

Nigeria's Complex Security Environment and Insecurity Conundrum

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Abstract: Nigeria is facing an unprecedented surge in everyday violence, a situation exacerbated by persistent failures in security systems and deepening public distrust in state institutions. This pervasive insecurity is rooted in decades of interconnected institutional weaknesses that have enabled various forms of organised violence across the country. Non-state armed groups, taking advantage of these vulnerabilities, increasingly challenge the state's authority and undermine efforts to preserve law and order. Nigeria's security landscape is currently defined by a complex web of threats, including terrorism, insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, farmer-herder conflicts, separatist agitations, and the activities of organised criminal gangs. These threats have spread rapidly, intensifying instability and creating pervasive fear among citizens. Combative responses by security agencies have so far proven inadequate, revealing the urgent necessity for comprehensive institutional reforms. The growing audacity of armed groups has also compelled communities to form local self-defence initiatives, such as vigilante organisations, further compounding the security matrix. This study critically examines the evolving dynamics shaping Nigeria's security challenges, utilising a wide range of secondary data sources. It finds that effective solutions must go beyond reactive policing, encompassing targeted reforms and inclusive policies to address deep-rooted socio-economic deprivation and political exclusion. The study concludes that reconstructing Nigeria's security architecture, alongside efforts to strengthen social cohesion and expand economic opportunity, is essential to reverse the current trajectory and achieve sustainable peace.

Keywords: Security Landscape, Societal Securitisation, Security Architecture, Multidimensional Threats, Security Environment

Introduction

Nigeria's insecurity is pervasive, increasingly complex, and widespread impacting the responsibility of the state to protect. Virtually every state in the country is entrapped in one form of violent crime or the other, with an attendant surge in attacks (COI Report - Nigeria: Security Situation, n.d.). Hardly would any week pass without news of tragedies from rampaging organised armed gangs. Is it the incessant attacks by bandits on the northwest axis? Or heinous attacks by killer Fulani herders on communities? Or malicious activities of unknown gunmen in the Southeast? Travelling on Nigerian roads has become nightmarish as kidnapping and robbery have become routine (Omolu, 2026).

Nigeria's complex ecosystem of threats is primarily driven by militant Islamist groups, organised criminal gangs, farmer-herder conflict, militant Biafran separatists, piracy, and security sector violence against civilians. It is exacerbated by factors such as youth bulge and unemployment, poor governance, the proliferation of SALWs, porous borders, competing nationalism, and the notion of group identity and belonging (CDD, 2022). Added to the menu are infrastructure and capacity deficits, which, over time, have created a massive security gap in operational effectiveness and in responding to threats.

At the root of Nigeria's crisis architecture is the breakout of insurgency in the northeastern region of Nigeria in 2009 by the Boko Haram jihadist group and later compounded by its splinter factions. Nearly two decades in, the violence has become broader and more diffuse, reshaping large parts of the country. Boko Haram group and other associated Jihadist groups such as the Islamic State Sahel (ISSP) and the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) are expanding their insurgency corridor to Kebbi, Kwara, Niger and Sokoto states. In the northwestern states of Zamfara, Katsina and Sokoto, armed groups loosely classified as bandits have seized control of rural areas, causing havoc such as mass kidnapping and extortion. The north-central region is enmeshed in intensified conflict between farmers and herders. The farmer-herder conflict is scaling southward, destroying agricultural productivity and displacing communities, resulting in a lot of killings annually. The conflict has become

persistent and increasingly complex, making it difficult to resolve. Elsewhere in eastern Nigeria, a series of violent clashes between security agents and separatist militias such as the Eastern Security Network (ESN) has resulted in deaths. The violent activities of separatist movements are creating a climate of fear and division, disrupting socio-economic activities and eroding public trust in institutions.

Generally, Nigeria's security environment is most significantly impacted by the interconnected security crises sweeping across northern Nigeria. Whether it is the insurgency in the northeast, the banditry in the northwest, or the farmer-herder conflict in the north-central region, which is already spilling southward. The conflicts in northern Nigeria matter most because they have overstretched security infrastructures, expanded government defence/security spending and layered other crises in the country (Salawu et al., 2025, pp. 62-81).

Nigeria would likely slide further into widespread instability unless the government acts swiftly to break the cycle. The government should act urgently, with coordination and seriousness, to implement the reforms needed to confront the deepening security crisis. At the heart of the reform are accountability, effectiveness, transparency, inclusiveness, equity, and the rule of law. The quality of governance directly affects the maintenance and sustainability of development and human security. The state must acknowledge the scale of the crisis, make targeted investments to improve governance, and rethink its current security architecture. The era of government agents downplaying threats and describing them as politically motivated is over. Therefore, understanding the diverse nature of Nigeria's security threats and their specific, complex local dynamics is paramount to building an effective national security architecture.

Research Methodology

This study employed library research to underpin both historical and analytical approaches in examining the phenomenon. Data were gathered from a variety of sources, including books, journals, newspapers, and reputable online materials. The selection of these sources was guided by their credibility, relevance, and recency, ensuring the analysis was rooted in authoritative, up-to-date information. These sources were systematically reviewed and

critically assessed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The review focused on identifying trends, contrasting perspectives, and historical developments as reflected in the work. The reliance on secondary sources proved the most effective strategy for addressing the intent and purpose of this paper. It allowed a broad synthesis of existing knowledge and facilitated a nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

Background of the study

Nigeria is currently witnessing an unprecedented upsurge in everyday violence amid a failing security architecture to contain the chaos and the citizens' deepening distrust in state institutions. The security environment is enmeshed in an escalating wave of distinct but overlapping threats across the country. Apart from the Nigerian civil war of 1966-1970, this current wave of insecurity is the most significant governance and security challenge ever confronting the Nigerian state since independence. The citizenry's distrust is at an all-time high because systemic infrastructural and capacity deficits have undermined public safety and national development (A crisis of trust: Results from the fourth national household survey, 2025).

The complexity and multidimensional nature of security challenges affect all six of the country's geopolitical regions (Lawal & Mbiba, 2024). The geopolitical zones of northern Nigeria (northwest, northeast & north central) are battling banditry criminal gangs, abductions for ransom, terrorism and farmer-herder conflicts with attendant mass killings. The geopolitical zones of Southern Nigeria (southwest, southeast & south-south) are enmeshed in kidnapping for ransom, oil militancy, separatist agitations, opportunistic criminal gangs and other violent crimes. There are other issues, such as maritime piracy, gang wars, and growing cases of extrajudicial killings. Additionally, growing concern about the security sector's heavy-handedness and perceived violence against civilians impedes sustainable peace.

These multidimensional security challenges have become an existential threat, irrespective of where one lives in Nigeria (Asylum, 2026). According to a survey published by Afrobarometer in August 2025, two out of every three Nigerians feel Nigeria was safer five years ago than it is today (Afrobarometer, 2025). This sentiment probably mirrors the report that Nigeria

logged nearly 12,000 conflict-related fatalities in 2025, which is higher than the 11,346 killings recorded at the peak of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2014 (Obasi, 2026). Furthermore, it is frightening to note that conflict-related deaths of 11,968 recorded in Nigeria in 2025 exceeded the combined fatality total in Iraq, Syria and Yemen over the same period. The Armed Conflict Location & Data Project (ACLED) database, updated in December 2025, provided the following breakdown of fatality figures: Syria, 7,918; Yemen, 2,902; Iraq, 574; and Nigeria, 11,968 (ACLED, 2025). Additionally, security trackers estimated that Nigeria has recorded over 100,000 deaths from violent conflicts and insecurity-related incidents since 2012 (Ndujihe & Odekina, 2026). These figures evidently underscore the scale of Nigeria's unfortunate and persistent insecurity. A heightened, pervasive atmosphere of "banality of evil" pervades the space, borrowing the phrase from Hannah Arendt (1963). The costs associated with the escalating armed violence across Nigeria are devastating the economy and governance. (Oyigebe, 2026)

The trajectory and multidimensional nature of these violent conflicts are putting the country's oneness on the line, especially with the prevailing culture of normalising violence. It is quietly diminishing people's faith in democracy and the rule of law (Obadare & Dillon, 2022). Nigeria is precipitously sliding into chaos, with these non-state actors becoming more audacious in their violent activities. Terror is also increasingly seen as an acceptable means of pursuing group agendas in Nigeria (Igboin, 2022). Politically violent groups and organised criminal syndicates have exploited this condition of appeal for armed militancy to create complex security challenges for the Nigerian state. Furthermore, dysfunctional government bureaucracy, corruption, and perceived exclusionary policies have equally exacerbated citizens' appetite for militancy. Opportunist criminal groups are exploiting underlying governance deficiencies to operate under the guise of political agitators (Jones & Kotarska, 2025).

Nigeria's security crisis has gone beyond the level of tolerance and has dangerously become a direct assault on the authority of the Nigerian state. Conflict zones are largely controlled by non-state actors, which collect levies and restrict movement. In some rural areas of the conflict zones, non-state actors assume de facto control of territories and exercise governing authority (Barnett, 2022; Aforka, 2022; Nwodo & Onah, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024; Global

Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2026; Human Rights Watch, 2026). Although the Nigerian state is not formally at war, the current security crisis has characterised it as a nation at war with itself. The government remains at a loss for pragmatic solutions to confront the enduring violent conflicts. Nothing has demonstrated the failure of governance and responsibility to protect more starkly than the current frequent attacks and persistent spread of violence (David, 2025, pp. 476-488).

These crises have clearly overwhelmed the government's preparedness. Despite massive defence spending in the past 15 years, it has not translated into improved security for the citizenry (Ezenwajobi & Ishaka, 2025). In their 18 March 2026 editorial in Vanguard Newspaper, Ndujihe & Odekina (2026) argued that despite a 15-year budgetary allocation of N32.88 trillion for defence, Nigeria is still trapped in protracted insecurity. They argued that there is little sign that the situation is abating, with about 1,091 deaths from violent attacks in the first 41 days of 2026. Additionally, conflicts have displaced no fewer than 3.726 million Nigerians and scattered them in about 3,900 IDP camps across the country (Daniel & Ndujihe, 2026). The humanitarian emergency consequences of the violence are of enormous scale, including food insecurity and risk of acute malnutrition (UNICEF Nigeria, 2024). Nigeria is estimated to have roughly 3.5 million internally displaced people, which is close to 10 per cent of Africa's internally displaced population (Robinet, 2026). Unless the government's efforts result in safer communities and restored livelihoods, citizens' confidence in the authority will remain abysmally low.

The image of Nigeria's security environment is one associated with threats from terrorism and insurgency, banditry and kidnapping, farmer-herder conflicts, separatist groups and opportunistic criminal gangs. These conflict drivers are compounded by infrastructure and capacity deficits, poor governance and institutional challenges, climate change-driven conflicts, and the impacts of the Sahelian security crisis due to porous borders. Cumulatively, these multifaceted factors are combining in different measures to dangerously define the Nigerian security landscape (Onota et al., 2024)

Threats, Drivers, and Conditions Fuelling Insecurity in Nigeria

Nigeria's security crisis stems from interconnected failures spanning decades, even though it may seem to have appeared overnight. Security collapses usually result from overlapping failures tied to institutional challenges, resource scarcity, and infrastructure and capacity deficits. These variables create fertile ground for small problems to morph into an existential threat. It is against this backdrop that Nigeria's layered forms of organised violence are accelerating in intensity and scale across the country. By defying the country's conventional security strategies, these non-state actors expose structural weaknesses in Nigeria's security architecture and undermine the state's monopoly on authority. The major diverse threats reshaping Nigeria's security landscape include terrorism and insurgency, banditry and kidnapping, farmer-herder conflict, separatist skirmishes and opportunistic organised criminal gangs. Other associated issues include climate change impacts, urban crime, piracy, militancy in the Niger Delta, and the contagious effect of the Sahel crisis. Cumulatively, these factors combine in various ways to accelerate the unprecedented insecurity the country is witnessing (Oyigebe, 2026).

Terrorism and Insurgency

Militant Islamist groups such as Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Mahmuda, Ansaru and Lakurawa are reshaping the security landscape through a complex mix of terrorism and insurgency. Starting with Boko Haram in 2009 as a localised insurgency, the activities of these militant Islamist groups have metastasised into something larger and more diffuse. Although operating independently of each other, the intensity and scale of their high-impact terror attacks are characterising terrorism and insurgency in an unprecedented way.

According to the 2026 Global Terrorism Index Report (GTI), Nigeria witnessed the highest increase in terrorism-related attack frequency and death toll in 2025 in Africa (GTI,2026). The increase in terror attacks was attributed to the resurgence of activities of jihadist groups operating in Nigeria, particularly the Islamic State, which moved from 20 attacks in 2024 to 92 in 2025. Cumulatively, terror incidents in Nigeria increased by 43 per cent in 2025, rising from

120 in 2024 to 171 in 2025. Driven by competition for dominance and expansionist ambitions, they are expanding into other regions, compounding existing security challenges there.

The interconnectedness of these Jihadist militants and other organised armed groups has enmeshed Nigeria in an expansive and heightening crisis of insecurity. Their convergence blurs the thin line between insurgency and terrorism and other forms of organised crime. Jihadist militants' recent strategy of overlapping with criminal networks in some regions is complicating counterterrorism and counterinsurgency measures and law enforcement efforts of the state. The lethality and deadly wave of incidents by these jihadist groups is evidenced by their successful coordinated attacks on military bases. Jihadist militants launched at least 8 attacks on military bases in Borno and Yobe states from January to April 2026 as the insurgency intensified (International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 2026).

The stretch of Lake Chad Basin in the Northeast through the Sahel corridor in the Northwest, down to the forested margins of the Niger Delta in the south, is considered Nigeria's most volatile border due to the entrenched presence of Islamic militants. These militant groups are demonstrably shifting toward economic motives alongside ideological drive. This is shown by their link to controlling the gold deposit near Lake Kianji in the Borgu Local Government Area of Niger State. They are also using mass abductions targeting soft targets such as schools, churches, and mosques to raise funds. (Oludiran, 2026) In the northwest, particularly in Zamfara State, criminal networks control gold mining sites, impose levies on miners, and use the proceeds to procure weapons and expand their territory (Malik, 2026). They have gone further by establishing a rudimentary governance structure under which residents in these isolated districts face illegal taxation, whippings, and sometimes execution for violations (Ladbury et al., 2014). The armed groups use mass abductions to spread fear and extract tactical concessions from the government.

Armed Banditry and Kidnapping

The criminal armed groups operating in several rural districts in the northwest and north-central regions are colloquially dubbed "bandits". Bandits are involved in a multifaceted criminality encompassing armed attacks, killings, cattle rustling, kidnapping, and raiding communities. Violence associated with these criminal armed groups is expanding and

growing in lethality. Banditry-related violence is spreading beyond its traditional corridors, affecting remote villages, towns, and peri-urban areas (Jones & Kotarska, 2025). Bandits are generally not motivated by political or religious ideology, but by economic gain (Jones & Kotarska, 2025). Although they do not have ideological ambition, some of the bandit leaders hobnob with jihadists transactionally. In some cases, bandit warlords collaborate with jihadists to expand their footprint in exchange for acquiring military skills (The New Humanitarian, 2023). However, given the audacity and lethality of their violent activities, the federal government formally designated the bandit group as terrorists.

As a profit-driven armed gang, banditry is the major driver of the kidnap-for-ransom crisis in Nigeria. The criminal gang has adopted kidnappings and mass abductions as a quick and easy means of revenue generation. Bandits have dangerously transformed kidnapping into a very lucrative enterprise, inflicting profound trauma on communities across the country (Campbell, 2021). By weaponizing mass abduction tactics, these loosely organised criminal networks target villages, peri-urban areas, schools, and places of worship. Although bandits are to kidnapping what dough is to pizza, kidnapping remains a pervasive threat across Nigeria's security landscape. According to one estimate, ransom payments recorded in Nigeria between 2017 and 2025 are around 15 million USD (The New Humanitarian, 2026). Yet, paying ransom is illegal in Nigeria. Due to the frequency of kidnapping incidents and the possibility of abductees being killed if payment is not made, ransom has become normalised. However, ransom payments reduce the family's purchasing power. Secondly, such unregulated revenue helps the armed group to fund and expand its operations. By converting abductees into high-value illicit financial commodities, ransom payments strengthen the foundation for future attacks (Campbell, 2021). Although ransom payments often lead to the safe release of victims and relief to their troubled families, they have far-reaching implications for perpetuating the vicious cycle. It is against this background that armed groups, especially bandits, are expanding the kidnapping corridors across the country. Kidnappers have adopted the tactics of weaponizing fear through the release of insidious videos of them brutalising their victims and captives' plea messages. (Jibril, 2026)

Conclusively, the kidnapping epidemic in Nigeria is characterised by an unprecedented increase in mass abductions, especially of school children (Oludiran, 2026). Secondly, their

tactics of mass abduction are expanding from the northwest, the traditional stronghold of bandits, to other geopolitical regions of the country. Finally, armed groups loosely classified as bandits are the primary perpetrators, driven primarily by financial gain. Although they have exhibited other ancillary motives such as recruitment drives, forced marriages and satisfaction of sexual urges. (Sherwood, 2014).

Farmer-herder conflict

Nigeria is enmeshed in a surging wave of deadly violent conflicts between herdsmen and farmers. Historically, the farmer-herder relationship in Nigeria was once characterised by symbiotic socio-economic transactions, particularly in the exchange of goods and services (International Crises Group, 2017). Conflict, driven largely by competition for water and grazing resources, has intensified. The trend and intensity of farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria have invoked heightened attention in the public domain, with concern about how the violence has dangerously transformed.

Farmer-herder violence in Nigeria is growing in complexity, trapping communities in the geographic hotspots in a cycle of insecurity and displacement. It is claiming thousands of lives and has transformed into one of the gravest security challenges Nigeria has faced in recent years (Folliss, 2025). Organised armed groups are aligning with pastoralist and agrarian communities in North West Nigeria and the North Central belt to make the conflict the Sahel's deadliest armed conflict (Conflict Armament Research, 2020). For decades, Nigeria has experienced cycles of escalation and de-escalation of farmer-herder conflict.

Recently, the conflicts have led to significant violence, devastating the affected communities, endangering both security and economic activity. Particularly, communities in north-central states such as Nasarawa, Plateau and Benue are being reshaped by this conflict through violent means. For instance, on June 13, 2025, the people of Yelewata in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State witnessed coordinated attacks that killed over 100 residents and displaced over 2000 persons (IFCR, 2025). Similarly, gunmen killed about 52 residents in Ukum Local Government Area of Plateau, displacing nearly 2000 people over several days of attacks (Ojewale and Onuoha, 2025). Significantly, Nigeria's north-central region is the epicentre of the conflict, although it is spiralling southward as well. Herders have clashed

with farmers across all ethnic groups in Nigeria, including Hausa farmers in Katsina State, Yoruba farmers in Ogun and Ekiti States, Igbo farmers in Ebonyi and Enugu States, and others, as they move from town to town in search of greener pastures for their cattle.

The conflict is getting worse, with Nigeria being classified as a hotbed of herder-farmer conflict in West and Central Africa. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (2021), from 2010 to 2020, Nigeria recorded the highest number of deaths in geographic hotspots of farmer-herder violence in West Africa. Similarly, a report by SBM Intelligence revealed that the conflict recorded 542 civilian deaths and 2.2 million displaced between 2019 and 2025 (SBM,2025). It is growing in complexity and is more pernicious than analysing fatality statistics alone. (Jones & Kotarska, 2025)

Rising farmer-herder violence in Nigeria is intersecting with urbanisation, weakened local governance structures, failing security architecture, insurgency, and climatic issues to produce multidimensional security challenges. Climate-induced degradation, militancy issues and cattle rustling in the far north are forcing herders to move toward the north-central region in search of pasture and water. Herders' migration has primarily created economic struggles over resources between them and farmers across the North Central states (Nwaneri, 2023). Tragically, the conflict has evolved from spontaneous responses to provocations to a cycle of deadlier planned attacks and reprisals today (Obadare & Dillon, 2025). It is spiralling and has assumed a religious and ethnic character with devastating consequences.

Beneath this conflict lies a complex web of assumptions such as ethnic cleansing, Christian genocide, an Islamization agenda and land grabbing. Given that the conflict has assumed a character beyond a resource contest, its dynamics have continued to change in form and intensity. The Christian genocide narrative overlaps with the reality that the pastoralists are overwhelmingly Fulani Muslims while host farming communities are predominantly Christians (Akinwotu, 2018). This perspective largely formed the basis for the United States of America's designation of Nigeria as a "Country of Particular Interest" (CPC). In Nigeria, religion has an ethnic connotation; the ethno-religious framing of the conflict has started gaining ground over other considerations. The ethno-religious interpretation has further punctured the existing fragile Muslim-Christian relations in the country. Bakare (2025) submitted that attackers have mutated from local herders to sophisticated terror networks

massacring unarmed citizens. He argued that any attempt to mischaracterise the deadly attacks as mere farmer-herder conflict would amount to a cover-up.

Appropriate diagnosis of the root causes of any conflict is sine qua non for finding enduring solutions. Unfortunately, the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has taken on a multi-coloured hue, with attendant scattergun government interventions. The conflict has become persistent and pervasive, with multidimensional consequences for human lives and livelihoods. It is exacerbated by failing security governance, climate change, existing ethnic/ communal divides and mistrust, and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025).

Separatist Movements

Separatist agitations, especially in the southeast, have created significant internal security challenges for the Nigerian state. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its affiliates, such as the Eastern Security Network (ESN), the Biafran Republic Government in Exile (BRGIE), and the Biafran Liberation Army (BLA), are separatist movements associated with low-level insurgency in the Southeast. These groups have employed coercive and violent tactics in their modus operandi, such as the enforcement of sit-at-home orders, targeted attacks on security personnel, arsons and assassinations. The activities of these separatist elements have evolved from mere political agitation to core security threats, turning the southeast region into a trouble spot (Molokwu & Uchime, 2023). For instance, the weekly Monday sit-at-home order triggered a major crisis that disrupted the region's socio-economic and security ecosystem. The enforcement of the sit-at-home order led to the emergence of a locally embedded hybrid armed group dubbed "Umuoma," or "unknown gunmen" (Onyemaobi & Ezeora, n.d.). Amnesty International, in its report "A Decade of Impunity: Attacks and Unlawful Killings in Southeast Nigeria", submitted that 1,844 people were killed between January 2021 and June 2023 (Amnesty International, 2025). Continuing, the report documented a worrisome pattern of unlawful killings, torture, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and destruction of property orchestrated by armed groups, state-backed militias, vigilantes, cult gangs and security forces across the region. Particularly, Imo State recorded more than 400 killings between 2019 and 2021 through the nefarious activities of unknown gunmen. Localities across Imo, Anambra, and Ebonyi states live in persistent fear,

violence, and disruption of normal life (Nextier, 2025). Oftentimes, separatist activities escalate into a series of skirmishes between them and Nigerian security forces, resulting in several civilian deaths.

From an economic angle, an estimate put the loss of earnings from sit-at-home days at N900.9 to N7.6 trillion between October 2021 and May 2025 (Oduola, 2025). The complex nature of the agitation, with its attendant hybrid threat, blurred the boundaries between political rebellion, criminality, and coercive organised community engagement (Jones & Kotarska, 2025). By fusing elements of armed insurgency, challenging the state's monopoly on authority, and exercising informal control over territories, the separatist agitators transformed the security landscape of the southeast region and Nigeria.

Governance and Institutional Challenges

Security challenges rarely arise overnight or by happenstance; they usually emerge from predictable patterns rooted in political and socio-economic issues. At the centre of Nigeria's persistently evolving security landscape are state capacity issues and structural institutional failures that exacerbate vulnerabilities. In many conflict-affected areas, security efforts are undermined by existential conditions stemming from governance deficiencies at the national and sub-national levels. Perhaps this is why the worst forms of armed violence originate and concentrate primarily in socioeconomic and politically disadvantaged corridors of the country (Ojo et al., 2023, pp. 319-346). Whether intentionally or not, unemployment and poverty, environmental degradation, and political and economic inclusiveness consistently feature in the discourse on Nigeria's complex insecurity challenges. These variables underscore the unfortunate reality of Nigeria's environment of sustained grievances (Manu et al., 2023).

Additionally, dysfunctional government bureaucracy, corruption, and perceived exclusionary policies have exacerbated citizens' willingness to resort to militancy (Suleiman & Karim, 2015, pp. 1-11). The ripple effect of the government's inertia in its responsibility to protect Nigerians seems to have metamorphosed into a free-for-all of violence. Due to degraded state capacity and weakened law enforcement, there is an upward trajectory in inter-group and anti-state violence. Institutional weakness is evident in virtually every sector: courts rarely deliver justice, the police are under-resourced to maintain order, and intelligence agencies fail to prevent repeated attacks. (Igba, 2026, pp. 1-20). Against this backdrop,

individuals and groups are increasingly retreating to primordial identities to reconstruct themselves. Politically violent groups and organised criminal syndicates have exploited this condition of appeal for armed militancy to create complex security challenges for the Nigerian state. Ideological narratives usually find fertile ground in areas where governance is largely absent, and communities feel abandoned (Odalonu & Obani, 2018)

The paradoxical mix of relative deprivation and frustration-aggression is a major factor accelerating the deterioration of security in Nigeria. (Akinyetun, 2020, pp. 87-109). These variables are compounded by institutions' failure to provide stability frameworks that prevent small conflicts from deteriorating into an existential threat. It is against this reality that the appeal of terror as an acceptable option to pursue a group agenda flourish. The audacity of these armed groups and the nature of the weaponry employed in their terror activities compound institutional failures.

Furthermore, because of the multifaceted security crisis bedevilling the country, institutional capacity is strained in meeting citizens' growing expectations for safety and accountability. This situation compounds or erodes the citizenry's trust in the state's responsibility to protect (Ogechi & Lazarus, 2025). Citizens losing faith in the state's authority or capacity to protect them is, in itself, a crisis, as exemplified by the #EndSARS protest. (Unachukwu & Ezewudo, 2024)

Therefore, the dilemma is why the return to democracy has yet to enhance socioeconomic and political inclusiveness in Nigeria incrementally. The Fourth Republic has provided stability at the centre but has failed to effectively incorporate all groups at the margins into the political process. (Matfess, 2016). Nigeria's democracy may align with Kane's (2010) assertion that democracy is also an avenue for democratising violence. (Klaus & Turnbull, 2025)

The Implications of Nigeria's Insecurity Conundrum

Nigeria's unabating insecurity conundrum has dangerously evolved from a challenge of fractured security architecture to a multifaceted existential crisis (Oyigebe, 2026). Tragically, the worsening security environment threatens internal cohesion and overshadows developmental opportunities. Particularly, the scale of repeated killings attributed to armed conflicts in Nigeria invites troubling comparison with internationally recognised conflict zone

fatality thresholds, yet Nigeria is not formally at war. For instance, the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) defines a war as a situation in which battle-related deaths exceed 1,000 per year (Uppsala Conflict Data Programme, 2024). By this benchmark, reported figures for conflict-related deaths in Nigeria, such as the June 15 Vanguard newspaper report (about 5,272 fatalities from Jan-May 2026) and 12,000 deaths in 2025 by Obasi (2026), inadvertently met the conflict zone criteria. These figures are not merely statistical analyses but have far-reaching implications for the humanitarian, economic, educational, and societal spheres of the citizenry.

The human cost of the security crisis is not represented in the number of conflict-related deaths alone; there are other critical issues such as sexual violence against women, abductions of children, displacements and disruption of livelihoods. (World Report 2026: Nigeria, 2026) According to one estimate, Nigeria has 3.4 million internally displaced people (IDPs) across fourteen states of the country (IOM, 2023). Many of these displaced persons are in poorly equipped IDP camps with little or no access to basic amenities such as healthcare providers, food, and educational services. (Nigeria: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023, n.d.). Protracted displacement disrupts livelihoods, erodes community cohesion, entrenches cycles of trauma, and increases dependence on humanitarian aid (Olanrewaju et al., 2019). These issues have serious implications for the psychosocial well-being of the IDPs, yet there are inadequate mental health support programmes in the IDP camps.

The conflict-extremist ecosystem is compounding Nigeria's education crisis, with armed groups heightening coordinated attacks on schools and mass abductions of school children. The International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) reported that between 2014 and 2024, armed groups and bandits abducted over 1000 students from their various schools in Nigeria (ICIR,2024). For over a decade now, the mass abduction of schoolchildren has become an increasingly troubling trend and tactic. The rampant attacks on schools and abductions, especially in the northern region of Nigeria, are putting a generation of children at risk of missing out on education (Amnesty International, 2025). Recently, 88 students and teachers were abducted following coordinated terror attacks on schools in Askira-Uba LGA, Borno State, and Oriire LGA, Oyo State on May 15, 2026 (Nextier,2026). These repeated abduction incidents are worsening Nigeria's problematic notoriety tag as the country with the highest

number of out-of-school children in the world. Nigeria is reported to have 18.3 million out-of-school children, representing one in every five globally (UNICEF, 2024). Beyond psychologically affecting students, these incidents threaten social cohesion and instil fear among parents and the community. Unless the situation abates, it would ultimately lead to a loss of interest in the educational system, and parents might withdraw their wards from school as a precaution. From Chibok, Dapchi, Kankara, Kagara, Papiri, and now Mussa and Oriire, each incident directly attacks the education system and could lead to permanent exclusion if not nipped in the bud. The government's inability to comprehensively address perpetrators of these attacks will inadvertently incentivise further attacks (Ike et al., 2022). Cumulatively, these issues reduce school enrolment and access to education, undermining the potential for human capital formation. Diminished opportunities for human capital formation pose a security threat by inadvertently creating conditions that breed conflict, such as relative deprivation and a sense of exclusion.

Nigeria's escalating insecurity has damning consequences on both the micro- and macro-economic spheres of society. It has largely disrupted daily economic activities in the conflict areas, increased the cost of doing business, diminished investors' confidence and required high budgets for securitisation. These issues are immediate, structural, and systemic, reversing development gains, undermining growth, and altering government fiscal equilibrium. For instance, since the emergence of Boko Haram, the northeast region has suffered multiple layers of economic paralysis due to the precarious security environment orchestrated by the group's terror activities. Violent conflict naturally has a structural multiplier effect on economic productivity and capital inflows. (Brück & Groot, 2013, pp. 497-501). Insecurity suppresses government revenue and distorts government spending in favour of the security sector.

Nigeria's defence sector received 32.88 trillion naira over 12 years, from 2012 to 2026, which represents 12.5 per cent of the total budget for the period under review (Ndujihe & Odekina, 2026). As security attracts more fiscal attention, it creates direct trade-offs in budgetary allocations to other sectors critical to the economy. Because security expenditures are often shrouded in secrecy, heavy security funding can create a "war economy" and undermine the effectiveness of security efforts (Akhigbe, 2026). The economic consequences of violence are

organically linked to its pervasive influence across virtually every spectrum of human existence. By limiting agricultural activities through holding farms under siege, levying harvests, and disrupting the food supply chain, armed groups are creating undernutrition and food sovereignty concerns. (O. et al., 2025) These are cardinal issues in national development: self-sufficiency, improved rural livelihoods, and the nutrition regime.

Evolving security threats and their attendant political and socio-economic consequences have reshaped the Nigerian state's traditional securitisation framework. Traditionally, the government held sole responsibility for protection, and the state had a monopoly on the instrument of coercion (Saxer, 2008). However, the contemporary security challenges have overwhelmed the state-centric framework, leading to the expansion of securitisation (Ogbonna et al., 2023, pp. 1-13). Nigeria's security architecture has overreached and overstretched itself, leading to the emergence of societal securitisation. Against this background, vigilante and community defence groups were incorporated as complementary, localised adaptive responses to security challenges. The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in the northeast and Amotekun in the southwest are classic examples of national and subnational collaborative initiatives reshaping the security landscape. These efforts and other local initiatives are expanding citizens' and communities' roles from passive recipients of protection to active participants in providing security. In conflict areas, citizens actively help secure society in different capacities, such as serving as informants and joining vigilante groups. In response to the growing need for community-driven protection, subnational governments, in concert with community leaders, are establishing local security networks tailored to their distinct security needs. Widespread threats and persistent violence necessitated a strategic shift from state-centric security to societal security (Njoku & Nwokolo, 2026).

In conclusion, Nigeria is enmeshed in a pervasive, multidimensional security crisis that is transforming society across multiple layers, including socio-economic, political, and psychosocial, and increasing citizens' participation in securitisation. The Nigerian state is also rethinking its unitary grip on the policing system by advancing legislation for state police.

Findings, Conclusion, and Recommendation

From the foregoing discussion, this paper finds that Nigeria is enmeshed in multidimensional security threats which are gradually being normalised across the country. Particularly, large-scale persistent violence and mass abductions for ransom have assumed national pandemic syndrome status. Threats manifest differently across Nigeria's six geopolitical regions, forming regional identities. Yet these threats sometimes overlap and diffuse, blurring the lines of localised identity. This insecurity has profound socio-economic consequences, undermining household economic activity on a massive scale. Escalating attacks on schools and abduction of school children are accelerating human capital loss by harming education and skill development opportunities.

Because of the pervasive nature of the threats and their widespread impact, they created an ecosystem of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and a severe humanitarian burden. At the root of the crisis is relative deprivation and exclusion driven by institutional failure and weak governance. Institutional gaps within an overstretched security architecture led to the rise of community-based policing and vigilance groups. These coping mechanisms are reinforcing waning public trust in the state's capacity to protect its citizenry. Inadvertently, the state's security governance efforts failed to curb these challenges progressively, thereby emboldening non-state armed groups. The government is making efforts to rethink the security architecture, such as moving the issue of state policing from political debate to legislation.

Conclusively, Nigeria's security challenges have morphed from localised criminalities to a pervasive and multidimensional crisis which has become a national tragedy. Insecurity did not emerge overnight, nor is it inexplicable; it is rooted in institutional decay, security failures, weak governance, and official corruption. These systemic failures are major drivers of the complex security crises facing the country and of the framing of these crises as existential threats. Unfortunately, Nigeria has continued to recycle insecurity through politically curated narratives instead of responding with a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach. Against this backdrop, societal securitisation has emerged, yet these efforts are highly fragmented and lack regulation, making them vulnerable to abuse. Troublingly, these localised initiatives and conventional security efforts have not effectively turned the tide against the non-state armed groups. This is evident in the unabating festering of violence

across the country and the growing audacity of the armed groups. The dilemma is a lack of answers, not insecurity.

To find a way forward, the government must move away from politically curated narratives of blame-shifting and embrace communication that acknowledges reality. Effective security governance rooted in transparent conflict management is needed to increase citizen engagement and rebuild public trust and state legitimacy. The state's current efforts to rethink the existing security architecture and decentralise policy are timely.

Beyond effective securitisation, governance reforms are needed to address the socio-economic and political factors that incentivise criminality. At the heart of the reform are issues associated with corruption, judicial efficiency, selective law enforcement, and infrastructural deficit. A whole-of-government approach that is reflective and has the right mix of security, political and socio-economic elements necessary for emancipatory impact.

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