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Borders Monitoring and Armed Banditry: Challenges to Peace and Stability in Niger Republic

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Abstract

Border insecurity in the Republic of Niger has been exacerbated by porous entry points, weak institutional capacity, and inadequate surveillance, creating conditions for armed banditry, insurgency, and cross-border criminality. Despite government interventions, responses have been slow, costly, and largely ineffective, fuelling public scepticism about the state's capacity to guarantee safety and stability. This study examines the relationship between border monitoring and armed banditry as a central challenge to peace in Niger. Drawing on frustration–aggression, resource access, and conspiracy theories, and employing a historical–descriptive method with secondary data, it identifies key drivers of banditry, including the proliferation of small arms, the influx of ex-combatants from neighbouring conflict zones, and rising youth unemployment. Findings reveal that weak surveillance, corruption at border points, and ungoverned rural spaces enable bandits to mount violent attacks, disrupt livelihoods, and intensify displacement. The study concludes that an effective response requires a multidimensional approach: integrating technology into border management, institutionalising intelligence-sharing and coordinated patrols with neighbouring states, and addressing socioeconomic triggers through employment creation and community engagement. Strengthening these measures is

Nsikak Stephen Edet, PhD & Dr. Anwana Victor Etim

vital for safeguarding Niger's territorial integrity and promoting sustainable peace.

Keywords: border security, armed banditry, porous borders, peace, stability, Niger

Introduction

Protecting citizens from both internal and external threats is a core responsibility of the state, and the ability to secure national borders remains a key measure of state strength. Across Africa, however, governments are increasingly struggling to monitor and control their borders in the face of armed banditry, insurgency, secessionist movements, and communal violence (Okumu, 2010).

In Niger, these challenges are particularly acute. Border porosity, arms and drug smuggling, fragile security institutions, weak political will, and corruption among security personnel all undermine effective governance. Globalisation and technological change have compounded the problem, eroding traditional border management systems. Crimes are now facilitated through cyberspace, while goods often bypass customs checks, leaving surveillance systems ineffective (Okumu & Ikelegbe, 2010).

The magnitude of Niger's border problem is evident. Of the 1,978 recognised entry points into the country, only 84 are legal, leaving 1,894 illegal and largely unmonitored (William, 1978). Niger's 4,745 km of international borders with Benin, Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria, as well as its maritime boundaries with Equatorial Guinea and São Tomé and Príncipe, are poorly policed. This has allowed a steady inflow of arms, combatants, and contraband goods, weakening national security and threatening sustainable development (Babatola, 2015; Anonymous, 2020).

The rise of armed non-state actors illustrates the severity of the crisis. Herdsmen militias, Boko Haram, secessionist groups, and, more recently, armed bandits have become entrenched across the country. Since 2011, banditry has intensified, marked by cattle rustling, highway robberies, kidnappings, mass raids on villages, sexual violence, and murder. These attacks have destroyed lives and livelihoods, and they pose a serious threat to Niger's peace and development (Bobbo, 1990).

Regional instability has deepened Niger's insecurity. Conflict in neighbouring states has pushed ex-combatants and displaced persons across Niger's porous borders, many of whom have joined or supported bandit groups. This influx has spread violence from the northern frontier into other regions of the country (Babatola, 2015). Law enforcement agencies remain poorly equipped to respond, often outnumbered and outgunned by heavily armed groups, and at times compromised by corruption, collusion, or political pressure (Bobbo, 1990).

The consequences are far-reaching: mass displacement, disrupted education, economic decline, and growing public fear. Acknowledging these realities, Niger's Senate has urged stronger diplomatic engagement with neighbouring states, particularly

Cameroon, Chad, Benin, and Nigeria, whose border regions often serve as safe havens for armed groups (Asiwaju, 2005).

It is against this backdrop that the present study examines the dynamics of border monitoring and armed banditry in Niger. It investigates the origins, ideologies, and sponsors of bandit groups; the socio-economic and political drivers of banditry; the profiles of targeted victims; and the structural weaknesses of Niger's borders. Together, these factors reveal how armed banditry threatens national security, peace, and stability. The study aims to provide evidence-based insights into one of the most pressing security challenges confronting both Niger and the wider Sahel region.

Statement of the Problem

Security is the foundation on which development, peace, and stability rest. For any state seeking sustainable progress, reducing crime and addressing insecurity are indispensable priorities (Carik, 2007). Like many nations, the Republic of Niger aspires to create a safe environment for its citizens. Yet the country continues to confront multidimensional threats, including militancy, insurgency, banditry, farmer–herder clashes, and armed robbery.

One of Niger's most pressing challenges is its extensive and porous borders with Nigeria, Chad, Benin, Cameroon, and the Atlantic coastline. These borders are riddled with unmanned or poorly monitored entry and exit points, providing unchecked passage for armed groups, traffickers, and other non-state actors (Rosenje & Adeniyi, 2016a). In the absence of effective policing and surveillance, insecurity has found fertile ground.

Porous borders have facilitated a range of transnational crimes, including human trafficking, arms smuggling, drug trade, and contraband flows (Parradang, 2014). Such activities not only endanger the safety of citizens but also erode state sovereignty, undermine socio-economic development, and intensify public distrust in government institutions. Crucially, the link between porous borders and the escalation of armed banditry has created a vicious cycle of violence, displacement, and underdevelopment.

This context raises urgent questions: What are the origins and ideological motivations of bandit groups? Who finances and sustains their operations? What socio-economic and political conditions enable their growth? Who are the primary victims, and how might understanding victimisation patterns shape more effective policy? And to what extent has persistent banditry weakened Niger's border governance, national security, and prospects for peace and stability?

By engaging these questions, the study seeks to illuminate the drivers and consequences of armed banditry in Niger and to identify strategies for addressing one of the country's most urgent security challenges.

Objectives of the Study

While this research was set mainly to ascertain the relationship between border monitoring and armed banditry as a challenge to peace and stability in Niger, its subsidiary objectives were:

- I. To find out the sponsors of armed banditry in Niger.
- ii. To identify the causes and triggers of armed banditry in Niger
- iii. To find out the extent to which the activities of armed banditry have threatened Niger's border monitoring, peace and stability.

Research Hypotheses

- I. The higher the chances of identifying who the sponsors of armed banditry are, the lower the level of armed banditry in the northwest region of Niger.
- ii. The greater the level of knowing the causes and triggers of banditry in Niger, the lower the chances of perpetrating violence, crimes and cross-border terrorism by bandits in Niger for sustainable peace and development.
- iii. The greater the level of armed banditry activities and its operations in Niger, the lower the chances for unthreatened cross-border crimes and security issues, peace and sustainable development.

Review of Related Literature

The relationship between border insecurity and armed banditry has received increasing scholarly attention, particularly within African security studies. Scholars generally agree that porous borders, weak governance, and socio-economic deprivation are significant enablers of violent conflict across the continent (Stewart, 2010; Chabal, 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012). Conflict in Africa often emerges from poor governance, economic mismanagement, and ethno-religious tensions, producing violent non-state actors who exploit institutional weaknesses for survival and expansion.

In the Republic of Niger, persistent insecurity has manifested in the Boko Haram insurgency, herder–farmer clashes, and, more recently, armed banditry. Since 2009, armed groups have intensified attacks on civilians, security personnel, and state infrastructure, relying on ambushes, kidnappings, cattle rustling, and extortion as their primary tactics. Although the government has employed military interventions and counter-insurgency operations, these measures have yielded limited results, with Niger continuing to rank low on the Global Peace Index (Ajibola, 2015). The resilience of armed groups, despite official claims of their defeat, reflects the structural weaknesses of the state and its inability to monopolise violence (Uhumwuangho & Aluforo, 2011; Olufemi, 2015).

Rural banditry, particularly cattle rustling, began escalating around 2010, driven by Tuareg and Fulani elements who formed criminal gangs in pastoralist zones such as Tahoua and Agadez (Rufa'i, 2017; Muhammadu, 2017). These groups established

operational bases in expansive forests, financing their activities through cattle theft and proceeds from the illegal trade in small arms and light weapons (Okoli, 2017). Border communities became central to these dynamics, often serving as hubs for gun-running and smuggling. The porosity of Niger's borders with Nigeria, Chad, Benin, and Cameroon enabled the trafficking of arms and ex-combatants from conflict-affected states, further aggravating insecurity.

The farmer–herder conflict has also played a role in the evolution of armed banditry. Climate change, desertification, and population growth have fuelled competition over land and water, forcing southward migration of pastoralists and precipitating violent clashes with sedentary farmers (Egwu, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2017). These confrontations have resulted in mass displacement and loss of lives, with rural banditry increasingly becoming both a symptom and a cause of underdevelopment (Ibrahim, 2016; Kyari & Chinyere, 2015).

The persistence of insecurity in Niger is also explained by socioeconomic and political factors. Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and relative deprivation have created fertile ground for youth recruitment into insurgency and banditry (Campbell, 2014; Okereke, 2012). The frustration–aggression theory, resource access theory, and conspiracy theory provide useful frameworks for explaining how grievances linked to resource scarcity, marginalisation, and state failure translate into violent criminality. Armed groups exploit these grievances, targeting not only local populations but also religious institutions, security formations, and even international organisations, as seen in attacks on churches, mosques, military barracks, and UN facilities.

Recent incidents, including the 2021 invasion of the Nigerien Defence Academy in Agadez, underscore the capacity of armed bandits to challenge state sovereignty directly (Patricio & Julia, 2015). While scholarly debate continues on whether these conflicts should be categorised as insurgency, organised criminality, or transnational terrorism, there is broad consensus that armed banditry in Niger is both a product of and a contributor to national insecurity. Its persistence undermines peace, stability, and development while posing wider security implications for the Sahel region.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a historical–descriptive research design to examine the relationship between border monitoring and armed banditry as challenges to peace and stability in the Republic of Niger between 2011 and the present. The historical approach was considered appropriate as it provides a systematic means of tracing the origins and evolution of armed banditry, evaluating past events to gain a clearer understanding of current realities, and offering insights for predicting future trends. The descriptive dimension complements this by interpreting existing conditions, prevailing practices, and institutional responses, thereby enabling a comprehensive analysis of the socio-political and security dynamics under investigation.



Nsikak Stephen Edet, PhD & Dr. Anwana Victor Etim

The study focused on the Republic of Niger, the largest country in Africa by landmass, with an estimated population of over 160 million as of the 2011 census. Specifically, attention was directed towards the Northeast, North-Central, and Northwest zones, which have been the epicentres of Boko Haram insurgency and armed banditry, threatening the country's political stability and socio-economic development. These regions, characterised by porous borders and recurrent insecurity, provided the most relevant context for interrogating the research problem.

The study relied primarily on secondary sources of data, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journals, newspapers, archival records, policy documents, and credible internet-based resources. These materials were subjected to internal and external validity checks to ensure reliability and objectivity. Data analysis was qualitative, employing content analysis to identify themes, interpret patterns, and evaluate the study's hypotheses. This method allowed for an in-depth understanding of the underlying causes, dynamics, and implications of armed banditry in relation to Niger's border security and broader peace and stability.

Discussion of Findings

This study tested three hypotheses on the relationship between armed banditry and border governance in Niger.

The first hypothesis posited that greater success in identifying the sponsors of armed banditry would reduce its prevalence in the northwest region. Evidence confirms that banditry in Niger relies on both direct and indirect sponsorship, with complex financial networks sustaining operations. At the Third Ministerial Conference on Counter-Terrorism Financing in India (November 2022), Nigeria's Minister of Interior revealed that financiers of terrorism had links to at least ten countries, implicating 123 companies, 33 bureaux de change, and several individuals (Sahara Reporters, 2022). Similar findings have emerged internationally: the United Arab Emirates recently exposed 38 individuals and 15 entities accused of sponsoring terrorism, including six Nigeriens. In March 2021, Nigeria admitted that 400 bureau de change operators had been arrested for allegedly funding Boko Haram, though the suspects' identities were withheld (The Guardian, 2021; Sahara Reporters, 2021). Such secrecy has fuelled conspiracy theories, with citizens questioning why, despite SIM card registration and surveillance technologies, bandits continue to communicate and operate freely (Vanguard, 2022). These concerns highlight the urgency of government transparency and accountability. The evidence supports the hypothesis: identifying, prosecuting, and disrupting the financial sponsors of armed banditry is critical to reducing its spread and safeguarding peace and development.

The second hypothesis proposed that knowledge of the causes and triggers of armed banditry would reduce violence and enhance sustainable peace. Findings show that the roots of banditry lie in the protracted conflict between pastoralists and sedentary farmers, exacerbated by desertification, drought, and climate change (Ademola, 2021).

Environmental stressors have forced pastoralist migration southward, triggering violent clashes over land and water. Beyond ecological pressures, poverty, illiteracy, weak security presence, proliferation of small arms, and illegal mining intensify the crisis. High-profile incidents illustrate the scale of devastation: in June 2022, bandits attacked a mining site in Shiroro, killing over forty people, including soldiers and police officers, and abducting Chinese expatriates alongside Nigerien workers (Premium Times, 2022). Other attacks, including the Owo Catholic Church massacre, the Kuje prison break, and recurrent ambushes of security forces (Tribune Online, 2022), underscore the interplay of socio-economic grievances and weak state capacity. These findings validate the hypothesis: comprehensive knowledge of the triggers of banditry is indispensable for developing effective countermeasures and fostering peace and development.

The third hypothesis argued that rising armed banditry undermines border monitoring, aggravates cross-border crime, and threatens sustainable peace. Niger's vast geography—4,047 km of land borders and 853 km of maritime boundaries—remains poorly policed, with fewer than 18,000 Customs personnel responsible for land, air, and sea entry points (Okumu, 2011; Okundade, 2017). This inadequacy has enabled infiltration by criminal groups, weakening territorial integrity. Banditry has further eroded trust in state authority by facilitating arms smuggling, human trafficking, and contraband trade. Border communities suffer recurring attacks, displacement, and livelihood losses, while women and children disproportionately endure sexual violence, abductions, and murder (Muggah & Batchelor, 2002; Feldman, 1993). Heavy-handed military responses have sometimes worsened the crisis, as security forces themselves face accusations of abuse, livestock confiscation, and reprisals against civilians (Osamba, 2008). This “double jeopardy” leaves communities trapped between state and non-state violence. The evidence affirms the hypothesis: as banditry expands, it undermines border security, facilitates cross-border criminality, and destabilises prospects for sustainable peace.

These findings highlight the centrality of border monitoring in addressing Niger's security challenges. Weak surveillance systems, porous borders, and corruption have enabled the unchecked flow of people, arms, and contraband, fuelling banditry and insurgency. Ecological pressures and socio-economic deprivation compound these structural weaknesses, validating frustration–aggression and resource access theories as explanatory frameworks. Institutional and logistical gaps, like poor inter-agency coordination, inadequate personnel, weak intelligence-sharing, and limited community engagement, etc., further undermine the state's response. Geography also provides tactical advantages to bandits, facilitating ambushes and rapid retreats. The findings further shows that armed banditry in Niger is both a symptom and a driver of weak state capacity. Left unaddressed, it threatens not only border communities but also the broader prospects for peace, stability, and sustainable development in the country and across the Sahel.

Summary

This study investigated the relationship between armed banditry and border governance in Niger, testing three hypotheses. The first confirmed that identifying and prosecuting the sponsors of armed banditry is critical to reducing its prevalence. Evidence showed that both domestic and international financial networks sustain bandit operations, with secrecy and weak accountability fuelling public mistrust. The second hypothesis, which linked deeper knowledge of the causes and triggers of banditry to reduced violence, was also validated. Ecological pressures like desertification, drought, and climate change, etc., combined with poverty, illiteracy, weak security presence, illegal mining, and small arms proliferation, were identified as key drivers. High-profile attacks further illustrated how socio-economic grievances intersect with weak state capacity to sustain violence. The third hypothesis affirmed that rising banditry undermines border monitoring and aggravates cross-border crime. Niger's vast, porous, and poorly policed borders have enabled infiltration by criminal groups, exacerbating insecurity, displacement, and human rights abuses, particularly against women and children.

Overall, the findings highlight that weak surveillance systems, porous borders, corruption, and institutional shortcomings have enabled banditry to thrive. These dynamics are compounded by ecological and socio-economic pressures, confirming frustration–aggression and resource access theories. Geography further enhances the tactical advantages of armed groups, while state and non-state violence together erode community trust. Armed banditry therefore emerges as both a symptom and a driver of weak state capacity, threatening peace, stability, and sustainable development in Niger and the wider Sahel.

Conclusion

The study concludes that armed banditry in Niger is sustained by a combination of financial sponsorship, ecological stressors, socio-economic deprivation, and weak border governance. Efforts to address the crisis must prioritise transparency in countering terrorism financing, deeper understanding of the socio-environmental triggers of violence, and reforms to strengthen border monitoring. Heavy reliance on military force has often backfired, leaving communities vulnerable to both state and non-state actors.

A sustainable response requires a multidimensional strategy: strengthening intelligence-sharing and inter-agency coordination, investing in modern surveillance technologies, resourcing border security agencies, and enhancing community participation in security initiatives. Addressing underlying socio-economic and ecological pressures, such as unemployment, poverty, and climate-induced migration, will also be essential. Without such comprehensive interventions, banditry will continue to erode state authority, disrupt livelihoods, and undermine peace and stability in Niger and the wider Sahel region.

Nsikak Stephen Edet, PhD & Dr. Anwana Victor Etim

Policy Recommendations

Building on the study's findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are proposed to address the intertwined challenges of armed banditry and weak border governance in Niger:

- I. Enhance Cross-Border Cooperation:** Strengthen bilateral and multilateral patrols, intelligence-sharing, and joint border posts with neighbouring countries to improve surveillance, limit criminal mobility, and disrupt regional networks.
- ii. Invest in Technology and Intelligence:** Deploy affordable surveillance tools, such as drones, sensors, and biometric systems, and adopt an intelligence-led border control model to detect, monitor, and neutralise cross-border criminal activities.
- iii. Build Security Capacity:** Expand the number, training, and welfare of border security personnel, while equipping them with modern tools and logistics to effectively secure and manage Niger's extensive border regions.
- iv. Integrate Local Communities:** Actively involve borderland communities in security and monitoring efforts, fostering trust, enhancing intelligence flow, and strengthening early-warning mechanisms against armed group incursions.
- v. Address Root Causes of Insecurity:** Mitigate unemployment, poverty, and the proliferation of small arms through targeted socio-economic development initiatives, livelihood creation, and disarmament strategies that reduce incentives for criminality and armed banditry.

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Nsikak Stephen Edet, PhD & Dr. Anwana Victor Etim

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Nsikak Stephen Edet, PhD & Dr. Anwana Victor Etim

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Nsikak Stephen Edet, PhD & Dr. Anwana Victor Etim

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Nsikak Stephen Edet, PhD & Dr. Anwana Victor Etim

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