapons like

AK47s, and AK49s, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, G3 magazines, and anti-aircraft guns^{xxix}.

3: UPSURGE IN CRIMINALITY AND VIOLENCE:

The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) 2021 analysis, showed that Militia violence also referred to as “banditry”, is the leading security challenge in Nigeria in 2021. It accounted for nearly a third of all organized political violence events recorded in Nigeria, in 2021^{xxx}. The violence increased 50% in 2021 compared to 2020, with 30% of all militia or bandit activity concentrated in Kaduna State. The report also shows that competition between and within armed groups often results in violence against vulnerable populations, including Christian minority communities in the northern states^{xxxi}.

Abductions, forced disappearances, kidnappings for ransom by bandits, and mass abduction of students, tripled in 2021 compared to 2020, as kidnapping for ransoms looms large as an important source of income for these bandit groups^{xxxii}. February 2021 saw the bandits abducting over 300 girl students in Zamfara and more than 100 students in Kaduna State in July of last year^{xxxiii}.

3.1: Timeline for Major Abductions by Bandits/Terrorists in Northwest Nigeria

- **April 18, 2020:** Bandits attacked four communities in Katsina State, namely, Tsabuwa in Batsari Local Government Area and Gurbi and two others in Kankara Local Government Area. More than 20 persons were killed and many others were wounded^{xxxiv}.
- **December 11, 2020:** Over 300 pupils were kidnapped from a boys' secondary boarding school in Kankara, Katsina State. Bandits on motorcycles, attacked the school, housing more than 800 students for over an hour unchallenged^{xxxv}.
- **February 24-25, 2021:** 87 people were killed in Kaduna and Katsina State, in a series of attacks by bandits, who attacked villages and burnt down houses, and looted the villages^{xxxvi}.
- **Feb. 26, 2021:** Bandits abducted over 317 schoolgirls in **Zamfara State**. This came just a week after a similar kidnapping incident. In a midnight raid, the bandits dressed as government security forces arrived at the school with vehicles and motorcycles, forced the schoolgirls into their vehicles, and took them to unknown locations.
- **February 26, 2021:** Bandits kidnapped about 279 female students aged between 10 and 17 at Government Girls Science Secondary School, Jangebe in Zamfara State. They were released by their captors on 2 March 2021. What the government offered to secure their release remains a secret^{xxxvii}.
- **March 11, 2021: Gunmen** kidnapped 39 students of the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization, Afaka, Igabi LGA, in Kaduna State. After 55 days in captivity, the students, 23 females and 16 males were released in batches.^{xxxviii} There were reports that ransom was paid to facilitate their release^{xxxix}.

- **April 20, 2021:** Bandits kidnapped at least 20 students and 2 staff members of **Greenfield University** Kaduna.^{xi} They killed 5 of the students when their 800-million-naira ransom was not met. They released the remaining 14 students on 29 May 2021 after their parents reportedly paid a ransom of ₦150 million and eight brand new motorcycles to the bandits^{xli}.
- **June 3, 2021:** Armed bandits attacked eight villages in Kebbi State, killing at least 90 people. The report said the bandits from neighboring states of Niger and Zamfara raided Koro, Kimi, Gaya, Dimi, Zutu, Rafin Gora, and Iguenge villages at about 3 am, stealing cattle and destroying crops. They came on motorcycles^{xlii}.
- **June 11–12, 2021:** Bandits on motorcycles Kadawa, Kwata, Maduba, Ganda Samu, Saulawa, and Askawa villages in the Zurmi local government area of Zamfara State. About 53 farmers working in their fields were killed. killing^{xliii}.
- **June 14, 2021:** Bandits kidnapped an unspecified number of students and 5 teachers, from the Federal Government Girls College, Birnin Yauri in Kebbi State 5 teachers. The gunmen were reported to have come on motorcycles from the Rijau forest close to the school, overpowered the mobile police unit stationed at the school, and abducted the students. A mobile Police officer was killed during the raid. Some of the girls are still in captivity 11 months after the abduction despite ransom payments made to the bandits^{xliv}.
- **July 5, 2021:** Gunmen stormed Bethel Baptist High school, about 25 kilometers from **Kaduna** city, overpowered the security men, and took off with 165 students^{xlv}.

4: THE MAJOR DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

There is no credible estimate of the number of bandits or criminal gangs operating in northwestern Nigeria. Some estimates placed the number of gangs at more than 120 and the numbers at around 10,000; making them more numerous than the country's jihadists^{xlvi}.

Most of the bandits are of the Fulani ethnic group, despite the presence of opportunists of various ethnicities and nationalities in their ranks; and have had the same nomadic and pastoral lifestyle before venturing into banditry^{xlvii}.

They are not ethno-nationalist^{xlviii} There is no central political or coherent ideology guiding their banditry. They are more of entrepreneurial bandits, living in the bush and armed with small arms.^{xlix} "Many bandits do not speak the Fulani language, and they attack their fellow pastoralists without shame. They seem mostly to fight for personal wealth and influence- and they fight each other as much as the government-but they live in the bush rather than in gilded villas"^l.

As the phenomenon continues to expand and wreak havoc on the Nigerian body polity, some faces and names have risen to become prominent, as the leaders of some of these bandit groupings. These in no particular order, include:

4.1: Ali Kachalla

Ali Kachala is one of the most notorious, terror and bandit kingpins of northwest Nigeria. He operates around the Dansadau axis of the huge Kuyambana forest, straddling Zamfara, Kebbi, Kaduna, and Niger states. He was credited with shooting down a Nigerian Air Force Alpha Jet at Kabar Village, 15 kilometers west of Dansadau Town on June 18, 2021^{li}, and with blowing

up a Mowag armored personnel carrier on July 23, 2021, in Dansadau^{lii}. Estimated to be in his early 30s, his base of operations is along the Goron Dutse River. His gang controls Dandalla, Madada, and Gobirawa Kwacha villages, from where he launches attacks on Dansadau and other neighboring communities. He is reported to be in alliance with Dogo Gide another notorious bandit leader and has been credited with carrying out a series of brutal attacks on communities across Zamfara.

4.2: Dogo Gide

Dogo Gide is the alias of the notorious leader of a bandit group operating near Dansadau and reported to be in an alliance with Alli Kachalla. His real name is Abubakar Abdullahi and hails from Maru local government area of Zamfara State. He is reputed to be in his forties and married with children. He is reputed to have vast connections with several bandit groups and terrorist organizations like Boko Haram and ISWAP. His notoriety for kidnapping, armed robbery, sexual violence, and cattle rustling is vastly eclipsed by his ruthlessness. He rose to prominence in 2018, when he murdered his Daji; a notorious bandit leader in his own right. He killed another bandit leader Damina^{liii}. There were unconfirmed reports that he was killed by his deputy, Sani Dan Makama in October 2021^{liv}. He was known to be in an extractive relationship with the locality where he operates. He ruled like a king, and “regulated farming through neo-feudal sharecropping arrangements”^{lv}.

4.3: Kachalla Turji

Kachalla Turji hails from Shinkafi local government area of Zamfara state^{lvi}. He is the notorious bandit leader, who allegedly wrote a letter to President Muhammadu Buhari; Zamfara State Governor, Bello Matawalle, and the Emir of Shinkafi offering to lay down his arms if some of his conditions are met^{lvii}. He heads the group, which specializes in raiding towns, and villages around Sokoto and its environs. An arrest of his father by security agencies led him into an orgy of attacks on the villages of Kurya, Keta, Kware, Badarawa, Marisuwa, and Maberaya, in which 42 people were killed, 338 houses torched and 150 people abducted. He is also known to levy taxes on communities, build mosques in villages, replace village heads with loyalists to him, and dispense harsh justice against petty criminals^{lviii}.

4.4: Kachalla Halilu Sububu Seno

Kachalla Halilu Sububu Seno is a bandit leader estimated to be in command of over 1,000 bandits in the Sububu Forest of Zamfara State^{lix}. He is well connected to other bandit groups across the sub-region in countries like Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic. He is notorious also for his ruthlessness. He struck a peace deal with communities in the Shinkafi area in 2019, leading to relative peace in the area. He provides security for Shinkafi by keeping other marauders at bay, while the locality becomes a haven for him and his men, from where he launches his attacks on other places^{lx}.

4.5: Adamu Aliero Yankuzo

Adamu Aliero Yankuzo operates in the forests of Katsina and Zamfara states and environs. He is said to have around 2,000 bandits under his command. He was reputed to have attacked and killed 52 people in Kadisau village, in revenge for the arrest of his son on June 9, 2020^{lxi}. He has a 5-million-naira bounty on his head^{lxii}.

4.6: Dan Karami

Dan Karami operates around Safana, Dan Musa, and Batsari Local Government Areas. His group was a part of the gang that kidnapped 300 students from a boarding school. He was wounded on January 23, 2021, in a clash with a rival over the control of guns, ammunition, and stolen cattle^{lxiii}.

5: BANDITS-TERRORISTS NEXUS

There is an increasing nexus between bandits and terrorists in northwest Nigeria.^{lxiv} Extremist groups have been known to have as part of their goals and strategy, the exploitation of local conflicts to gain a foothold in communities, exploiting the weak security architecture of the state to stamp their control over local economies, to ensure that their group thrives. Boko Haram led by the late Abubakar Shekau was known to have towed this path. His interest in expanding beyond the narrow confines of the northeast to the northwest and central Nigeria, where some analysts believed he wanted to outflank ISWAP and Ansaru, was beyond question^{lxv}. Boko Haram provided evidence of their links with the northwestern bandits in December 2020, with the abduction of school children in Kankara Katsina state. The abduction was carried out by a bandit gang and Shekau went on air to claim responsibility for it; claiming that he, meaning Boko Haram, and his brothers, meaning bandits, carried out the attacks^{lxvi}. One of the bandits interviewed by James Barnett in Zamfara State in early 2022, admitted that he works with Boko Haram,^{lxvii} lending credence to a 2021 Institute for Security Studies (ISS) study, which established that Boko Haram is teaming up with the bandits in the northwest.^{lxviii}

The environment created by local insurgencies also attracts the purveyors of international terror^{lxix}. The recently killed Al Qaeda leader Ayman Al Zawahiri recognized this in 2011 when he directed Al Qaeda regional commanders to abandon the strategy of spectacular strikes against the west, which was favored by Osama bin Laden his predecessor, and to seek gains locally, without being distracted by attempts to attack international aviation or bomb European cities^{lxx}.

Governor Masari of Katsina state confirmed that another terror big-player was in on the region, when he raised alarm sometime this year, that ISWAP is trying to set up bases in northwest Nigeria^{lxxi}.

5: GOVERNMENT RESPONSE:

The Nigerian government applied various versions of the carrot and stick^{lxxii} approach, toward a solution. Peace deals were signed with some of the bandit leaders at some point. At other points, the government tried to kill its way through the problem, with the military solution. Joint Military Task Forces, which integrated the military with other security agencies of the state, with a mandate to put an end to banditry, were established to this end. And Operation Harbin Kunama^{lxxiii} was born.

The government's military response was seen by many as exacerbating the crisis. The anti-banditry campaigns by the military "produced brief periods of calm as bandits were forced to relocate and regroup"^{lxxiv}. But these gains were temporary and have had the negative impact of exacerbating herder's resentment, which in turn played into the bandit's hands, as they exploited that resentment to recruit fighters to their cause.

Military units were accused of being high-handed and engaged in arbitrary executions, disappearances, and even cattle rustling during those campaigns, as a Zamfara State government report, which recommended court-martial for 10 military officers, stated^{lxxv}.

The Zamfara State government, where this wave of banditry began, was the first to strike a peace deal with the bandits. It lasted only 9 months.^{lxxvi} Katsina State, Aminu Bello Masari, negotiated a deal with the bandits in 2019, which would see them ceasing their attacks in exchange for non-prosecution^{lxxvii}. The effort, like its counterpart in Zamfara, failed. The governor in reaction then called on the residents of his state, to arm themselves and confront the bandits^{lxxviii}.

Peace deals have also proven inadequate in stopping banditry. The 2019 peace deal between armed bandits and the governors of three northwestern states of Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara, which encompassed disarmament, the release of abducted civilians, and amnesty for the bandits like others like it, worked for a while and then collapsed in 2020.^{lxxix} Even the designation of bandits as terrorists by the federal government has also failed to stem the tide of banditry, leaving many observers wondering about other methods of engaging the problem.

6: CONCLUSION

This wave of banditry presently consuming the northwest of Nigeria, began life in the local farmer-herder clashes of Zamfara. Aided by the corruption and cutthroat politics of the elitist class, the proliferation of small arms, and an abundance of discontent to go around graduated into multi-billion-naira entrepreneurial criminality, attracting bandits, terrorists, and opportunists.

These gangs initiated an upsurge in kidnapping for ransom targeting schools, highways, communities, and churches across northwestern Nigeria. It has destabilized the region, making large swathes of territories in the region beholden to criminal warlords, who govern with impunity. The ransoms have created a lucrative cottage industry, which the government is unable to challenge or stop. There is no gainsaying the fact that some government officials benefit from that industry of crime. That could account for the lack of political will to confront the problem in its totality. The humanitarian, socio-economic, developmental, and cultural implications have been huge, not only in northwestern Nigeria but the country as a whole. And this would increase exponentially if the government does not find the political will, to address the issues scaffolding banditry in the region.

To this end, we offer a few recommendations in the search for lasting and sustainable solutions.

7. RECOMMENDATION

1. Government must design and coordinate the implementation of effective mechanisms, that would address the remote and immediate causes of banditry, like the Land Use laws, across all tiers of government. Only a coordinated and holistic approach is capable of confronting this problem. The remote motivations, which drive people to violence like poverty, inequality, lack of education, job opportunities, structural injustice, and lack of perspective for the youth — must be addressed to stem the recruitment of youth into bandit groups.
2. The National Livestock Transformation Plan, which seeks to effect sustainable solutions to the farmer-herder clash must be implemented. The plan remains one of the most comprehensive documents addressing this problem.
3. Adequate border security is needed in Nigeria, to stem the influx and proliferation of small arms.
4. Policing needs to be addressed and reformed. The Nigerian police are not adequately funded for their statutory role in a complex country like Nigeria. The force is grossly understaffed, and underfunded. The motivations are low among the rank and file, and our police-to-population ratio is far below the UN recommendations. The government should be proactive in this regard.
5. International Organizations and partners would urgently need to increase their advocacy and pressure on the Nigerian government to start addressing these urgent recommendations.

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