

The Banditry Crisis and Socio-Economic Development in Northern Nigeria: A Critical Analysis of State Capacity, Policy Responses, and Developmental Consequences

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Abstract

Armed banditry in Northern Nigeria has transitioned from small-scale rural criminality into a complex, transnational security and developmental crisis, destabilizing communities and economies across the African continent. In the first half of 2025 alone, at least 2,266 people were killed by insurgents and armed bandits across northern Nigeria, surpassing the total casualty count for all of 2024. Between 2023 and May 2025, verified fatalities reached 10,217. The Nextier Security Outlook for 2026 documented 599 banditry incidents in 2025, representing a 134 per cent increase in attacks and a 74 per cent rise in deaths over 2024. New armed formations, including the Lakurawa group, designated a terrorist organization by the federal High Court in Abuja in 2025 and targeted by US-Nigeria joint strikes on Christmas Day 2025, and the progressive convergence of criminal banditry with jihadist networks aligned with ISWAP and the Islamic State Sahel Province have transformed the northwest's security landscape from a criminal governance challenge into a hybrid insurgency with geopolitical dimensions. This study critically analyses the banditry crisis in northern Nigeria, examining the strengths and weaknesses of the Nigerian state's response, the socio-economic developmental consequences of the crisis, and the policy framework governing counter-banditry operations and post-conflict recovery. Drawing on a systematic review of peer-reviewed scholarship, security intelligence assessments, institutional reports, and empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026, and grounded in three theoretical frameworks

such as the Fragile State Theory, the Frustration-Aggression Theory, and the Political Economy of Violence perspective in which the study identifies six major findings. These encompass the state's structural incapacity to protect rural communities, the catastrophic agricultural and food security consequences of the crisis, the failure of amnesty-based peace agreements, the emerging crime-terror nexus, the gendered dimensions of displacement and captivity, and the compounding effect of economic mismanagement on insecurity. Seven evidence-based policy recommendations are advanced for a comprehensive, multi-dimensional response that addresses both the security and the structural developmental roots of the crisis.

Keywords: Armed banditry, Northern Nigeria, insecurity, socio-economic development, state capacity, fragile state, food security, counter-banditry, Zamfara, North-West Nigeria, crime-terror nexus, Lakurawa.

1. Introduction

Northern Nigeria in the mid-2020s presents one of the most acute and complex security emergencies anywhere in the world. A region that had, in the colonial and early post-independence periods, been celebrated for its pastoral traditions, agricultural productivity, and intricate emirate governance systems has, over the past decade and a half, been progressively consumed by a cycle of armed violence that has claimed tens of thousands of lives, displaced hundreds of thousands of people, dismantled rural livelihoods, collapsed agricultural systems, and fundamentally challenged the authority and capacity of the Nigerian state across vast swaths of its northern territory.

The term "banditry" as applied to this crisis requires immediate qualification. What is labeled "banditry" in northern Nigeria encompasses a diverse and rapidly evolving spectrum of violent actors and activities: armed criminal gangs engaged in kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, village raiding, and extortion; warlord-led territorial organizations that exercise quasi-governmental authority over rural communities and impose parallel systems of taxation and governance; and increasingly, formations with explicit jihadist ideological affiliations, including the Lakurawa network, which carries documented links to the Islamic State Sahel Province and was designated a terrorist organization by the Nigerian government in 2025. As the Soufan Center (2025) notes, the theater of conflict in northwestern Nigeria now exhibits a hybrid security landscape where criminal economies, communal grievances, and jihadist insurgency converge, blurring the distinction between organized crime and ideological insurgency.

The scale of the human toll is staggering and worsening. Armed bandits killed 8,300 individuals across northwest states between January 2013 and March 2022, with Zamfara State alone accounting for 4,114 of those deaths (IJRIAS, 2025). Between 2023 and May

2025, a further 10,217 people were killed by armed groups in northern Nigeria, the majority women and children (The Conversation, 2026). In the first half of 2025, 2,266 people were killed more than the total for all of 2024. The Nextier 2026 security report documented 599 banditry incidents in 2025, representing a 134 percent increase in attacks over 2024 (Punch, 2026). In Zamfara State, attacks have occurred daily since the onset of the crisis, with 638 villages sacked by bandits and 725 villages currently under bandit control (Amnesty International, 2025).

The Nigerian state's response to this crisis has encompassed a range of instruments, military operations including Operation Hadarin Daji and Operation Thunder Strike, serial attempts at amnesty and negotiated peace agreements, aerial bombardments, and most recently joint operations with the United States that included Tomahawk missile strikes on Lakurawa compounds in Sokoto State on Christmas Day 2025. Yet despite this sustained response, violence has continued to escalate. This pattern raises fundamental questions about the adequacy, design, and implementation of both the security response and the developmental policies that would need to address the structural roots of the crisis.

The socio-economic consequences of the banditry crisis are equally devastating. Zamfara's agrarian economy lost an estimated NGN 43 billion (USD 100 million) in potential agricultural revenue in 2022 alone. Maize farmers in Katsina reported household income declines of 30 to 40 per cent and yield reductions of more than half compared to pre-banditry levels. Across northern Nigeria, 33.1 million people were projected to face acute food insecurity in 2025 (WFP, 2024). Insecurity cost Nigeria 8 percent of its GDP, estimated at USD 132.59 billion, in 2021 alone (IEP/Tandfonline, 2023). These are not abstract statistics: they represent the systematic dismantling of the economic foundations on which millions of northern Nigerian families depend.

This study analyses this crisis systematically and critically. It asks not only what is happening but also why the state has been unable to stop it, what developmental consequences have resulted, what the weaknesses of current policy responses are, and what a more effective and sustainable response would require. The paper proceeds through the following sections: statement of the problem (2), scope (3), significance (4), objectives (5), research questions (6), operational definitions (7), literature review (8), theoretical framework (9), methodology (10), major findings (11), discussion (12), summary (13), conclusion (14), and policy recommendations (15).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite over a decade of sustained military deployment, multiple peace agreements, and serial policy interventions, armed banditry in northern Nigeria has not only persisted but has demonstrably worsened in scale, geographic reach, and organizational sophistication. The problem this study examines is therefore not merely the existence of banditry, which

is well documented, but the structural incapacity of the Nigerian state to manage, contain, or resolve the crisis and the devastating socio-economic consequences that flow from this failure of state capacity. Five dimensions define the problem.

First, state security forces have proven fundamentally inadequate to the task of protecting rural communities. The Nextier report (2026) explicitly identified "structural weaknesses within the state, including limited capacity to secure rural communities and enforce justice" as the primary enabling condition for the escalation of banditry. In Zamfara State, 725 villages are currently under direct bandit control, a fact that constitutes the most graphic possible indicator of state territorial retreat. Accidental airstrikes, including a catastrophic strike in Zamfara in June 2025 that killed civilians, reflect the blunt-instrument character of a military response lacking the intelligence infrastructure, community engagement frameworks, and operational finesse required for effective counterinsurgency in complex civilian environments.

Second, amnesty-based peace agreements, which have been the primary non-military instrument of state response, have consistently failed to produce durable peace and have, by multiple assessments, actively worsened the crisis by emboldening bandit leaders, undermining government legitimacy, and signaling impunity to armed groups. Zamfara's first amnesty experiment in 2016 collapsed when the amnestied bandit leader Buharin Daji was killed by rival bandits. The 2019 "cows-for-guns" deal under Governor Matawalle similarly failed. By 2026, a comprehensive analysis by The New Humanitarian concluded that "poorly structured amnesty deals embolden bandits, undermine government legitimacy, and perpetuate impunity"—a damning verdict on the fundamental policy instrument through which Nigerian governors have sought to manage the crisis.

Third, the banditry crisis has undergone a structural transformation from criminal enterprise toward ideological insurgency that state counter-banditry frameworks have not adequately addressed. The emergence of Lakurawa, a Fulani-rooted armed network with documented links to the Islamic State Sahel Province, responsible for 59 civilian deaths between January and June 2025 in Sokoto and Kebbi States alone, and the progressive blending of bandit networks with JAS (Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Dawah wal-Jihad, commonly known as Boko Haram) and ISWAP fighters signal a qualitative escalation that transforms the northwest into what the Soufan Center (2025) describes as "a second insurgency theater alongside the northeast."

Fourth, the socio-economic consequences of the crisis are severe, compound, and largely unaddressed by existing policy frameworks. Agricultural production has collapsed across significant portions of the north-west and north-central zones. Thirty-three million Nigerians faced acute food insecurity in 2025. Communities pay extortion levies to bandits to access their own farmland. School attendance has fallen precipitously in conflict-affected communities. The humanitarian system is chronically underfunded relative to

need. And the macroeconomic shocks of inflation and currency depreciation intensified by the 2023 fuel subsidy removal have compounded the economic vulnerability of conflict-affected populations to a degree that makes autonomous recovery without sustained external support impossible.

Fifth, public trust in the state has collapsed in many affected communities. The Nextier report (2026) documented that "citizens now perceive the state as unable or unwilling to protect them, leading to a breakdown in trust." This trust deficit drives communities toward survival strategies—negotiating with bandits, paying levies, forming vigilante groups—that may provide short-term protection but further entrench the parallel authority structures of armed groups and progressively exclude the state from its own territory.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the armed banditry crisis and its socio-economic developmental consequences in northern Nigeria, covering the North-West geopolitical zone (comprising Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Jigawa, Sokoto, and Zamfara states) and the North-Central zone (particularly Niger, Benue, Kogi, and Plateau states), which together represent the primary theater of the banditry crisis. The temporal scope covers the period from 2011, the approximate start of the contemporary banditry crisis, to August 2025, with specific attention to the 2020–2025 period during which the most devastating escalation has occurred and the most current policy responses have been developed and evaluated.

Thematically, the study covers six domains: (i) the historical origins, evolution, and current character of armed banditry in northern Nigeria; (ii) an assessment of the Nigerian state's security response, its strengths, weaknesses, and outcomes; (iii) the socio-economic developmental consequences of the crisis across agriculture, food security, displacement, education, and livelihoods; (iv) the policy framework governing both counter-banditry operations and post-conflict recovery; (v) the emerging crime-terror nexus and its implications for policy design; and (vi) evidence-based recommendations for a comprehensive and sustainable response. The study relies exclusively on secondary research methodology.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study makes contributions at scholarly, policy, and humanitarian levels.

Academically, the study advances the literature on African security studies, conflict and development, and state capacity by providing a comprehensive, multi-dimensional, and contemporarily grounded analysis of one of Africa's most acute ongoing security crises. The study integrates security intelligence, economic data, and political economy analysis in a way that single-discipline assessments have tended not to achieve and situates the

Nigerian banditry crisis within the broader comparative literature on Sahel insecurity, state fragility, and the crime-terror nexus. By synthesizing findings from 2025 and 2026, among the most current available, the study makes a temporal contribution to a literature that has struggled to keep pace with a rapidly evolving crisis.

For Nigerian policymakers, including the Tinubu administration, the National Security Council, state governors in affected zones, and the National Assembly, the study provides a structured, evidence-based diagnosis of the specific governance, security, and developmental failures that have enabled the banditry crisis to escalate, alongside actionable recommendations for a more coherent and effective policy response. For international partners, including the United Nations, the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the United States, and bilateral development agencies, the study provides an analytical foundation for understanding why current international engagement has been insufficient and what more effective partnership would require.

For the millions of Nigerians in the North-West and North-Central zones whose lives, livelihoods, and security have been devastated by the banditry crisis, the study contributes to the scholarly documentation and policy visibility of a suffering that has too often been rendered invisible by international media focus on Boko Haram in the North-East. For researchers and students in peace and security studies, political science, development studies, and related disciplines, the study provides a comprehensive analytical resource on one of the most important security governance challenges facing sub-Saharan Africa in the 2020s.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This study is designed to achieve the following specific objectives:

- i. To examine the historical origins, structural drivers, and current evolution of armed banditry in northern Nigeria, including the emerging convergence of criminal banditry with jihadist armed networks.
- ii. To assess the Nigerian state's security response to the banditry crisis, evaluating the design, implementation, strengths, and critical weaknesses of military operations, amnesty programs, and other counter-banditry policy instruments.
- iii. To analyze the socio-economic developmental consequences of the banditry crisis across agriculture, food security, population displacement, education, and rural livelihoods in the North-West and North-Central geopolitical zones.
- iv. To evaluate the structural factors—institutional, fiscal, governance, and political—that have limited the effectiveness of the Nigerian state's response to the banditry crisis and enabled the crisis to escalate over more than a decade of sustained military engagement.

- v. To advance evidence-based, multi-dimensional policy recommendations for a comprehensive response to the banditry crisis that addresses both its immediate security dimensions and its deeper structural developmental roots.

1.6 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What are the historical origins, structural drivers, and current character of the armed banditry crisis in northern Nigeria, and how has the crisis evolved from criminal enterprise toward hybrid insurgency?
- ii. How has the Nigerian state responded to the banditry crisis, and what does the evidence reveal about the strengths and critical weaknesses of that response?
- iii. What are the measurable socio-economic developmental consequences of armed banditry for northern Nigerian communities, particularly in terms of agricultural production, food security, population displacement, and livelihood destruction?
- iv. What structural factors within the Nigerian state, its political economy, and the broader Sahel security environment most significantly explain the persistence and escalation of banditry despite sustained counter-banditry operations?
- v. What policy reforms, institutional investments, and governance improvements are most urgently required to achieve sustainable improvement in security and socio-economic development in conflict-affected areas of northern Nigeria?

1.7 Operational Definition of Terms

1.7.1 Armed Banditry

Armed banditry, in this study, refers to the organized use of violence by non-state actors or armed groups for criminal purposes, including kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, raiding of communities for looting and livestock theft, extortion of "protection" levies, and territorial control over rural areas.

1.7.2 State Capacity

State capacity refers to the ability of the Nigerian state to perform its core functions within its claimed territory, including the maintenance of a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, the protection of citizens from violence, the provision of public goods and services, and the enforcement of laws and regulations.

1.7.3 Socio-Economic Development

Socio-economic development, as used herein, refers to improvements in the material conditions, productive capacities, and quality of life of populations across the dimensions of income, food security, education, healthcare, housing, and social cohesion.

1.7.4 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

"Internally displaced persons" refers to individuals and communities who have been forced to flee their homes and communities as a result of armed conflict, generalized violence, or other crises but who remain within Nigeria's national borders.

1.7.5 The Crime-Terror Nexus

The crime-terror nexus refers to the operational, financial, and organizational linkages between criminal armed groups and ideologically motivated terrorist or jihadist organizations. In the northern Nigerian context, this nexus is illustrated by the Lakurawa network's combination of criminal extortion and jihadist ideology.

1.7.6 Counter-Banditry Operations

Counter-banditry operations refer to the organized military, security, and governance activities undertaken by the Nigerian state to suppress, deter, and prevent armed banditry. These include the Joint Task Force Operation Hadarin Daji (OPHD) in the Northwest, the primary ongoing military operation against banditry, in operation since 2015, and Operation Thunder Strike.

1.7.7 Fragile State

A fragile state refers to a state that lacks the capacity, authority, or legitimacy to perform its core governance functions across its claimed territory. The concept, developed by scholars including Rotberg (2003) and Ghani and Lockhart (2008) and developed in policy frameworks by the OECD Fragility Framework, encompasses dimensions of security fragility (inability to monopolize violence).

2 Review of Related Literature

2.1 Origins and Evolution of Armed Banditry in Northern Nigeria

The contemporary armed banditry crisis in northern Nigeria did not emerge from a vacuum. Scholarly analysis consistently traces its origins to the intersection of four structural processes that intensified across the 2000s and early 2010s. The first is the long-term escalation of farmer-herder conflict across the north-central and north-west zones, driven by climate change-induced desertification, increased pressure on pastoral corridors, demographic growth, land use change, and the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms (FEWS NET, 2024; IIARD Journals, 2025). The second is the proliferation of small arms following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, which flooded the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa with uncontrolled weapons that found their way into the hands of increasingly organized criminal groups in northern Nigeria.

The third structural driver is the entrenched underdevelopment of the North-West and North-Central zones, characterized by levels of youth unemployment, poverty, educational deprivation, and infrastructural deficit significantly exceeding national averages. Research by Ojo et al. (2023) and Abraham et al. (2024) identifies government neglect, widespread youth unemployment, poverty, and regional underdevelopment as the major drivers of banditry and arms proliferation, creating the human capital pool of economically desperate young men from which bandit groups recruit. The fourth factor is the implosion of the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast from 2009 onward, which normalized non-state armed violence as a viable survival and enrichment strategy and whose pressure on northeast communities displaced some violent actors toward the northwest.

What began as relatively small-scale cattle rustling and highway robbery has, by 2025, evolved into a multi-billion naira criminal economy operating through dozens of distinct armed networks with territorial control over hundreds of rural communities. ScienceDirect (2025) documents over 30,000 bandits operating in northern Nigeria, controlling captive communities in Zamfara, Kaduna, Sokoto, Benue, Kebbi, and Niger states and imposing forced labor on farmers who are compelled to cultivate bandit-controlled farms without compensation. This scale of criminal territorial governance represents not banditry in the conventional sense of opportunistic criminality but a form of proto-state authority that the conventional counter-banditry policy toolkit is poorly designed to address.

2.1.2 Assessing the State's Security Response: Strengths and Weaknesses

The Nigerian military's primary operational response to the banditry crisis in the north-west has been the Joint Task Force Operation Hadarin Daji (OPHD), established in 2015. Academic analysis of OPHD's record is measured: the operation has achieved documented successes in disrupting specific bandit formations, killing bandit leaders, and reducing banditry incidence in targeted areas during specific operational periods. Tandfonline (2023) documents the military's capacity for sustained pressure against bandit formations through a "shock and awe" approach combining ground operations with aerial bombardment. The December 2025 US-Nigeria joint strikes on Lakurawa compounds in Sokoto involving Tomahawk missiles and approved by President Tinubu represent the most kinetically powerful counter-banditry operation in the crisis's history.

However, the weight of evidence points overwhelmingly to the inadequacy of the military response as currently constituted. The Nextier (2026) security report's documentation of a 134 percent increase in banditry incidents in 2025 despite over a decade of sustained OPHD operations is the most damning indicator. Multiple structural weaknesses are identified in the literature: the "super camp" approach, whereby the military

consolidated smaller outposts into larger bases, has left vast rural areas exposed to bandit raids on communities beyond the effective protection radius of military positions (Soufan Center, 2025); accidental airstrikes reflecting poor intelligence have killed civilians and alienated communities whose cooperation is essential for effective counterinsurgency (Nextier, 2026; Amnesty International, 2025); and the fluid nature of bandit groups, which operate within civilian populations, complicates identification and targeting while increasing civilian casualty risk.

The police dimension of the state's security response is equally deficient. Nigeria's police force totals approximately 370,000 officers for a population of over 220 million, a ratio well below international standards, and rural northwestern communities are among the most comprehensively under-policed in the country. President Tinubu's November 2025 emergency security declaration ordered the recruitment of an additional 20,000 police officers, bringing planned 2025 recruitment to 50,000, but even this would fall far short of the 190,000 recommended by the Inspector General of Police (ISS Africa, 2025). The governance of vigilante and community self-defense groups, which communities have been forced to rely on in the absence of effective police presence, remains unregulated and has itself generated human rights violations.

2.1.3 The Failed Amnesty Policy and Its Consequences

Nigeria's amnesty and negotiated peace approach to the banditry crisis has a consistently documented record of failure. The New Humanitarian's (2026) comprehensive review of amnesty attempts in the north-west identifies a pattern in which amnesty deals provide temporary conflict interruption followed by renewed and often intensified violence. The fundamental structural problem with amnesty as applied in the Nigerian north-west context is that it has been pursued without the institutional infrastructure required for effective disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR): there are no standardised reintegration support programmes, no enforceable commitments to political or economic inclusion for former fighters, and no effective monitoring mechanisms to detect and respond to post-amnesty violations. Amnesty in this context has therefore functioned as a de facto recognition of bandit authority rather than a transition framework toward sustainable peace.

Zamfara's experience is illustrative. Governor Matawalle's 2019 "cows-for-guns" deal released cattle to bandit leaders and legitimised their social standing without securing meaningful disarmament or community reconciliation. The subsequent years saw violence intensify as amnestied leaders consolidated power, used the ceasefire period to rearm, and were eventually challenged by rival bandit factions unwilling to be excluded from the peace dividend. By 2025, the Zamfara security situation had deteriorated to such an extent that

attacks were occurring daily and 725 villages were under bandit control a complete reversal of the peace process's stated objectives.

2.1.4 Socio-Economic Consequences of the Banditry Crisis

The socio-economic consequences of the banditry crisis across northern Nigeria's affected zones constitute a developmental catastrophe whose full extent has not been adequately captured in mainstream policy discourse. The agricultural sector has been most directly devastated. Maize farmers in Katsina surveyed in 2022 reported household income declines of 30 to 40 per cent and yield reductions of more than half compared to pre-banditry levels. A 2023 survey in Zamfara found crop income per hectare had dropped by approximately 57 per cent compared to production before the 2011–2018 violence escalation. Zamfara's agrarian economy lost an estimated NGN 43 billion (USD 100 million) in potential agricultural revenue in 2022 alone (ACAPS, 2025).

Food insecurity has reached emergency levels across the affected zones. Thirty-three million Nigerians were projected to face acute food insecurity in 2025, with armed banditry across the north-west and north-central identified as a primary contributing factor alongside climate change and economic crisis (WFP, 2024; FEWS NET, 2024). The price of beans in October 2024 was 282 per cent above the same period in 2023; local rice prices rose by 153 per cent over the same period. These price shocks reflect not only national economic conditions including the fuel subsidy removal of 2023 but the specific disruption of northern agricultural supply chains by conflict. Farmers who cannot safely access their fields, who must pay extortion levies to bandits before harvesting, or who have been displaced from their communities cannot produce the food on which regional and national food markets depend.

Population displacement has reached catastrophic proportions. ACAPS (2025) documented 580,000 IDPs in north-central Nigeria alone by February 2025. An estimated 69,000 IDPs are in Zamfara, 71,000 in Kaduna, 61,000 in Katsina, and 45,000 in Sokoto (IJRIAS, 2025). Approximately 60,000 Nigerians crossed the border into the Republic of Niger, driven from their homes by violence in Sokoto, Katsina, and Zamfara. The humanitarian cost of this displacement in shelter, water, food, healthcare, and educational disruption for displaced children represents an enormous and chronically underfunded burden on both the Nigerian state and the humanitarian system.

The educational consequences of the crisis are particularly alarming for long-term development. School closures in banditry-affected communities, school kidnappings including the abduction of 303 schoolchildren and 12 teachers from a Catholic school in Niger State in November 2025 and the reluctance of teachers to serve in insecure rural postings have produced what experts describe as a "lost generation" of children in the north-west and north-central zones. The combination of school closures

with the economic destruction of household livelihoods creates a dual crisis of current educational deprivation and future human capital deficit that will compound the developmental costs of the crisis for decades.

2.1.5 The Emerging Crime-Terror Nexus and Its Policy Implications

The most alarming dimension of the banditry crisis's recent evolution is the progressive convergence of criminal banditry with jihadist insurgency in the north-west. The Soufan Center (2025) documents the Lakurawa network's role as "a strategic conduit linking the territorial ambitions of ISSP and ISWAP" in northwestern Nigeria. Formed in 2017 initially as an anti-bandit force that was welcomed into villages, Lakurawa progressively became oppressive, controlling territories in Sokoto and Kebbi states, imposing religious doctrine to justify extortion and parallel governance, and forging operational links with JAS/Boko Haram fighters. Designated a terrorist organization by Abuja in 2025 and targeted by US-Nigeria joint strikes on Christmas Day 2025, Lakurawa exemplifies the blending of criminal and ideological motivations that the Soufan Center (2025) argues "blurs distinctions between organized crime and ideology."

The ISWAP dimension of the convergence is equally significant. Between July 2024 and July 2025, ISWAP led all Islamic State "provinces" worldwide in claimed attacks—with 445 attacks and 1,552 reported casualties (Soufan Center, 2025). ISWAP's "burn the camps" campaign from April 2025, systematically targeting Nigerian military positions in the Lake Chad Basin, exposed the vulnerability of the military's "super camp" consolidation strategy. More concerning from a northwest perspective is the documented effort by ISWAP to expand operations from its traditional northeast base into the northwest—a geographic expansion that, if successful, would transform the northwest from a criminal banditry problem into a full-scale jihadist insurgency zone. The implications for counter-banditry policy are profound: a response designed for criminal governance challenges is poorly suited to a problem that has acquired the structural characteristics of ideological insurgency.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three theoretical frameworks that together provide a comprehensive analytical basis for understanding the banditry crisis and evaluating state responses.

2.2.1 Fragile State Theory

Fragile State Theory, developed by scholars including Rotberg (2003) and Ghani and Lockhart (2008) and institutionalized in the OECD Fragility Framework, provides the macro-analytical foundation for understanding why the Nigerian state has been unable to

address the banditry crisis effectively. The theory holds that states exist on a spectrum from strong (capable of performing all core governance functions) through weak to failing (unable to perform critical governance functions in significant portions of their territory) and failed (unable to perform core governance functions across virtually their entire territory). Northern Nigeria's banditry-affected zones exhibit the characteristic features of a failing state context at the sub-national level: the state cannot monopolize violence, cannot protect citizens from organized armed threats, cannot maintain territorial integrity against non-state armed groups, and has lost the legitimacy that would be required to mobilize citizen cooperation in security provision.

2.2.2 Frustration-Aggression Theory

The Frustration-Aggression Theory, originally proposed by Dollard et al. (1939) and elaborated in political violence contexts by Gurr (1970) in his theory of "relative deprivation," holds that aggression is a predictable response to the frustration created by the perceived gap between expected and actual achievement. In the northern Nigerian context, the theory illuminates why structurally disadvantaged young men facing high unemployment, limited educational opportunity, inadequate public services, and absence of viable pathways to economic advancement have proven susceptible to recruitment into bandit organizations that offer alternative routes to income, status, and power.

2.2.3 Political Economy of Violence

The Political Economy of Violence perspective, drawing on scholars including Keen (1998), Collier and Hoeffler (2004), and Reno (1998), analyses armed conflict not primarily as the expression of political, ethnic, or religious grievance but as a form of economic activity that generates rents, income, and power for its participants through the exploitation of predatory opportunities created by weak governance and resource abundance. In this framework, the persistence of armed banditry in northern Nigeria despite military operations is explained not by the inadequacy of those operations alone but by the viability and profitability of banditry as an economic system within the governance vacuum of rural north-western Nigeria.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design combining document analysis with systematic secondary research synthesis. A qualitative design is appropriate because the primary analytical objectives—understanding the political economy of the banditry crisis, evaluating the design and implementation of state responses, assessing socio-economic consequences, and generating policy recommendations—require interpretive,

contextual, and theoretically informed analysis rather than primarily statistical measurement. The study follows Amin's (2025) guidance on systematic qualitative synthesis as a rigorous and academically legitimate approach for complex security and governance phenomena.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected from five primary source categories: (i) peer-reviewed journal articles on Nigerian security, banditry, and development published between 2020 and 2025, sourced from Tandfonline, ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, IIARD Journals, and Google Scholar; (ii) security intelligence and policy assessments from the Soufan Center, ISS Africa, ACAPS, Nextier, and the Council on Foreign Relations' Nigerian Security Tracker; (iii) humanitarian and food security data from WFP, FEWS NET, ReliefWeb, and Amnesty International; (iv) official government statements and military press releases regarding counter-banditry operations; and (v) credible Nigerian and international media coverage from BusinessDay, The Conversation, The New Humanitarian, Reuters, Al Jazeera, and Punch. Sources published from 2023 through August 2025 were prioritized to ensure the most current possible evidence base.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis and content analysis. Thematic analysis involved systematic identification of recurring patterns across the literature regarding the causes, consequences, and state responses to the banditry crisis, organized around the study's five research questions. Content analysis was applied to policy documents, military operation reports, and government statements to assess the consistency between stated policy objectives and documented operational outcomes. The three theoretical frameworks, Fragile State Theory, Frustration-Aggression Theory, and Political Economy of Violence, provided interpretive lenses for synthesizing findings into a coherent analytical account.

4. Major Findings

4.1 Finding 1: The Crisis Has Escalated Dramatically Despite Sustained Counter-Banditry Operations

The most foundational empirical finding of this study is that armed banditry in northern Nigeria has escalated dramatically across every measurable dimension: casualty counts, incident frequency, geographic spread, and organizational sophistication, despite over a decade of sustained military operations. Banditry incidents rose from 256 in 2024 to 599 in 2025, a 134 percent increase. Casualties rose from 1,585 in 2024 to 2,742 in 2025, a 74 percent increase. In the first half of 2025, 2,266 people were killed more than in all of 2024. Since 2023, 10,217 have died. These numbers confirm that the operational tempo of the

military response has been insufficient to contain, let alone reverse, the trajectory of the crisis (Nextier, 2026; The Conversation, 2026; Soufan Center, 2025).

4.2 Finding 2: State Structural Weaknesses Are the primary enabling conditions for bandit expansion?

The evidence overwhelmingly confirms that it is structural weaknesses within the Nigerian state rather than the tactical capacity of bandit groups alone that constitute the primary enabling condition for the persistence and escalation of the crisis. Nextier (2026) explicitly identifies "limited capacity to secure rural communities and enforce justice" as the fundamental governance gap that created "an enabling environment for armed groups to emerge and expand." The concentration of military resources in large super-camps that leave vast rural areas exposed, the absence of functioning rural police presence, the collapse of the formal justice system's deterrent capacity, and the retreat of civil administration from banditry-affected rural zones have together created a state vacuum that armed groups have systematically filled.

4.3 Finding 3: Amnesty Programs Have Consistently Failed and Actively Worsened the Crisis

The consistent finding from analysis of every amnesty initiative implemented in the northwest, from Zamfara's 2016 deal with Buharin Daji through Governor Matawalle's 2019 "cows-for-guns" program to more recent ceasefire experiments, is that poorly structured amnesty deals have emboldened bandit leaders, legitimized their authority, funded their operational capacity, and undermined government credibility without achieving durable disarmament or community security. The New Humanitarian's (2026) comprehensive analysis concludes that amnesty in its Nigerian north-west form "perpetuates impunity" rather than resolving it. The repeated return to amnesty as a policy instrument despite its documented failure history reflects either a shortage of alternative policy options or a political economy in which some actors benefit from the continuation of the crisis.

4.4 Finding 4: Agricultural and Food Security Consequences Constitute a Developmental Emergency

The agricultural and food security consequences of the banditry crisis represent a developmental emergency that has received inadequate policy attention relative to the security dimensions of the crisis. Crop income per hectare in Zamfara fell by approximately 57 per cent from pre-violence levels. Zamfara's agricultural economy lost NGN 43 billion annually. Katsina farmers reported household income declines of 30 to 40 per cent. Farmers across the north-west paid NGN 139.5 million in levies to bandit groups between 2020 and

2023 just to access their own fields. Thirty-three million Nigerians faced acute food insecurity in 2025. These figures confirm that the banditry crisis has dismantled the agricultural economy of northern Nigeria's most productive zones and that food insecurity will deepen further unless security is restored and rural livelihoods are actively rebuilt.

4.5 Finding 5: The Crime-Terror Nexus Represents a Qualitative Escalation Requiring Strategic Policy Redirection

The convergence of criminal banditry with jihadist ideology and transnational terrorist networks, exemplified by Lakurawa's links with ISSP and its designation as a terrorist organization in 2025, and by ISWAP's documented expansion efforts into the northwest, represents a qualitative escalation of the crisis that existing counter-banditry frameworks are structurally inadequate to address. Counter-banditry operations designed for criminal governance challenges are poorly designed for ideological insurgency. The December 2025 US-Nigeria joint strikes on Lakurawa camps, the most militarily powerful single intervention in the crisis's history, reflect the recognition that the crisis has acquired dimensions that exceed Nigerian military capacity alone. But military kinetics, however powerful, cannot eliminate the governance vacuums and economic incentives that make both criminal banditry and jihadist recruitment viable in northern Nigeria.

4.6 Finding 6: Public Trust Has Collapsed in the State's Capacity and Willingness to Protect

A finding with profound long-term implications is the collapse of public trust in the state's capacity and willingness to protect northern Nigerian communities. Nextier (2026) documents that citizens in affected communities now perceive the state as either unable or unwilling to protect them, driving communities toward "survival strategies such as negotiating with bandits, paying levies, or forming vigilante groups." This trust collapse represents a political crisis that exceeds the security crisis in its long-term democratic and developmental significance: it suggests that even if military operations were to produce temporary security improvements, the legitimacy deficit of the state in affected communities would prevent the sustained civilian-security force cooperation that effective counterinsurgency requires.

5. Discussion of Findings

The six findings of this study converge on a central analytical conclusion: the Nigerian state's response to the banditry crisis has been fundamentally misconceived, addressing the symptoms of a deep structural governance failure through security instruments that are necessary but wholly insufficient, while neglecting the political economy, developmental, and legitimacy dimensions of the crisis that provide the structural conditions for its

persistence and escalation. Understanding why this misconception has persisted despite extensive evidence of its inadequacy requires the analytical lenses provided by the study's three theoretical frameworks.

Fragile State Theory reveals that the banditry crisis is not a security problem that has acquired developmental consequences but a governance failure that manifests both as a security crisis and as a developmental emergency simultaneously and whose resolution requires governance transformation rather than security operations alone. The military's inability to protect 725 bandit-controlled villages in Zamfara is not evidence of inadequate military capacity; it is evidence of a governance system that lacks the institutional foundations for sustained rural security provision. Building those foundations—effective rural police presence, functioning local governance, justice system capacity, civil administration, and basic public services—requires decades of institutional investment, not military operations.

The frustration-aggression theory provides the clearest explanation for why the supply of potential bandit recruits has not diminished despite sustained military pressure. As long as northern rural communities combine high youth unemployment, extreme poverty, educational deprivation, and the absence of viable legitimate livelihoods with a functioning criminal economy in which bandit participation offers income, status, and power, there will be an inexhaustible supply of young men willing to replace those killed or captured by security forces. The frustration-aggression dynamic is self-sustaining in environments where the structural frustrations that drive it are not addressed. Economic investment, youth employment programs, educational expansion, and rural development are not merely supplementary to the security response; they are, from a frustration-aggression perspective, more fundamental than it.

The Political Economy of Violence framework illuminates the specific economic logics that make banditry a viable and durable livelihood strategy in northern Nigeria. Zamfara's mineral wealth, gold, copper, and lithium, provides a resource base that makes territorial control over the region economically valuable beyond the returns from conventional criminal activities. The estimated NGN 43 billion in annual agricultural revenue that bandit groups extract or displace in Zamfara alone provides an economic incentive for the maintenance of territorial control that military operations have been unable to eliminate. The political economy analysis suggests that eliminating the economic viability of banditry through formalization of the artisanal mining sector, rural economic development that provides competitive legitimate alternatives to criminal recruitment, and the systematic disruption of ransom payment networks may be as important as the military dimension of the response.

The finding on the emerging crime-terror nexus requires particular analytical attention because it signals a qualitative change in the nature of the crisis that Nigerian

policy has been slow to absorb. The Soufan Center's (2025) characterization of the northwest as potentially becoming "a second insurgency theater alongside the northeast" is not alarmism but an analytical assessment grounded in documented organizational links between bandit groups and transnational jihadist networks. If this assessment is correct — and the evidence supports it — then Nigeria is not dealing with a manageable criminal governance challenge but with the early stages of a potentially generational jihadist insurgency whose suppression would require a fundamentally different policy framework than the counter-banditry approach currently in operation.

5.1 Summary

This study has critically analyzed the banditry crisis in northern Nigeria, examining its origins; evolution; the Nigerian state's response strengths and weaknesses; the socio-economic developmental consequences; and the emerging crime-terror nexus. Drawing on security intelligence assessments, humanitarian data, peer-reviewed scholarship, and policy evaluations from 2020 to August 2025, and grounded in Fragile State Theory, Frustration-Aggression Theory, and the Political Economy of Violence, the study identified six major findings.

These findings confirmed a 134 percent escalation in banditry incidents in 2025 despite sustained counter-operations; state structural weakness as the primary enabling condition; the consistent failure of amnesty programs to produce durable peace; a developmental emergency encompassing agricultural collapse, food insecurity, and mass displacement affecting 33 million people; the qualitative escalation represented by the Lakurawa-ISSP convergence; and the collapse of public trust in state protection capacity. The three theoretical frameworks confirmed that the crisis represents a governance failure requiring political economy transformation alongside security operations, that structural economic frustrations provide an inexhaustible bandit recruitment pool, and that the economic viability of banditry must be addressed alongside its military dimensions.

5.2 Conclusion

The banditry crisis in northern Nigeria is the most severe, most sustained, and, measured by the trajectory of the available evidence, the most rapidly worsening security and developmental emergency confronting the Nigerian state in the contemporary period. More people were killed in the first half of 2025 than in all of 2024. More villages are under bandit control in Zamfara today than in any previous year. Thirty-three million people face acute food insecurity driven substantially by conflict-induced agricultural disruption. And a new jihadist network, Lakurawa, is actively forging the organizational and ideological bridges between northern Nigeria's criminal banditry and the transnational Islamic State

enterprise that would, if consolidated, transform the northwest into a second insurgency theater.

The Nigerian state's response to this crisis has not been absent. Operation Hadarin Daji has maintained a decade-long military presence; airstrikes have disrupted bandit formations; the December 2025 US-Nigeria joint strikes represent an unprecedented escalation of military force; and President Tinubu's November 2025 emergency declaration signals recognition of the crisis's severity. But the evidence is unambiguous: military operations alone, however intensive, have not and will not resolve a crisis whose roots lie in structural governance failure, chronic underdevelopment, political economy incentives for violence, and the progressive ideological contamination of criminal networks by transnational jihadism.

Resolving this crisis will require a generation of sustained, coordinated, and adequately resourced investment in the governance, economic, and institutional foundations that the Nigerian state has not provided to its northern rural communities and that the communities themselves cannot build under the conditions of violence and displacement they currently endure. This is the challenge that the policy recommendations below seek to address, with the full recognition that recommending action is easier than organizing the political will, financial resources, and institutional capacity to execute it. The 10,217 documented deaths between 2023 and May 2025 demand that something more than the status quo be attempted.

5.3 Policy Recommendations

5.3.1 Transition from Reactive Military Response to a Comprehensive Human Security Strategy

The Tinubu administration should commission a comprehensive National Northern Security Strategy that moves beyond reactive military operations toward an integrated human security framework combining five lines of effort: civilian protection and community security (including community policing, civilian early warning systems, and accountability mechanisms for security force conduct); intelligence-led targeting of armed group leadership and financial infrastructure; rural governance restoration (including rehabilitation of local administration, justice systems, and civil services in conflict-affected communities); economic recovery and development investment; and regional cooperation with Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad on cross-border bandit and jihadist network disruption. Nextier's (2026) recommendation to prioritize "civilian protection, improving coordination among security agencies, and investing in rural infrastructure and technology for early threat detection" should be operationalized through this strategy.

5.3.2 Reform the State Police and Rural Security Architecture

The chronic under-policing of rural northern communities must be addressed through fundamental reform of Nigeria's policing architecture. The constitutional amendment enabling state police forces currently under National Assembly debate should be accelerated and enacted, enabling affected states to establish, fund, and deploy police forces responsive to local security conditions. The Inspector General's recommendation for 190,000 additional police officers should be treated as a minimum target, with recruitment specifically prioritizing candidates from banditry-affected communities to build cultural competence and community trust. Rural police posts should be rebuilt across banditry-affected LGAs, with community liaison officers mandated to engage directly with local leaders, vigilante networks, and displaced community representatives.

5.3.3 Develop a Credible Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Framework

Nigeria must abandon the ad hoc, unstructured amnesty approach that has consistently emboldened rather than pacified bandit groups and replace it with a rigorous, internationally supported Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) framework modeled on best practices from post-conflict transitions in Sierra Leone, Colombia, and the DRC. A credible DDR framework must include verifiable disarmament with independent monitoring; phased release of fighters conditional on sustained compliance; structured economic reintegration through vocational training, agricultural support, and business development; psychosocial support for former fighters and their communities; and accountability mechanisms for serious crimes that cannot be amnestied. The UN Office for Disarmament Affairs and ECOWAS should be engaged as technical partners.

5.3.4 Launch an Immediate Northern Agricultural Reconstruction Program

The Nigerian federal government, in partnership with state governments of the affected zones, TETFund, the Bank of Agriculture, and international partners including FAO, WFP, and USAID, should launch an immediate Northern Agricultural Reconstruction Program providing security-protected agricultural corridors allowing farmers safe access to their fields; emergency seed, fertilizer, and tool provision to displaced and conflict-affected farmers; crop income insurance against banditry-related losses; mobile agricultural extension services; and targeted cash transfers to food-insecure rural households. This program should be funded through a dedicated Northern Development Fund drawing on the fiscal savings from fuel subsidy removal, a tangible demonstration that the reform's claimed developmental dividend is actually reaching the most vulnerable Nigerians.

5.3.5 Address the Crime-Terror Nexus Through a Designated Counterterrorism Framework

The Nigerian government should formally acknowledge the transformation of key banditry formations, particularly Lakurawa and its ISSP-affiliated networks, from criminal organizations into designated terrorist entities and should develop a specific counterterrorism legal and operational framework for their suppression that goes beyond the counter-banditry operational toolkit. This should include targeted financial sanctions on bandit and jihadist network finances; systematic disruption of ransom payment networks; formal intelligence sharing agreements with US Africa Command, Interpol, and regional partners; engagement with Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad on cross-border operational coordination; and hardening of critical infrastructure, particularly communications infrastructure that Lakurawa has targeted in northwest border zones.

5.3.6 Invest Urgently in Northern Youth Employment and Educational Reconstruction

Consistent with the Frustration-Aggression framework's identification of youth unemployment and educational deprivation as structural drivers of bandit recruitment, the federal government should substantially increase investment in northern Nigeria's youth employment and education infrastructure. This should include expansion of NELFUND student loan access to northwestern and north-central states with specific ring-fenced allocations for conflict-affected communities; targeted implementation of the 3MTT digital skills initiative in accessible community hubs across banditry-affected LGAs; agricultural youth enterprise grants targeting 18-to-35-year-old rural youth as an alternative to bandit recruitment; reconstruction of conflict-damaged schools with security features including perimeter protection and emergency evacuation protocols; and hazard pay provisions to incentivize qualified teachers to serve in previously insecure rural postings.

5.3.7 Formalize the Artisanal Mining Sector to Eliminate a Key Bandit Revenue Source

Zamfara's mineral wealth—gold, copper, and lithium—has provided a critical economic foundation for territorial banditry in the state and has attracted the attention of jihadist networks seeking to fund operations through resource control. The federal government should prioritize the formalization of the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector in Zamfara and neighboring states through regularizing and licensing existing informal miners with streamlined processes and subsidized compliance costs; establishing legal buying centers for gold and other minerals that eliminate the informal market through which bandit groups sell extracted resources; implementing community benefit sharing from licensed mining revenues that creates local economic incentives for supporting

security operations rather than bandit networks; and developing environmental restoration programs for communities whose farmland has been degraded by informal mining. Eliminating the illegal mineral revenue streams that fund armed groups is as important as targeting their military capacity.

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