

Unemployment, Youth Vulnerability, and the Escalation of Armed Banditry in Niger Republic

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17248284>

Citation: Edet, N. S., & John, V. O. (2025). Unemployment, Youth Vulnerability, and the Escalation of Armed Banditry in Niger Republic. *Transnational Journal of Arts, Humanities and Sciences*, 1(3).

Abstract

Armed banditry has emerged as one of the most pressing security challenges in the Republic of Niger, threatening peace, stability, and socio-economic development. This article examines the nexus between unemployment, youth vulnerability, and the escalation of armed banditry, situating the analysis within frustration–aggression and resource access theories. Drawing on a historical–descriptive design and secondary data from international reports, academic studies, and policy briefs, the study finds that persistent unemployment and poverty leave young people highly susceptible to recruitment into bandit groups. Armed banditry is sustained by promises of quick financial rewards, peer influence, and cross-border criminal networks, creating a vicious cycle in which unemployment fuels insecurity and insecurity deepens economic deprivation. The study further highlights the limitations of militarised responses, which often provide only temporary relief while failing to address structural drivers. It concludes that reducing youth unemployment through job creation, vocational training, and reintegration initiatives must be recognised as a strategic security measure. By embedding socio-economic interventions into security policy, the Republic of Niger can weaken recruitment pipelines, mitigate armed banditry, and foster sustainable peace.

Keywords: unemployment, youth, armed banditry, Niger Republic, insecurities

Introduction

Armed banditry has emerged as one of the most pressing security threats in the Republic of Niger and across the Sahel region. While border porosity, arms proliferation, and weak state institutions have been extensively studied as enablers of banditry, increasing attention is now being paid to the socio-economic dimension, particularly the role of youth unemployment and vulnerability in sustaining the crisis. In societies with limited economic opportunities, unemployed young people are disproportionately exposed to recruitment into violent groups, where participation in armed banditry offers not only immediate financial gain but also a sense of identity, belonging, and power (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019; Osasona, 2021).

The vulnerability of Niger's youth is situated within broader structural challenges. The country continues to experience high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and limited access to social services, all of which intersect with unemployment to create fertile ground for criminal mobilisation. According to the World Bank (2022), more than 40% of Nigerien youth remain underemployed or unemployed, with poverty rates reaching 41.8% in 2021. These socio-economic realities are compounded by environmental stressors such as desertification and climate change, which undermine agricultural livelihoods and drive rural–urban migration, further swelling the ranks of frustrated and idle youth (International Crisis Group, 2021).

The link between unemployment and armed violence has been widely theorised through frustration–aggression and resource access theories. Frustration-aggression theory suggests that unmet socio-economic expectations, such as the inability to secure jobs or decent livelihoods, generate aggression that can manifest in violent behaviour (Dollard et al., 1939; Berkowitz, 1989). Similarly, resource access theory highlights the role of limited access to land, income, and opportunities as drivers of conflict and organised crime (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). In Niger, these dynamics have created a generation of young men who perceive armed banditry as a viable alternative for survival in a failing socio-economic environment.

Empirical evidence underscores this connection. Studies show that the majority of armed bandits operating in Niger's northwest and border communities are unemployed youth between the ages of 18 and 35 (Rufa'i, 2017; Musa, 2021). Many are drawn into banditry networks through promises of financial rewards from kidnapping-for-ransom, cattle rustling, and cross-border smuggling. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Sahel, particularly since the fall of Libya's Gaddafi regime in 2011, has further enabled their operations (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs [UNODA], 2020). Against this backdrop, the study seeks to critically examine the nexus between unemployment, youth vulnerability, and the escalation of armed banditry in the Republic of Niger.

Statement of the Problem

The escalation of armed banditry in the Republic of Niger has become one of the gravest threats to national peace and stability. While factors such as porous borders, arms proliferation, and weak security institutions have been widely acknowledged, insufficient attention has been given to the socio-economic drivers of the crisis, particularly unemployment and youth vulnerability. The Republic of Niger is a country where poverty and joblessness remain widespread; over 40% of young people are either unemployed or underemployed (World Bank, 2022). This socio-economic reality not only breeds frustration but also creates fertile ground for the recruitment of youth into armed bandit groups, where crime is perceived as a viable means of survival and empowerment.

The vulnerability of unemployed youth is further reinforced by systemic poverty, weak governance, and limited access to productive resources. As a result, many young people are drawn into banditry through promises of financial gain from kidnapping, cattle rustling, and smuggling. The consequence has been recurrent cycles of violence, loss of lives, displacement, and erosion of public confidence in the state's ability to provide security.

If unemployment and youth vulnerability continue to be neglected, military and policing interventions alone will remain insufficient. Addressing the crisis therefore requires an integrated approach that prioritises job creation, youth empowerment, and social inclusion alongside border security measures. This study is thus concerned with exploring the nexus between unemployment, youth vulnerability, and the escalation of armed banditry in the Republic of Niger, with a view to recommending socio-economic pathways to peace and stability.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to examine the relationship between unemployment, youth vulnerability, and the escalation of armed banditry in the Republic of Niger. The subsidiary objectives are:

- i. To analyse how unemployment contributes to youth vulnerability in the Republic of Niger.
- ii. To investigate the role of youth vulnerability in driving armed banditry.
- iii. To assess the potential of reducing unemployment as a strategy for mitigating armed banditry and promoting peace.

Research Questions

- i. How does unemployment contribute to youth vulnerability in the Republic of Niger?
- ii. In what ways does youth vulnerability drive the escalation of armed banditry?
- iii. To what extent can reducing unemployment mitigate armed banditry and promote peace in the Republic of Niger?

Literature Review

Unemployment and Youth Vulnerability in West Africa

Unemployment remains one of the most critical socio-economic challenges confronting African states, particularly in the Sahel region. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2020) highlights that persistent joblessness among young people heightens their exposure to poverty, marginalisation, and engagement in illicit activities. In the Republic of Niger, youth unemployment is compounded by structural poverty, environmental degradation, and limited state capacity, making young people vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups (World Bank, 2022). Osasona (2021) argues that when states fail to provide legitimate livelihoods, criminal enterprises fill the gap, offering young people income and a sense of belonging.

Youth Recruitment into Armed Banditry

Several scholars have connected the rise of armed banditry in the Republic of Niger and neighbouring Nigeria to the socio-economic vulnerability of youth. Okoli and Ugwu (2019) describe rural banditry as a political economy of violence, in which unemployed youth are mobilised into gangs engaged in kidnapping, cattle rustling, and extortion. Rufa'i (2017) notes that the majority of bandits in the northwestern Niger Republic are young men between 18 and 35 years old who lack employment opportunities and see banditry as a pathway to survival. Musa (2021) further observes that bandit groups often lure recruits with promises of wealth from ransom payments and smuggling networks, making unemployment a key driver of their expansion.

Theoretical Perspectives

Frustration–aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939; Berkowitz, 1989) provides a useful lens for explaining how unmet socio-economic expectations, such as joblessness and poverty, translate into aggression and participation in violent groups. Resource access theory (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004) similarly highlights the role of unequal access to resources in fuelling conflict. Within this context, unemployed and disenfranchised youth in the Republic of Niger often perceive armed banditry as a rational response to economic exclusion, especially where the state has failed to provide social safety nets.

Unemployment, State Fragility, and Insecurity

The escalation of armed banditry in the Republic of Niger also reflects broader issues of state fragility. Weak institutions, poor border governance, and corruption undermine the government's ability to provide security or address unemployment (International Crisis Group, 2021). This has produced a vicious cycle in which unemployment drives youth into banditry, and banditry in turn worsens insecurity, which further depresses economic activities and employment opportunities (Alemika, 2020). Regional studies similarly show that high unemployment levels correlate with the proliferation of criminal networks in fragile states (Onapajo & Ozden, 2020).

The literature reveals a strong correlation between unemployment, youth vulnerability, and the growth of armed banditry. However, existing studies have largely focused on Nigeria, with limited attention given to the Republic of Niger despite its comparable challenges and strategic location in the Sahel. This article contributes to filling that gap by examining how unemployment specifically drives youth vulnerability and sustains armed banditry in the Republic of Niger, while also offering policy pathways that integrate job creation with security strategies.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, employing a historical–descriptive approach to analyse the nexus between unemployment, youth vulnerability, and the escalation of armed banditry in the Republic of Niger. The choice of this design was informed by the need to explore complex socio-economic and political dynamics that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone.

The research relied exclusively on secondary data, drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, international organisation reports, government publications, and credible media sources. Key materials included reports from the World Bank, the International Labour Organisation, the International Crisis Group, and scholarly works on unemployment, youth vulnerability, and rural banditry in West Africa.

The analysis was guided by two theoretical perspectives: frustration–aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939; Berkowitz, 1989), which explains how unmet socio-economic needs trigger violent behaviour, and resource access theory (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004), which links restricted access to economic resources to conflict dynamics. These frameworks provided interpretive lenses for understanding how unemployment interacts with youth vulnerability to sustain armed banditry in the Republic of Niger.

Data were synthesised using a thematic approach. Relevant themes, such as unemployment, poverty, arms proliferation, youth recruitment, and border governance, were identified and systematically examined to reveal patterns and causal relationships. Triangulation of multiple sources was employed to enhance reliability, while emphasis was placed on situating the Republic of Niger's experience within broader Sahelian insecurity.

Findings and Discussion

Unemployment as a Driver of Youth Vulnerability

The persistence of unemployment in the Republic of Niger has produced a generation of young people who are increasingly vulnerable to criminal recruitment and mobilisation. According to the World Bank (2022), over 40% of Nigerien youth are unemployed or underemployed, a figure that represents more than just an economic indicator; it signals

widespread exclusion from social and political life. In societies where employment is not merely a source of income but also a measure of dignity and identity, joblessness intensifies feelings of alienation and marginalisation.

This vulnerability is exacerbated by Niger's demographic structure. With nearly two-thirds of the population under the age of 25, the country's labour market is unable to absorb the annual influx of new job seekers (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2020). The mismatch between a rapidly growing youthful population and stagnant economic opportunities has left many young people idle and disillusioned. As Osasona (2021) notes, where the state fails to provide livelihood options, criminal networks and non-state armed actors often step in, offering young people financial incentives, protection, and a sense of belonging.

Armed banditry thus becomes a rationalised alternative for many unemployed youth. Participation in these networks promises immediate financial rewards through kidnapping-for-ransom, cattle rustling, and cross-border smuggling, activities that are often perceived as more lucrative than low-wage or subsistence employment (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). Moreover, bandit groups exploit socio-economic frustrations by framing participation not only as survival but also as a symbolic act of resistance against state neglect and systemic inequality (Rufa'i, 2017).

The theoretical underpinnings of this dynamic can be illuminated through the frustration–aggression hypothesis (Dollard et al., 1939; Berkowitz, 1989). This theory suggests that when legitimate goals such as employment, education, or upward mobility are consistently blocked, frustration accumulates and is channelled into aggression. For Nigerien youth, armed banditry provides both an outlet for this aggression and an alternative pathway to achieve otherwise inaccessible social and economic goals.

Empirical evidence from neighbouring Nigeria strengthens this argument. Studies reveal that bandit groups recruit heavily from unemployed rural youth who lack access to farmland, credit facilities, or modern agricultural tools (Alemika, 2020). These conditions closely mirror those in the Republic of Niger, where desertification and environmental stress further reduce livelihood options, intensifying unemployment and vulnerability.

In sum, unemployment in the Republic of Niger not only deprives youth of economic sustenance but also erodes their resilience against exploitation by armed groups. It transforms disillusioned young men into a readily available pool for recruitment, thereby sustaining and escalating the cycle of armed banditry.

Recruitment of Youth into Armed Banditry

The process of youth recruitment into armed banditry in the Republic of Niger is not random but deeply structured around socio-economic vulnerabilities and systemic neglect. Empirical evidence suggests that the majority of armed bandits in the Republic of Niger and adjoining border regions are young men between the ages of 18 and 35, the

demographic group most affected by unemployment and underemployment (Rufa'i, 2017; Musa, 2021). This finding highlights the intersection between economic exclusion and the exploitation of youth by criminal groups.

Bandit networks employ a combination of coercion, persuasion, and inducement in their recruitment strategies. Many unemployed youths are drawn into these groups by promises of rapid financial rewards through kidnapping-for-ransom, cattle rustling, and cross-border smuggling. In some cases, the immediate income from a single operation far exceeds what a young man could earn through months of agricultural labour or petty trading (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). This stark economic disparity makes banditry appear not only viable but also rational, particularly in environments where state institutions fail to deliver social safety nets.

Recruitment is also facilitated through kinship and peer networks. Existing members of bandit groups often use family and community ties to recruit new entrants, leveraging trust to draw young men into violent enterprises (Alemika, 2020). In Niger's border communities, where state presence is weak and traditional authority has been eroded, these informal networks become powerful channels of mobilisation. The process is further reinforced by cultural narratives that glorify resilience, masculinity, and survival in contexts of deprivation, thereby legitimising violent engagement as a form of social mobility (Osasona, 2021).

Another dimension of recruitment is the exploitation of grievances and frustrations among youth. Bandit leaders often frame participation as resistance against systemic neglect and corruption, tapping into widespread disillusionment with the state (International Crisis Group, 2021). In this sense, recruitment extends beyond mere economic incentive to include psychological and ideological appeals, offering youth not only material benefits but also a sense of belonging and empowerment in otherwise marginalised lives.

Regional insecurity also plays a significant role. The porosity of Niger's borders enables bandit groups to recruit from transnational pools of unemployed youth across Nigeria, Chad, and Mali, blurring distinctions between domestic and external drivers of recruitment. The collapse of Libya in 2011 and the consequent flow of small arms into the Sahel have intensified this phenomenon, giving armed groups both the means and the attraction to draw young people into cross-border violence (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs [UNODA], 2020).

Ultimately, the recruitment of youth into armed banditry in the Republic of Niger is sustained by a convergence of factors: economic deprivation, peer pressure, cultural narratives, disillusionment with governance, and the lure of quick financial gain. Without addressing these structural drivers, recruitment pipelines will remain open, continually replenishing the ranks of armed groups and perpetuating cycles of violence.

The Vicious Cycle of Poverty, Insecurity, and Armed Banditry

One of the most significant findings of this study is the mutually reinforcing relationship between unemployment, poverty, and the escalation of armed banditry in Niger Republic. Unemployment contributes to poverty, poverty deepens youth vulnerability, and vulnerability sustains the recruitment base for armed groups. In turn, the violence and insecurity generated by banditry further undermine economic activities, displace communities, and disrupt markets, thereby intensifying unemployment and poverty. This dynamic creates a self-perpetuating cycle that entraps both individuals and communities.

The impact of this cycle is particularly visible in rural and border communities where agriculture forms the backbone of local livelihoods. Armed banditry has forced farmers to abandon farmlands, leading to food insecurity and higher unemployment rates in rural areas (International Crisis Group, 2021). Young people, already unemployed or underemployed, are pushed deeper into economic desperation when their households lose productive assets such as livestock or farmland through raids and extortion (Musa, 2021). In these contexts, joining bandit groups is often perceived as a rational response to immediate survival pressures.

Empirical studies from across West Africa corroborate this pattern. Alemika (2020) demonstrates that in conflict-prone regions, insecurity depresses economic investment, discourages trade, and disrupts agricultural productivity, all of which exacerbate unemployment. In Niger Republic, where over 80% of the population relies on subsistence farming, such disruptions have devastating consequences. What begins as a security challenge thus transforms into a full-blown socio-economic crisis.

Theoretical perspectives strengthen this interpretation. Resource access theory (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004) highlights how restricted access to land, employment, and resources pushes vulnerable populations toward alternative, often violent, livelihood strategies. In Niger Republic, the loss of agricultural and economic opportunities due to banditry not only perpetuates poverty but also widens inequality between rural communities and urban elites, further fuelling discontent. Similarly, frustration–aggression theory (Berkowitz, 1989) suggests that the inability to meet basic needs amidst widespread deprivation produces aggression that manifests in violent criminality.

This cycle is further intensified by displacement. Banditry has forced thousands of people to flee their homes in Niger Republic, generating a population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who lack stable livelihoods (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022). Many displaced youth, deprived of education and work opportunities, become easy targets for recruitment into armed groups. Thus, displacement does not merely reflect the consequences of banditry; it actively expands the pool of vulnerable youth available for recruitment, sustaining the crisis.

The vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment, and armed banditry therefore presents a structural challenge that cannot be broken through military operations alone. Unless the root causes of youth unemployment and socio-economic deprivation are addressed, efforts to curb banditry will remain temporary, and the cycle will continue to reproduce itself across generations.

The Limits of Militarised Responses

Successive governments in the Republic of Niger, often in collaboration with regional partners, have relied heavily on militarised strategies to combat armed banditry. These interventions typically involve the deployment of the armed forces, joint border patrols, and the establishment of special security task forces. While such measures have achieved short-term tactical gains, such as the neutralisation of certain bandit camps and temporary reduction in attacks, they have proven insufficient in addressing the underlying drivers of the crisis. The persistence of armed banditry despite sustained military operations underscores the limitations of security-centric approaches in resolving socio-economic conflicts.

The first limitation is that military responses tend to be reactive rather than preventive. They focus on suppressing symptoms of banditry, raids, kidnappings, and cattle rustling without tackling the root causes of youth unemployment and vulnerability. As the International Crisis Group (2021) observes, the cycle of violence often resumes once military pressure is lifted, because the structural conditions that enable recruitment into armed groups remain unaddressed. This reflects a broader pattern across the Sahel, where counterinsurgency campaigns frequently yield temporary calm but fail to achieve long-term stability.

Secondly, militarised responses often generate unintended consequences that deepen youth vulnerability. Heavy-handed operations, including arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and destruction of property, can alienate local populations and foster resentment against state authorities (Alemika, 2020). This resentment is easily exploited by bandit leaders, who present themselves as protectors of marginalised communities, thereby strengthening their recruitment appeal. Such outcomes align with the frustration–aggression framework, as new grievances arising from state actions feed into cycles of aggression and violence.

A third limitation lies in the overstretched capacity of Niger's security forces. Confronted with multiple security threats, including jihadist insurgencies in the southeast and spillover violence from Mali in the west, the state lacks the resources to sustain effective counter-banditry operations across all affected regions (Osasona, 2021). This overstretch creates security vacuums in rural areas, which bandit groups exploit to entrench their influence. Moreover, corruption within security institutions sometimes undermines operations, with reports of security personnel colluding with bandits in exchange for financial gain (Musa, 2021).

Given these limitations, it is evident that militarisation alone cannot dismantle the structural drivers of armed banditry. Durable solutions require a multidimensional approach that integrates security measures with socio-economic interventions, particularly those aimed at reducing youth unemployment. As the Nigerian experience with the Niger Delta amnesty programme illustrates, economic empowerment and reintegration initiatives can complement security measures by providing disaffected youth with legitimate alternatives to violence (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). Applying similar models in the Republic of Niger could help break the cycle of recruitment and violence.

In this light, unemployment reduction is not merely an economic policy but a strategic security imperative. Job creation, vocational training, and targeted youth empowerment programmes can diminish the appeal of banditry, thereby complementing military strategies and fostering sustainable peace. Without such measures, security operations will continue to produce only temporary relief, leaving the root causes of banditry unresolved.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for policymaking in the Republic of Niger, particularly regarding how to mitigate armed banditry by addressing unemployment and youth vulnerability. The evidence suggests that unless economic deprivation is tackled, military responses and conventional policing will remain insufficient to break the cycle of violence. Thus, policy interventions must adopt a multidimensional approach that integrates socio-economic development with security reforms.

First, job creation must be recognised as a security strategy. In the Republic of Niger, where youth unemployment and underemployment exceed 40% (World Bank, 2022), expanding employment opportunities is central to weakening the recruitment pipelines of armed groups. Government-led initiatives in agriculture, small-scale industries, and infrastructure development could provide sustainable jobs, especially in rural and border communities where vulnerability is highest. Evidence from Nigeria's youth empowerment programmes demonstrates that when young people are economically engaged, their susceptibility to recruitment into criminal groups decreases substantially (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

Second, vocational training and entrepreneurship support are essential. Many unemployed youth in Niger lack formal education and marketable skills, limiting their options in the labour market. Vocational training programmes tailored to local needs, such as modern farming techniques, livestock management, and small business development, would equip young people with practical skills while reducing their reliance on criminal economies. Microfinance initiatives could also be integrated to provide start-up capital for youth-led enterprises, fostering resilience against recruitment pressures.

Third, reintegration and rehabilitation policies should complement security operations. Beyond job creation, the state must design programmes for the rehabilitation of former bandits and at-risk youth. Such initiatives should combine psychosocial counselling, vocational training, and economic incentives to discourage relapse into violence. Lessons can be drawn from the Niger Delta amnesty programme in Nigeria, which, despite its challenges, demonstrated that economic reintegration can reduce violence when adequately resourced and transparently implemented (Alemika, 2020).

Fourth, strengthening governance and border management is vital. Corruption at border posts, weak surveillance, and limited coordination with neighbouring states continue to fuel the transnational dimensions of banditry (International Crisis Group, 2021). Addressing these weaknesses requires investment in technological border monitoring, regional intelligence-sharing, and the enforcement of anti-corruption measures within security agencies. By reducing the flow of arms and curbing cross-border mobility of criminal groups, such measures would complement efforts to reduce domestic recruitment through employment creation.

Finally, a shift in policy perspective is required. Armed banditry should not be viewed solely as a law-and-order problem but as a socio-economic and governance challenge. This implies that ministries beyond defence and interior, such as youth development, labour, agriculture, and social affairs, must be actively involved in designing and implementing anti-banditry strategies. A coordinated, whole-of-government approach, supported by international partners, would ensure that policies address both the immediate security threats and their long-term socio-economic drivers.

In summary, the policy implications of this study stress that reducing youth unemployment is not merely a developmental priority but a strategic intervention for peacebuilding. By embedding economic empowerment within national security frameworks, the Republic of Niger can weaken the appeal of armed banditry, disrupt recruitment pipelines, and foster conditions for durable peace and stability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study has examined the nexus between unemployment, youth vulnerability, and the escalation of armed banditry in the Republic of Niger. The findings show that persistent unemployment and socio-economic exclusion are central drivers of youth recruitment into armed bandit groups. Banditry thrives where large numbers of young people lack legitimate livelihoods and are susceptible to mobilisation by criminal networks offering immediate financial rewards. The situation is further aggravated by poverty, weak governance, and porous borders, creating a vicious cycle in which unemployment fuels insecurity, and insecurity in turn deepens economic hardship.

The analysis underscores that military and policing measures alone cannot resolve the crisis. Instead, addressing the root causes, such as particularly

unemployment and youth vulnerability, is imperative for achieving sustainable peace and stability. Theoretical insights from frustration–aggression and resource access frameworks highlight the importance of tackling unmet socio-economic expectations and structural inequalities to reduce the appeal of armed banditry.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Job Creation and Economic Empowerment:** The government of the Republic of Niger should prioritise large-scale youth employment programmes, including vocational training, small enterprise support, and agricultural value-chain initiatives, to provide viable alternatives to banditry.
2. **Targeted Youth Reintegration:** Programmes modelled on successful reintegration schemes elsewhere in Africa should be developed to rehabilitate and reintegrate former bandits. Such initiatives should combine psychosocial support with economic incentives to discourage re-engagement in violence.
3. **Strengthening Governance and Border Management:** While addressing unemployment, the state must also invest in improved border surveillance, anti-corruption measures, and regional cooperation to limit the cross-border flow of arms and criminal networks that sustain banditry.

By combining economic empowerment with stronger governance and security reforms, the Republic of Niger can reduce youth vulnerability, weaken the recruitment base of armed banditry, and lay the foundations for long-term peace and development.

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