



**Usmanu  
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*Topic*

**Navigating the Maze: Addressing  
Multi-Dimensional Insecurity  
Challenges in Northern Nigeria**

**Lecture Presented By  
Mallam Nuhu Ribadu  
National Security Adviser (NSA)**

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**Thursday, 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2024  
University Auditorium, Main Campus**

**Navigating the Maze: Addressing Multi-Dimensional Insecurity Challenges  
in Northern Nigeria**

**By**

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**Being a Convocation Lecture Presented at Usmanu Dan Fodiyo University,  
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# **Navigating the Maze: Addressing Multi-Dimensional Insecurity Challenges in Northern Nigeria**

## **Executive Summary**

Northern Nigeria faces a daunting array of insecurity issues that are deeply rooted in socio-economic, political, ethnic, and religious tensions. At the core of Northern Nigeria's insecurity is the pervasive issue of banditry, which has significantly evolved from its historical origins. Initially integrated into the societal structure, banditry has now transformed, becoming more violent amidst the advent of modern weaponry and the crumbling of traditional social structures.

Beyond banditry the rise and spread of Islamist insurgencies, notably Boko Haram and its offshoots like Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), have also contributed to an insecure environment. Originating as a critique against Western education, these groups have profoundly altered the security and socio-political landscape of Northern Nigeria in the last decade and a half, intertwining with local banditry to deepen the region's crisis. Another critical area of focus is the intensifying herder-farmer conflicts, driven by climate change, land degradation, and the subsequent competition for dwindling resources. This longstanding discord has now taken on ethnic and religious dimensions, exacerbating regional and indigene-settler divides. Unchecked religious preaching and deep-seated historical grievances have helped fuel a cycle of violence, adding layers of complexity to the security situation.

Alongside this, an alarming rise in arms and drugs trafficking significantly compounds regional insecurity, with intricate cross-border networks facilitating illegal imports. This proliferation of weaponry has not only amplified the regions conflicts but also poses significant challenges to peace and stability efforts.

To address this the Nigerian government's Renewed Hope Agenda blends kinetic actions with socio-economic initiatives; underscoring the importance of community engagement and state cooperation within Northern Nigeria as critical to building peace. Under the leadership of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) government, we are actively working and will continue to do more.

A comprehensive approach to addressing Northern Nigeria's security challenges is needed. This includes an integrated strategy that combines military, political,

and socio-economic efforts, underlines the importance of cross-border cooperation, enhances youth empowerment and the strengthens local institutions. To do this the necessity of inclusive dialogue, prevention measures, and regional support to ensure security and stability is paramount.

## **Northern Nigeria's Insecurity Threats**

Nigeria faces insecurity challenges across all six geopolitical zones. This insecurity takes various forms, including insurgency, terrorism, communal clashes, banditry, kidnapping, and piracy, and is fuelled by deep-rooted socio-economic, ethnic, and religious tensions. The Northeast has been particularly affected by the insurgency led by Boko Haram and its offshoot, ISWAP, resulting in a severe humanitarian crisis that has seen millions displaced and widespread destruction. The Northwest faces challenges with banditry and kidnapping, where armed groups attack rural communities, causing significant loss of lives and displacement. Whilst the North-Central zone, or Nigeria's Middle Belt, has experienced farmer-herder clashes driven by land disputes and environmental degradation, resulting in casualties and increased inter-communal tensions. What is clear is that Northern Nigeria is faced with a multifaceted tapestry of insecurity issues, each interwoven with the thread of history yet starkly impactful in today's socio-political climate.

### **Banditry: A Persistent Historical Scourge**

Banditry in northern Nigeria has a deep historical foundation that extends well beyond the current crisis. Historically, banditry was not just a matter of criminality but deeply woven into the socio-economic and political fabric of the region. The British conquest of the Northern Protectorate in 1903 and the subsequent amalgamation with the Southern Protectorate in 1914 were partly motivated by the desire to curb armed banditry and enhance regional security.<sup>1</sup> This era was characterised by widespread banditry, including armed robbery and community plundering, which influenced the decision to amalgamate. Although economic motives often dominate discussions about this amalgamation, the need to improve security, especially in the largely ungoverned Muslim North, was a significant factor. Lord Lugard, the first Colonial Officer of the Protectorate, experienced numerous confrontations with armed bandits who used ambush tactics with devastating efficiency, underscoring the security challenges of the time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Democracy and Development (2022), Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem: Explaining the Conflict Drivers, Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) Abuja, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup> Rufa'i, A. M (2021). "I am a Bandit": ...p15.

Lugard's encounters in areas like Nupeland, Kano, and Borguland, where he was wounded by bandits, highlighted the region's precarious security situation.<sup>3</sup> In 1911, bandits in the Zamfara region ambushed Kano traders, killing about 210 people and stealing goods worth £165,000.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, persistent harassment, intimidation, and raids on herdsmen and traders around Kwatarkwashi in 1911 caused significant economic damage to the province. The collaboration between Zamfara communities and bandits from both Nigerian and present-day French territories facilitated these crimes, turning the region into a criminal haven.

The colonial administration's response, which included stationing armed policemen along strategic routes in Sokoto Province to ensure security and collect caravan tolls, represented an early attempt to manage rural banditry.<sup>5</sup> However, cross-border crimes continued in the post-colonial period, worsened by civil wars and insecurity in the wider West Africa region. The smuggling of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) across porous borders has further perpetuated violence and banditry in both rural and urban areas. The prevalence of these weapons continues to pose significant security challenges, impacting the stability and development of the region.

The shift from historical banditry to the current crisis is marked by this growing availability of modern weaponry, the erosion of traditional social structures, and worsening economic hardships. Unlike historical banditry, which may have had elements of honour or community defence, contemporary banditry is characterised by greater violence and less discrimination in targeting victims. Today's bandits are less likely to strictly adhere to ethnic or familial lines, though some groups may still invoke these connections.

The phenomenon of banditry in the northwest predates the intercommunal conflict of the early 2000s and 2010s. Cattle rustling, a long-standing form of banditry in Northern Nigeria, involved nomadic and semi-nomadic groups engaging in livestock theft that was orchestrated by organised families or clans that passed down raiding techniques and routes through generations. Nonetheless, the ranks of bandits swelled significantly in the 2010s, partially as a result of increased ethnic tensions between Hausa and Fulani communities. Bandits exploited the grievances of herders, recruiting those who felt compelled

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<sup>3</sup> Perham, M (1963) ed. *The Diaries of Lord Lugard Vol. IV*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press

See also NAK/PRO/FO/403-316: Consul-General Jago to the Marquess of Land owed (received October, 15 no.4. Africa) Tripoli, North Africa, October, 7<sup>th</sup>, 1901. A copy of this file is deposited in National Archives Kaduna and Department of History, Bayero University Kano.

<sup>4</sup> NAK/Sokprof.No.42: Report for the Quarterly Year ending, June, 30<sup>th</sup> 1911 by Mc Allister, 1911. Also, young men of Tudunawa, Zongonawa and Tamawa who resides at the Hill- top of Kwatarkwashi collaborated with the other people from Niger in carrying out rural banditry

<sup>5</sup> Rufa'i, A. M (2021). "I am a Bandit": A Decade- Long of Research in the Bandits...

to protect their lives, lands, and herds. Cattle rustlers like Buharin Daji and Kundu, for instance, conducted recruiting exercises in 2011 and 2012, and were successful in enticing young, predominantly Fulani men, with promises of cash, cows, and women. Alongside recruitment a number were simply coerced into joining their ranks.

Other Fulani individuals took up arms to defend themselves but came to view criminal activity as the best or only means of financing this self-defence. A group of four closely aligned bandit commanders in Zamfara claimed they resorted to cattle rustling in 2011 to acquire weapons for self-defense following attacks on their communities by local vigilantes' group, known as Yan Sa-kai.<sup>6</sup> They justified their actions as a necessity, though others pursued banditry purely for profit. Some repentant bandits have admitted to joining bandit groups to reclaim rustled cattle, while others have expressed dismay over unnecessary killings of both Fulani and their cattle. These concerns are exacerbated by the worsening impact of ethnic profiling and vigilante justice. The distinction between economic necessity—"I must rustle some cattle to buy guns to defend my people from Yan Sa-kai"—and economic opportunism—"The more cattle I rustle, the more guns I can buy, becoming more powerful and wealthy"—is subtle. Many herders who initially took up arms for self-defence have since become hardened criminals.

The conflict in the north remains dynamic and mobile. The base of operations for bandits in the northwest can shift rapidly. Additionally, gangs often collaborate with other bandit groups to conduct attacks far from their camps, driven by both opportunity and necessity. For instance, bandit Dogo Gide, usually based in the Birnin Gwari forest straddling Kaduna and Niger states, targeted distant Birnin Yauri in Kebbi state for a mass kidnapping in July 2021, as many schools closer to his camps had closed due to banditry. Bandits typically move on motorcycles but also utilize waterways, especially during the rainy season, to transport themselves and their weapons via canoe.

Zamfara stands as the epicentre of banditry, albeit local government areas (LGAs) within Sokoto, Kebbi, Katsina, Niger, and Kaduna that border Zamfara are also severely affected. For example, Sabon Birni, Isa, and Rabah, Goronyo in eastern Sokoto, bordering Zamfara's Shinkafi LGA, have been among the hardest hit. In the Birnin Gwari region in western Kaduna high levels of violence are linked to its forest networks extending into Zamfara.

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<sup>6</sup> Idayat Hassan (2021). Nigeria's rampant banditry, and some ideas on how to rein it in. available at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/11/8/Nigeria-banditry-peace-deal-jihadists-how-to-rein-it-in>

Banditry is also evolving, with groups have expanded their operations to include kidnapping for ransom, a highly profitable tactic that fuels their activities. In a significant strategic shift, the abduction of school children has become a favoured method for bandits, notably highlighted by the audacious kidnapping of the Kankara schoolboys by Auwalu Daudawa in Katsina state in December 2020. Since these incidents, the kidnapping of school children has become a potent weapon, with the most recent being the kidnapping in Kuriga, Kaduna state in March 2024.

Estimates suggest there are over 300 bandit warlords, each commanding at least 50 fighters operational across different regions of Northern Nigeria. Like in the pre-colonial era, kinship and community ties continue to play significant roles in banditry, with bandit groups often operating within defined ethnic or kinship lines, forming bandit families or clans. These groups rely on extensive networks of informants, safe houses, and community support to evade authorities or rival factions. The loyalty within these families and the code of silence among community members have made it challenging for authorities to effectively combat banditry.

The importance of a bandit leader extends beyond mere strength and the size of their forces or weaponry; it also hinges on the prowess of their affiliated musicians and the popularity of their songs. Most bandit kingpins, locally known as "Kachalla," boasts special songs attributed to them, contributing to their myth and aura. Hausa speaking Nigerians in their 40s and above will undoubtedly be familiar with the songs of Kassu Zurmi, Gambu and other musicians who served as praise singers to bandit families and noted kingpins in the past. Today, this trend has continued with the emergence of a new breed of bandit-musicians, including figures like the late Surajo, Adamu Ayuba, Hammadu, Makaho, Mal. Jika, and Maigari -the latter three all hail from Dunburum in the Zurmi LGA of Zamfara state. These bandit-musicians play a pivotal role in the banditry ecosystem, with their songs serving as a measure of a bandit kingpin's power and influence.<sup>7</sup>

The menace of banditry, while historically entrenched in the socio-economic fabric of Northern Nigeria, has undergone a significant transformation. Previously confined to local skirmishes and cattle rustling, modern-day banditry in the region has escalated into a lucrative and deadly operation. This involves kidnapping for ransom and large-scale violence that destabilises entire communities. This evolution reflects broader socio-economic despair and a

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<sup>7</sup>Rufa'i A. M., (2021) '*Inter and Intra-bandit Gangs Rivalry in Zamfara Region*' a paper presented at the Fourth National Conference Organized by the Faculty of Arts and Islamic Studies on the theme Zamfara Kingdom Past and Present, Venue FIAS, 25<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup>.

governance vacuum, realities that have allowed bandits to grow their tactics and access the sophisticated weaponry. To this end addressing banditry today requires not only a security response but also an understanding and addressing of its deep-rooted causes.

### **Islamist Insurgency: A Transformative Force**

The Islamist insurgency in Northern Nigeria, spearheaded by groups like Boko Haram and its offshoots including ISWAP has dramatically reshaped the region. Founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram initially targeted Western education and aimed to implement Sharia law, seeking to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria. But following Yusuf's death in 2009, under Abubakar Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram escalated its campaign, launching widespread attacks against the government, security forces, and civilians.

Ansaru, which emerged from Boko Haram in 2012, and ISWAP, which formed in 2016 and pledged allegiance to ISIS, represent significant fractures of the original movement. These groups have not only perpetuated the conflict but also broadened its scope from the Northeast across to the Northwest and North-Central zones of Nigeria, intertwining with local banditry and exploiting community grievances. This complex web of insurgent activity, coupled with efforts to embed within local populations and even collaborate with bandits, has fuelled a devastating humanitarian crisis marked by mass displacement and severe socio-economic disruption. The Boko Haram insurgency has directly and indirectly caused the deaths of tens of thousands of Nigerians and the displacement of millions, significantly hindering socio-economic development and altering the security, socio-economic, and geopolitical fabric of the region.

The growth of interactions with the other insecurity challenges across Northern Nigeria is a concerning trend. In the northwest, a region already troubled by bandit groups, there is an emerging cooperation between these bandits and terrorist groups, often involving financial exchanges, in states such as Zamfara, Niger and Katsina. This collaboration, particularly around the sharing of resources but also around local terrain knowledge, poses a risk of escalating the current insecurity. For instance, the train attack in Kaduna in March 2022 was a joint operation between a Boko Haram faction and the late Ali Kawaje, a prominent bandit warlord. But Boko Haram factions are not alone in this approach. Ansaru and ISWAP's strategies have also included providing support against bandits in exchange for community allegiance and operating in strategic locations like Dandume, Birni Gwari and the Shiroro axis. This multifaceted insurgency landscape, marked by potential for both cooperation and infighting among groups, not only has immediate impacts for residents, but significantly complicates efforts to address insecurity in Northern Nigeria.



## **Herder-Farmer Conflicts: Deepening Divides**

The age-old conflict over scarce resources between nomadic herders and settled farmers has intensified in North-Central states such as Kaduna, Benue, and Nasarawa, exacerbated by climate change, population growth, and land degradation. These clashes are no longer mere resource disputes but are increasingly interpreted through lenses of ethnicity and religion, adding layers of complexity to an already volatile situation. In this way the conflicts in the North-Central states of Nigeria are emblematic of a broader crisis facing the country, where environmental, economic, and societal pressures converge to fuel violence.

Historically, the relationship between nomadic herders and settled farmers was symbiotic. Herders' cattle would graze on leftover crops from farmers' fields, providing manure for the next planting season. But the historical migration patterns and pastoral livelihoods are now in direct conflict with modern agricultural practices and land use policies, leading to recurrent violence and community ruptures. Furthermore, this relationship has been strained by climate change, population growth, and land degradation, which have led to a reduction in available grazing land and water resources. These environmental stressors have pushed herders to migrate further south into more fertile farming lands, leading to conflicts with local farmers.

Often referred to as Nigeria's "food basket," Benue has been at the epicentre of herder-farmer clashes. The state government's attempt to mitigate these clashes through legislation - the anti-open grazing law - has led to further polarisation with herders viewing such policies as existential threats to their way of life. In Kaduna state, the conflict has seen an alarming rise in violence, with numerous attacks attributed to armed herdsmen against farming communities. The situation is further complicated by the state's diverse ethnic and religious makeup, turning disputes over land into sectarian violence, with devastating effects on community cohesion and security.

Herder-farmer conflicts are increasingly framed in ethnic and religious terms, with herders mostly being Fulani Muslims and farmers belonging to various ethnic groups and predominantly Christian. This framing has escalated the conflicts, making them harder to resolve as they now encompass identity and existential concerns. Northern Nigeria's rich tapestry of religious and ethnic diversity has long been both a source of cultural wealth and a catalyst for tension. But in recent years, religious divides have intensified, frequently exacerbated by political actors, leading to violent outbreaks. The indigene-settler divide, a contest over rights and privileges anchored in historical land and identity claims, has the potential to stir social and political unrest.

Rooted in colonial legacy, the distinction between "indigenes" – those considered native to a particular locality – and "settlers" – people who, despite having lived in the area for generations, are regarded as outsiders – fuels disputes over access to land, resources, and political representation. This dynamic has led to repeated and deadly clashes, in places like Plateau state, between indigene farmers and settler herders over land.

Although the high-profile religious riots that characterised the last three decades in Northern Nigeria have decreased, emerging patterns of violence represent a new frontier of religious tension. These incidents underscore the volatile nature of religious sentiments and the potential for conflict. Linked to this, the proliferation of media platforms allows individuals to broadcast messages without oversight, contributing to a climate of intolerance and misunderstanding. This issue highlights a broader challenge within the Nigerian religious landscape, where inflammatory rhetoric can circulate freely, heightening tensions and sometimes leading to violence.

### **Understanding the Drivers: A Multifaceted Analysis**

Factors driving insecurity include:

- **Land Use Disputes:** The escalation of farmer-herder conflicts to unprecedented levels in recent years is partly due to conflicting land tenure systems. Traditional land distribution methods clash with formal government-granted rights, leading to widespread disputes.
- **Changing Livelihoods and Climate Change:** Diminishing arable land and water resources, exacerbated by inefficient farming practices, desertification, and erratic rainfall, force herders' southwards, sparking conflicts with farmers over dwindling resources.
- **Reciprocal Radicalisation:** The stigmatisation of Fulani herders contributes to a cycle of violence, where negative perceptions between farmers and herders in different regions reinforce a spiral of escalating conflict.
- **Security Sector Challenges:** Inadequate security force capacity and professionalism, marked by under-resourcing and excessive force, undermine efforts to combat insecurity. The military and police, stretched thin and sometimes outgunned, often resort to heavy-handed tactics, exacerbating tensions.
- **Access to Arms:** Despite laws against unauthorized arms possession, the circulation of SALWs is rampant, with Nigeria accounting for a significant proportion of all SALWs in West Africa.
- **Corruption and Injustice:** Perceived injustices and corruption, filtered through ethnic, religious, or regional biases, fuel inter-communal conflict

and insurgency, pushing communities toward extra-legal measures for self-protection.

- **Regional overspill:** Nigeria's proximity to fragile states and the existence of numerous unofficial border crossings facilitates the movement of insurgent groups and bandits, compounding security challenges.

These multifaceted insecurity issues confronting Northern Nigeria are intricately linked to the region's low Human Development Index (HDI) scores, which encapsulate vital dimensions like education, health, and economic opportunities. This connection underscores a cyclic relationship where underdevelopment fuels violence, and vice versa, emphasising the intricate nature of the challenges faced.

The educational disparities between Northern and Southern Nigeria play a significant role in the dynamics of radicalisation in the region. Lower literacy rates and school enrolment figures in the North, as reported by UNICEF and the World Bank, highlight a crucial challenge in access to and the quality of education. For instance, adult literacy rates as low as 40% in certain Northern states starkly contrast with rates above 80% in many Southern states.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, net primary school enrolment rates in the South approach 80-90%, while in the North, they can dip as low as 50-60%. The Northwest region has three of the four states with the lowest literacy rates in the country.<sup>9</sup> Conflict is reinforcing these educational divides as one million Nigerian children are estimated to be out of school due to insecurity in the northwest alone.<sup>10</sup> Such disparities are further exacerbated by gender, with many girls in the North not attending school due to various socio-economic and cultural barriers.

This educational gap not only restricts economic opportunities but also heightens susceptibility to extremist ideologies. Groups like Boko Haram, have effectively exploited these vulnerabilities by offering alternative narratives that promise belonging, purpose, and sometimes financial benefits. Their ideology fundamentally opposes Western-style education, drawing on the educational inequities to fuel their narrative and recruit followers. Addressing these educational disparities is critical in countering radicalisation and fostering a more stable and prosperous environment in Northern Nigeria.

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<sup>8</sup> Adult Literacy rate in Nigeria <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=NG>

<sup>9</sup> Ajibola Amzat, (2017) "Despite decades of funding, literacy levels in the northern states remain low," *The Guardian*, July 24, 2017, <https://guardian.ng/news/despite-decades-of-funding-literacy-level-in-the-northern-states-remains-low/>.

<sup>10</sup> "One million Nigerian children to miss school due to threat of violence," *France 24*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210916-one-million-nigerian-children-to-miss-school-due-to-threat-of-violence>.

Limited access to healthcare and the resultant population discontent in Northern Nigeria are closely linked to the region's overarching instability. Similar disparities are observed in health outcomes as highlighted by UN data and reports from the World Health Organization and UNICEF. Life expectancy in the North lags significantly behind the South, with figures as low as 50 years compared to the South's average of around 60 years.<sup>11</sup> This divide is further deepened by child and maternal mortality rates in the North, which are nearly double those observed in the South. The scarcity of medical professionals exacerbates these health challenges. According to a report by The ICIR, Nigeria has an average of about four doctors per 10,000 people, a figure that, despite being the highest in two decades, falls short of the WHO's recommended ratio of one physician for every 600 persons.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, stark economic disparities between Northern and Southern Nigeria manifest in various forms, including GDP per capita, income levels, and employment opportunities, creating a fertile ground for the recruitment into violence. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, Northwest Nigeria contains some of the poorest states in the country. As of 2019, each northwestern state has a higher poverty rate than the national average of 40.1%, with Sokoto having the highest rate in the country: 87.73% of the state's population live in poverty.<sup>13</sup> Its reports also illustrate that unemployment rates in the Northern regions can exceed 20%, a stark contrast to the more industrially diverse and economically vibrant Southern regions, where unemployment rates hover around 10-15%.

The scarcity of livelihood opportunities becomes a pivotal factor driving individuals, especially the youth, towards armed groups and criminal networks. These groups exploit the economic vulnerabilities by offering financial incentives, making economic desperation a potent catalyst for individuals to join their ranks. A possibility that is aided by the availability of arms in the region, with gunrunning having evolved into a significant business operation.

The illegal arms market in Northern Nigeria has seen a marked increase in demand and supply. The economic incentives are significant, with prices for firearms and ammunition varying widely based on type according to sources. For instance, the cost of a single bullet can range from N2,000 to N5,000, while high-calibre weapons such as AK47 rifles and rocket-propelled grenades are traded for anywhere from N1.5 million to N5 million. This price variability has

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<sup>11</sup> . Life Expectancy in Nigeria <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1122851/life-expectancy-in-nigeria-by-gender/#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20life%20expectancy%20at,well%20as%20in%20the%20world.>

<sup>12</sup>Nigerian Physician Statistics [https://tradingeconomics.com/nigeria/physicians-per-1-000-people-wb-data.html#:~:text=Physicians%20\(per%201%2C000%20people\)%20in,Bank%20on%20April%20of%202024.](https://tradingeconomics.com/nigeria/physicians-per-1-000-people-wb-data.html#:~:text=Physicians%20(per%201%2C000%20people)%20in,Bank%20on%20April%20of%202024.)

<sup>13</sup>. *2019 Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria: Executive Summary* (Abuja: National Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

catalysed a geometric rise in individuals participating in the arms trade, particularly in the Northwest, which is home to rampant criminality.

Traffickers have developed sophisticated networks to transport illegal arms into and across Nigeria, deploying innovative methods to circumvent security checks. Concealment tactics range from hiding weapons within vehicles' compartments, to using animals or canoes for border crossings, to disguising arms amidst legitimate cargo, such as agricultural products, to avoid detection.

The proliferation of illegal firearms not only fuels the ongoing insecurity but also complicates efforts to restore peace and order. This issue is further complicated by corrupt elements within society and the international scope of these trafficking networks. As Northern Nigeria grapples with this escalating crisis, a multifaceted approach that includes tighter security measures, regional cooperation, and addressing the root causes of demand for illegal arms is imperative.

### **Confronting the Challenges**

The administration of His Excellency President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, in its Renewed Hope Agenda, provided a holistic framework that seeks to comprehensively address various aspects of insecurity. This agenda includes provisions for bolstering security forces, implementing community-based security initiatives, promoting socio-economic development, and fostering inter-communal dialogue to address grievances and foster reconciliation. Through the Renewed Hope Agenda, the government aims to tackle the underlying causes of insecurity by addressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, social marginalisation, and ethnic tensions. By implementing targeted interventions and reforms, the government seeks to create an environment conducive to peace and stability in Northern Nigeria.

President Tinubu was also deliberate in appointing northerners to top security positions, aiming to involve those with proximity to the issues in the crafting of solutions. The role I hold, of National Security Adviser, is a demanding job that requires dexterity, hard work, and consensus building across security and political structures. The figures we met in terms of both attacks and casualties when assuming office in May 2023 were deeply concerning. In 2022 alone Nigeria witnessed four major terrorism attacks: the attack on the Abuja-Kaduna train, an attack on the Guards Battalion in Abuja, the Kuje Prison attack, and another at a church in Owo, Ondo state. Meanwhile, many roads across the country, such as the Abuja-Kaduna, Zaria-Kano, and Lagos-Ibadan roads, were unsafe due to daylight operations by criminal elements.

Since the coming of this administration, we have not seen any organised terrorist attack. Roads hitherto unsafe for commuters, for instance the Abuja-Kaduna , Zaria-Kano are today secure for travellers at anytime of the day. We are not out of the woods yet, but we have made serious progress in pushing down casualty figures and depriving miscreants access to weapons and free movement. Since assuming office, we have also successfully freed over a thousand individuals, many of whom were villagers held captive for as long as two to three years. We successfully secured the release of abducted students from the Federal University of Gusau and school children from Kuriga without paying ransom.

Our non-kinetic strategies and approach are driven by evidence. We have strengthened the administration of criminal justice by reopening trials of Boko Haram terrorism suspects detained in Kanji and other locations across the country and prosecutions are now underway in eight different courts. Concurrently, we have significantly reduced the proliferation of arms nationwide by blocking the flows and arresting gunrunners. With new appointments at the National Centre on Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCSALW), we are poised to launch even more robust initiatives.

On the kinetic front, the Nigerian military is conducting numerous operations targeting insurgent groups like Boko Haram and bandits operating in Northern Nigeria. Operations such as Operation Hadin Kai, Operation Safe Haven, Operation Whirl Stroke, Operation Hadarin Daji, and Operation Sahel Sanity have been launched to root out insurgents and criminals from their strongholds, dismantle their networks, and restore law and order in affected areas. The federal government has also established joint task forces comprising military, police, and other security agencies to coordinate efforts and enhance operational effectiveness in tackling insecurity. These task forces collaborate to conduct raids, patrols, and targeted operations aimed at disrupting the activities of insurgents and criminal elements. Nigeria has also bolstered border security measures, particularly along its porous borders with neighbouring countries, to prevent the infiltration of insurgents, weapons, and illicit goods. It has also prioritised intelligence gathering and sharing as a crucial component of its kinetic efforts to address insecurity in the region. Enhanced intelligence capabilities, include surveillance, reconnaissance, and information gathering, enable security forces to identify and neutralise threats more effectively. These efforts have been notably successful, with military personnel delivering the elimination of high-profile bandit leaders such as Ali Kawaje and Boderis,. They have also successfully disrupted existing cells of criminal terrorists, further securing the region and diminishing threats to public safety.

The Nigerian government is also focusing more on counterinsurgency strategies aimed at winning the hearts and minds of local populations. In doing so we can isolate insurgents from their support base and prevent the recruitment of new members. These strategies involve engaging with communities, providing humanitarian assistance, and promoting reconciliation and deradicalisation programmes. Infrastructure development, job creation programmes, improved education and healthcare services, and efforts to tackle poverty and inequality are also critical parts of this approach.

The emphasis on non-kinetic efforts alongside kinetic strategies marks a significant recognition that achieving peace in conflict zones extends beyond military might to include sustained and cooperative engagement across various sectors. In line with this understanding, a pivotal meeting convened in March 2024 at the Office of the National Security Adviser in Abuja, saw the participation of 15 Northern Governors as well as service and intelligence chiefs. The agenda of this meeting was dedicated to formulating strategies to tackle the pressing security challenges in Northern Nigeria. A significant outcome of the discussions was the consensus on the necessity of *transcending mere territorial dominance* to also focus on winning the hearts and minds of the populace, thereby fostering a holistic approach to reinstating peace and stability in the region.

Central to these discussions was the acknowledgment of the critical role that grassroots and regional initiatives play in complementing government efforts. Among strategies highlighted were the reform of the Nigerian Police Force, enhancement of local policing capabilities, implementation of peacebuilding programmes, and promotion of dialogue and reconciliation fora. Additionally, educational campaigns designed to counter violent extremism are increasingly being recognised as pivotal components of the broader strategy to restore peace. These initiatives collectively represent a multidimensional approach aimed at addressing the underlying causes of conflict and building a foundation for long-term stability in Northern Nigeria.

Building on the analysis of current efforts and challenges, a roadmap for the future to ensure sustained progress in tackling insecurity in Northern Nigeria would include the following:

- A more integrated approach that combines military, political, and socio-economic strategies. This entails aligning security operations with efforts to address underlying grievances, such as poverty, unemployment, and marginalization.

- Enhancing cross-border cooperation to address transnational threats effectively and disrupt the flow of illicit arms and goods across borders.
- Investing in youth empowerment and education is essential to prevent radicalisation and mitigate the appeal of extremist ideologies. This includes providing access to quality education, vocational training, and economic opportunities for young people in Northern Nigeria.
- Strengthening the capacity of local institutions to govern effectively and address community grievances. This involves empowering traditional and religious leaders, local governments, and civil society organisations to play a more active role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.
- Promoting inclusive dialogue that involves all stakeholders, including marginalised communities, to foster a holistic and durable peace. This entails creating spaces for meaningful participation and representation of diverse voices in decision-making processes.
- Prioritising prevention and resilience-building measures can help mitigate the risk of future insecurity. This includes early warning systems, community policing initiatives, and programs to address the root causes of conflict and violence.
- Engaging regional neighbours to support efforts to secure and stabilise the region.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is crucial to emphasise that the complex web of insecurity engulfing Northern Nigeria is influenced by a blend of socio-economic, ethnic, and religious factors. Insights from historical examinations of banditry, the rise and growing impact of Islamist insurgencies, and the deep-seated conflicts between herders and farmers illustrate how insecurity has been exacerbated by a troubling increase in arms trafficking. To effectively address these issues, a comprehensive and cohesive response is required. The ultimate solution to the problem, however, has to be multifaceted, one that marries military, political, and socio-economic strategies with robust cross-border cooperation and deep community engagement.

By championing an integrated strategy that equally prioritises prevention and the building of resilience, we hope to attain a pragmatic roadmap towards achieving stability and prosperity in Northern Nigeria. This comprehensive approach, aimed at mending the socio-political fabric of the region, sets a new precedent for addressing deep-seated security issues through collective determination, strategic action, and a commitment to inclusive governance.



