



Resurgence of Banditry and Insecurity in Nigeria: Way Forward

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Abstract

Nigeria is experiencing frequent violent conflicts in almost every part of the country. The country's security crises include ethno-religious violence, especially in the northern parts of the country, farmers-herders clashes across the northcentral, the southwest and the southeast, climate of violence and social unrest occasioned by secessionist agitation in the southeast, armed banditry and cattle rustling in the northwest, continuous Boko Haram and Ansaru insurgence and massive killings in the northeast, and continuous kidnapping and ransom-taking across the country. Add to these politically-motivated clashes and inter-community border disputes that erupt in different parts of the country and you have the picture of Nigeria's social landscape since the return of democratic rule in the country in 1999. The adverse socio-economic effect of all these is enormous. This paper examines resurgence of banditry and allied forms of violent crime and social disruptions in Nigeria with a view to identifying possible solutions to the problem. The paper adopted anomic theory as its theoretical framework. Data for the paper were sourced through primary and secondary sources. The primary data were sourced through semi structured interviews where 45 respondents were purposively selected from the five states of Benue, Plateau, Katsina, Imo, and Zamfara while the secondary data were sourced from journal articles, periodicals, government reports, newspapers and the internet. Following careful analysis of the collected data, the paper found that lack of synergy, inter-agency rivalries, ineffective intelligence sharing and political interference as well as inadequate military response by the Nigerian state are some of the factors hindering various attempts to deal with the prevalence of insecurity in the country.

Keywords: conflict, casualty, banditry, terrorism, governance, resurgence

Introduction

Banditry, insurgency and terrorism have become possibly the most troubling threats from non-state actors confronting humanity today (Akinji, 2025). Although this triple evil is widespread and has raised serious concerns in many parts of the world, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East, Africa's Sahel region is considered the global epicenter of this three-fold threat to mankind. Statistics from the Institute for Economics and Peace, producers of the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) indicate that more than 50% of worldwide terrorism deaths take place in this region where there has been a "nearly tenfold increase in fatalities since 2009" (GTI, 2025). Of the ten countries in which 86 per cent of all terrorism deaths in 2024 occurred, six are in Africa, with Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali and Nigeria accounting for 47% of total deaths recorded globally.

Many factors have exacerbated the frequency of attacks resulting from banditry, insurgency and terrorism in Nigeria and other parts of the Sahel region, an area noted for its climatic, economic and socio-political vulnerabilities. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA):

The Sahel is one of the poorest regions in Africa and in the world. The Sahel comprises a semi-arid region of Africa extending from Senegal eastward to The Sudan – or from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. However, based on common development challenges, the United Nations (UN) limits the Sahel to ten (10) countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Chad. The structural characteristic of lack of diversification of Sahel countries' economies, contributes to low productivity and competitiveness... The economic model of the Sahel countries, based on their significant dependency on agricultural and mining proceeds as well as official development assistance (ODA1), poses structural limitations (UNECA, 2021).

Drivers of Banditry in Nigeria

a. Socio-Economic, Political and Religious Factors

In the Sahel region, Nigeria, the focus of this paper, is the most-populated country and probably the most volatile one as well. Apart from the challenging factors that characterize the Sahel countries, as noted by UNECA above, the security situation in Nigeria is worsened by ethnic and religious divisions increasingly escalated by bad governance. All these act as drivers of banditry in Nigeria as no one factor can effectively explain the spread of banditry in the country, particularly since the return of democratic rule in 1999 (Adesola & Akerele, 2025).

Banditry, as a phenomenon in Nigeria, dates back to the 1960s but reached

disturbing levels in the 1980s due to the macroeconomic distortions that began during that period (Akanji, 2025; Ojo, Oyewole & Aina, 2023; Ja'afar, 2024; Rufai, 2018). Government's failure to provide social amenities, boost agricultural production, and enhance the maintenance of law and order by dealing decisively with perpetrators of violence and all forms of criminality aggravates the fragile security situation in Nigeria (Ja'afar, 2024; Rufai, 2018).

There are other explanations, under the above factors, offered for the resurgence of banditry and terrorism in Nigeria. One of such accounts avers that banditry in Nigeria, particularly those inflicted upon the Middle Belt, North West and South East, is a Northern agenda to destabilize the present government from the southern part of the country in order to enable the North recapture power in 2027.

The purely economic explanation attribute incidences of banditry and terrorism to widespread hunger and poverty and government's insensitivity to the plight of the downtrodden across the country (Akanji, 2025; Ojo, Oyewole & Aina, 2023; Ja'afar, 2024). This version holds government accountable for the excruciating suffering the masses are plunged into since the removal of fuel subsidy in 2023 by the government of Bola Ahmed Tinubu.

Some Nigerians, however, insist that the resurgence of banditry in Nigeria has religious undertones (Akanji, 2025). Islamic fundamentalists are said to be executing, via banditry and terrorism, their agenda of Islamizing the Nigerian state. This is shown in the various attacks on churches and Christian communities in Benue, Plateau, Niger, Kaduna, Ebonyi and Imo States. However, the attacks on communities in Imo State may be a peculiar case as the unknown gunmen and IPOB have been implicated as being responsible for the killings; what remains unclear is whether the unknown gun men have been infiltrated by Islamic fundamentalists from the northern part of Nigeria.

It is disturbing to note that various regions in Nigeria at different times have witnessed the intensity of banditry and no region has been able to effectively tackle or stop this menace in spite of the different approaches, ranging from the kinetic to the carrot, adopted by various governments (Adesola & Akerele, 2025). Consequently, since 2023, bandits, who have never really been sufficiently subdued, have reemerged with full force, unleashing mass killings in Benue, Plateau, Ebonyi and Katsina States, among many other places.

b. Government's Conspiracy and Complicity

The audacious manner Nigerian bandits execute their dastardly acts and make good their escape tend to suggest that government or its security agents are covertly involved in the attacks or officially reluctant to prevent or stop them (Akanji, 2025). This attitude has increased not only the number of attacks

carried out by bandits across the country but also the magnitude of losses recorded after each attack. For instance, on May 10, 2025, in Benue State, 24 farmers were killed in four local government areas of Logo, Kwande, Ukum and Guma. Several houses were razed down, leading to the displacement of hundreds of residents – yet, none of the perpetrators of these acts was arrested or tried. Similar, sometimes worse incidents, have happened repeatedly in Plateau, Zamfara, Kaduna and Katsina States and other parts of Nigeria.

Belief in government's complicity in these attacks is spreading across the country. Even high-ranking intelligence and military personnel are lending credence to this belief, and providing credible evidence, too. Top military and intelligence officials who had revealed that the Nigerian government or its operatives knew those behind terrorist attacks in the country include a former Deputy Director of Defence Administration, Commodore Kunle Olawunmi (rtd), and a former General Officer Commanding (GOC) 1 Division of the Nigerian Army, Kaduna, Maj. Gen Danjuma Ali-Keffi (rtd) (Thisday, 2024). Olawunmi had said the Nigerian government was aware of sponsors of terror in the country, pointing out that some of these sponsors were reportedly "serving governors and senators while others were working in Aso Rock".

Gen. Ali-Keffi, who was arrested, detained and compulsorily retired after his own comments, made far-reaching revelations. In 2020, the former GOC headed a presidency-instituted Board of Inquiry (BOI) convened by Major General Babagana Monguno (rtd), the then National Security Adviser (NSA), to look into the issue of terrorism in Nigeria. The inquest, according to him, revealed that senior government officials, a top banker, and top military brass were involved in terrorism financing.

Maj. Gen Danjuma Ali-Keffi was GOC 1 Division of the Nigerian Army, Kaduna, when the late Chief of Army Staff, Lt Gen Ibrahim Attahiru, and 11 senior officers and crew members died in a military crash in Kaduna on May 21, 2021. Gen. Ali-Keffi, in an interview with Thisday, described the crash as "suspicious", pointing out that "Attahiru (had) devised the strategy to end terrorism in the North by cutting off the oxygen of terrorism, including funding and logistics, and to take down terror financiers" (Thisday, 2024).

From the foregoing, it appears that banditry and other forms of terrorist activities can only be checked or stopped when the government stops using bandits and terrorists as tools for political gain or for ethnic/religious settlement of scores.

c. The International Dimension

Regarding the international dimension, many bandits operating in Nigeria are suspected to be foreign nationals from Chad, Niger and Central Africa

Republic. In April 2025 alone, over 1000 persons were killed by bandits, a development that prompted national security adviser (NSA) to give matching orders to all the service chiefs to synergize in their efforts to check the rising incidents of killings within the Nigerian state. The killings in Benue and Plateau alone scaled up apprehension about the increasing onslaught of Nigerians by Islamic fundamentalist organizations.

There is strong evidence that there are links between Nigerian terrorist groups, specifically Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP/ISIS-WA), and the Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP) or Lakurawa, and international terrorist groups. These links lead to mutual allegiances, technical cooperation with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), joint training in foreign camps, and arms trading within the Sahel region. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), President Trump targeted Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP) or Lakurawa, a new deadly terrorist organization operating in northwestern Nigeria, when Sokoto was struck in late December 2025. So, there is an international dimension to banditry and terrorism in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Anomic Theory

Emile Durkheim (1952) popularized the concept of anomie which focuses on the implication of social disorder occasioned by a state of normlessness and its effects on the individual's mental stability. The theory argued that lack of social and economic justice could lead people to deviant behaviour and crime such as banditry pervading the landscape of Nigeria.

However, it was Robert Morton (1968) who stressed that lack of non-fulfillment among people or region may create the need to wage war against the system that provides the cog in the wheel of development of the people or region and that this situation will only be reversed when there is justice in the distribution of socio-economic and political benefits. Banditry activities thrive in Nigeria because the government has failed in its responsibility as enunciated in the 1999 constitution, section 14 subsection 2, to provide for the socio-economic and security wellbeing of its people. The theory is apt for this study for it exposes how a formless or lawless society is a breeding ground for deviant behaviour involving the citizens of a country and their rulers.

Methodology

The study is qualitative and data were obtained through primary and secondary sources. The primary data were sourced through semi-structured interview where 45 respondents were purposively selected from the five states of Benue (10), Plateau (10), Katsina (10), Imo (7), and Zamfara (8). These states were

selected because they constitute flashpoints of resurgence of banditry activities since 2023 while the secondary data were sourced through journal articles, periodicals, government reports, newspapers and internet-based materials. Data were thematically analyzed.

Types of Bandits in Nigeria

There are two major classifications of bandits in Nigeria. One is related to their activities while the other is based on their strategies. According to Akanji (2025), banditry activities such as herder-farmer clashes in Nigeria are equated as community violence. Akanji (2025) groups bandits into two categories: (a) the social bandits and (b) the common bandits.

The social bandits are local agitators who regard the activities of the state as oppression, deprivation and marginalization. According to Akanji (2025), social bandits are heroic criminals who attack the society to show their disaffection against the state while deriving personal and group benefits. Ralph Austen (1986) sees the social bandits as professional criminals.

The common bandits are self-serving individuals who engage in criminal activities such as cattle rustling, kidnapping and armed robbery for personal aggrandizement. According to Ralph Austen (1986) they are the professional robbers or the underworld. The common bandits fall within the league of conflict entrepreneurs who deploy spoiler strategies to attract membership and patronage. Thus, despite the different classifications of bandits, their activities and strategies are almost the same and affect the state's political and socio-economic growth negatively.

Matters Arising from Banditry in Nigeria

There have been different arguments and issues arising from the series of banditry activities in Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt states of Benue and Plateau. One position is that banditry escalation in the Middle Belt and other regions of the country is a result of conflicts between the different ethnic groups who often struggle for means of livelihood (Ojo, Oyewole & Aina, 2023; Ja'afar, 2024). Farmers versus herders clashes, which often result into mass murder and wanton destruction of property, are typical manifestations of such conflicts.

What is worrisome and disturbing, however, is that relevant authorities have not been able to find a lasting solution to this frequent problem but instead have chosen to continue politicizing the conflicts for political gain. After Tinubu became president in 2023, the Middle Belt has witnessed upsurge of coordinated attacks in different communities of Benue and Plateau States with scores of casualties. On June 19, 2025, over 218 persons were killed in Benue and over 6000 villagers displaced. In a swift response to the plight of the

victims, especially the internally displaced persons in Benue state, Oluremi Tinubu, the wife of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, donated the paltry sum of 1 billion naira. The donation attracted virulent criticisms as such funds would have been used to develop and protect the area instead of waiting for the escalation of the conflict in the region. The Nigerian government hardly takes proactive measures to prevent crises, even in known volatile areas.

It is the insensitivity of government that provoked the mantra of “Defend yourselves” among communities in Nigeria, many of which have resorted to self help. Following the self-defense mantra, communities have formed vigilante groups. In spite of vigilante-group operations, communities in Benue, Plateau and other parts of Nigeria have continued to suffer offensive attacks by the bandits who invade under the cover of being herders wielding superior armament, and most times with government backing. According to SBM intelligence, between January-October 2025, the casualties continued to increase in the Middle Belt and other areas in Nigeria in general. The table below indicates the casualties in some states of Nigeria.

Table 1 Banditry Attacks in Nigeria: Casualties in Selected States

State	Number of Casualties
Anambra	63
Benue	519
Borno	539
Edo	60
Kaduna	58
Katsina	155
Niger	69
Ondo	59
Zamfara	638
Taraba	42

Source: www.sbmintel.com and modified by the Authors

The wielding of superior arms by bandits and other unknown gunmen in Nigeria arouses concern among prominent Nigerians, including retired generals and serving politicians, who have called on Nigerian communities to defend themselves from the incessant onslaught, since the Nigerian state has proved grossly incapable of protecting the citizens, as the 1999 constitution as amended clearly mandates it to do.

Despite the call for self-defence, there are reservations in different quarters on the rationale of such calls. The promoters of the self-defence idea argue that since government has failed in its responsibility of defending its citizens, there is nothing wrong if the citizens wield arms to defend themselves. But some scholars argue that Nigeria is not ripe for a situation where everyone will have

access to arms as it would lead to anarchy; instead, they advise, government should be compelled to beef up its security architecture as well as pay its security personnel adequately to boost their morale and enhance their service to the motherland.

The Issue of Ungoverned Areas

Some hold the view that banditry thrives because there are ungoverned areas in Nigeria. This has generated a lot of interest among scholars. The depiction of an area as ungoverned within a state that is sovereign and has the paraphernalia of government sounds abhorrent and embarrassing and questions the ability of a state to defend and protect its territory from both internal insurrection and external incursion. Ungoverned areas exist where there is a total breakdown of governance and the state no longer has power to govern its jurisdiction.

In Nigeria's context what constitutes the un-governed area is when the non-state-violent actors (NSVAs) take over the complete security of the area they occupy, such as the Sambisa forest in the Northeast, and the eventual hoisting of their flag in three local government areas in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe at the same time preventing Nigeria's security personnel from having access to the area (Adesola & Akerele, 2025). During the period of their occupation, the bandits run the local affairs of the areas and impose taxes on farmers and herders alike and monitor who moves and who comes in. Yet the depiction of such areas as ungoverned may not be right since they have not been declared an independent area or state.

Community Policing as Antidote to Banditry in Nigeria

Since the state of nature where men were faced with existential battles, from the vagaries of nature to the basic needs of life such as food, clothing and shelter, the inherent drive for self preservation made scholars to conclude that self-preservation is an inherent attribute of man. It is in pursuance of this that modern democracies have included and recognized in their constitutions the inalienable rights of individual citizen such as right to life, right to happiness and right of association. However, the individual citizen cannot exercise the right to life or happiness without some level of social protection. Security is a critical issue and requires everybody's responsibility. Devising proactive security initiatives involving citizens is now imperative, especially as governments around the world are increasingly faced with multilayered security challenges, ranging from energy, environmental, economic, cultural, technological and political ones; and with paucity of funds, governments are typically unable to effectively attend to their multiple security challenges (Nwoko, 2021; Pendle & Akoi, 2024). Hence, there is need for communities to get involved in providing intelligence gathering and proactive security measures.

The rationale behind this line of reasoning is that most security challenges are local and require local solutions capable of maintaining peace and driving development. Development cannot thrive where there is threat to lives and property in the local communities. Since the local people are familiar with their security threats they should be involved in resolving their local security challenges.

And for the local security outfit to be able to effectively resolve the security challenges within their local communities, possession of small and light weapons by the communities become necessary and urgent. This line of thinking is necessary because of the manner our local dwellers are senselessly murdered in large numbers by bandits, and children and women are most vulnerable during these attacks. It is these mindless and senseless killings in several communities in Nigeria, especially since the return of democratic rule in 1999, that necessitated the call for community policing (Nwoko, 2021). Community policing is a call for inclusive security measures aimed at reducing or eliminating crime that threatens local and national security. The yearning for community police became expedient because the statutory institutions saddled with the responsibility to keep internal peace have failed in their responsibility to effectively perform their statutory functions.

Several factors account for the poor performance of the security personnel in Nigeria which include poor remuneration, stagnated promotion and stringent measures in the recruitment of the personnel (Yunusa & Usman 2022). Nigerian security personnel face existential threats as their salary is usually meager, forcing some of them to engage in unwholesome practices, including receiving money and giving vital information that enable bandits to carry out their nefarious activities unhindered. Some security personnel would not dare the bandits who wield superior weapons for the fact that should they lose their lives their families would not be taken care of; sometimes families of police officers who die in active service are subjected to forceful ejection from official quarters and other inhuman treatments.

Discussion of Findings

Forty five (45) respondents were selected and purposively interviewed from five states of Benue (10), Plateau(10), Katsina(10), Imo(7) and Zamfara (8). These five (5) states constitute the epicenter of resurgence of banditry since 2023. Respondents #1, #4, #3 and #7(Benue) said that government's inability to provide adequate security in the state is one of the reasons for the resurgence of banditry there. Respondent #3 said: "We are faced with precarious situation in Benue state where there are no security personnel around to protect us. We are indeed abandoned by the Nigerian government to perish otherwise this inhuman killings would not have been happening."

Respondents #10, #9, #6, #2 and #8 (Plateau) were of the view that banditry activities in the state is sponsored by retired Fulani generals, who are the owners of the cattle, in collaboration with top federal government functionaries. The farmers who are mainly the Christian group/tribe are targeted for elimination which was why the US government had declared Nigerian state “a state of particular concern”. Since this declaration, the government has braced up its security apparatus to confront the bandits who are targeting the Christian communities in Benue and Plateau States. Respondents #1-#7 in Benue state vehemently believed that government is behind the banditry activities in Nigeria, particular since the president and his vice are Muslims.

Respondents #5, #3, #4, #8 and #10 (Katsina) said that the bandits in the state were foreign nationals from Niger and Chad and advised government strongly to impose border restriction through surveillance and inter-agency collaboration between the Customs, Civil Defence and soldiers. Their position was that lack of inter-agency collaboration was largely responsible for security lapses in the state. They said that the government is expected to empower the local communities to defend themselves since most of the attacks are carried out in the local communities; usually, before the official security personnel would arrive, the bandits, who possess superior weapons, had carried out their dastardly and nefarious activities and gone. This was corroborated by Adesola and Akerele (2025) who posited that bandits, because of their superior weapons, were able to control the area they occupy. According to respondent #8 in Katsina, “If government go encourage this soldiers and custom to work and stop their I pass you, there will be calm in Katsina state”.

According to respondents #4, #5, #6, #7, and #10 (Imo), those killers in the state are not the northern bandits nor the foreign nationals from any other countries but the unknown gunmen from Eastern region especially the IPOB members. What is not certain is if the unknown gunmen have been infiltrated by the northern and foreign bandits. Respondent #5 was not bothered about whether the bandits are northern, foreign or unknown gunmen but was grieved because of the number of lives killed on a daily basis in the State (Imo) while the perpetrators are roaming the streets unharmed. In some instances, the police and other security personnel would not come to the areas being attacked for days and when they finally arrive they would begin to arrest the local residents thereby adding pains to injuries. These local residents bail themselves with several thousands of naira and in most cases are kept in police custody for days or weeks before getting released. Respondents #6, #3, #7, #8 and #10 (Zamfara) were of the opinion that hunger and poverty within the state were responsible for banditry activities, which include kidnapping for ransom; they advised relevant authorities to create more jobs and ensure food security in order to stem the tide of banditry in the state. Respondent #8 has this to say: “How can people not take to crime particularly banditry as a means to survive the harsh

economy in the state (Zamfara)?”

Conclusion

The study, having interrogated the causes of banditry, its typologies and the destructive impact of banditry to Nigeria’s socio-economic and political development, made some findings that reveal that even though banditry is as a result of socio-economic factors and bad governance, proactive measures are required to stem the tide of banditry. The paper found that lack of synergy, inter-agency rivalries and ineffective intelligence sharing as well as political interferences are some of the factors hindering effective policing of the conflict-prone areas and the high rate of casualties of banditry in Nigeria.

Recommendation

Having examined resurgence of banditry and insecurity in Nigeria, the study hereby make the following recommendations:

- (a) The communities or the local people should be empowered to police their various communities since they are versed in the knowledge of their local communities. This can be done through the provision of arms and ammunition by the government and inter-community surveillance is important for local community policing.
- (b) Government should encourage inter-agency collaboration amongst its security personnel: police, soldiers, customs, civil defence and immigration and ensure that security personnel remuneration are adequate and timely, and ensure also that in the event of the death of the security personnel his family is adequately compensated and not treated with disdain.
- (c) Registration of the herders by the local area council is necessary for each community to know the number of herders in their communities and land should be provided for the herders to graze their cattle as this would encourage ranching system and thereby reduce incessant herder-farmer clashes
- (d) There should be effective policing of Nigerian borders to ensure that emigrants are adequately screened before being allowed to enter the country.

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Writers' Brief Data



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