

Terrorism by Another Name? From Boko Haram to Bandits

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Abstract – *This study examines the changing aspects of violence in Nigeria through a comparative analysis of Boko Haram terrorism and armed banditry, questioning the conceptual and policy distinctions between the two. The increasing convergence in tactics, impact, and organizational structures between these groups has called for a critical reassessment of the definitions and state responses to organized violence. The main objective of the research is to explore whether armed banditry in Nigeria qualifies as terrorism under international legal frameworks and to assess the implications of mislabeling for national security policy. Using a qualitative research design, the study relies on reviews of secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports, and media analyses. Thematic content analysis was used to identify patterns in discourse, policy framing, and operational behavior. The findings reveal significant overlaps between Boko Haram and bandit groups in terms of violence intensity, territorial control, and disruption of governance, despite divergent ideological foundations. The study concludes that the existing binary classification between terrorism and banditry is inadequate and counterproductive for effective security policy. It recommends an integrated security framework and a more consistent legal and policy approach. These insights contribute to both academic scholarship and practical policymaking in conflict-prone societies.*

Keywords – *Armed violence, Banditry, Boko Haram, Nigeria, Terrorism*

I. INTRODUCTION

The terrorist phenomenon in Nigeria is inextricably intertwined with the country's socio-political and religious evolution, assuming complex forms and degrees of intensity throughout its course. Politically, Nigeria has grappled with incidences of political and sectarian violence that increasingly turned into large-scale terrorist activities, especially from the early 2000s. The emergence of Boko Haram was a game-changer for the nation's war on terror, converting sporadic religious conflict into a long-term insurgency with regional and global ramifications. Boko Haram began as a local religious movement influenced by Salafist thought in the early 2000s, but its transformation into an armed jihadist organization

signaled an extreme loss of state capacity and the escalation of ideological extremism [1]. As the group intensified its assault on civilians, schools, religious centers, and government offices, terrorism became entrenched in the national psyche, precipitating massive internal displacement, humanitarian emergencies, and national security breakdown [2]. The ability of the group to exploit weak governance structures, poverty, and religious zeal in the Northeast enabled it to expand rapidly, challenging the state's monopoly on violence and destabilizing a security setting that was already fragile [3].

In the past several years, Nigeria has seen the rise of new patterns of organized violence across the Northwest and Northcentral regions, in which persons described as "bandits" have engaged in mass kidnappings, killings, and devastation of communities. These groups, often described as criminal groups, have displayed high levels of organization, access to sophisticated weapons, and domination of certain geographic areas, with patterns in these closely mirroring the operating patterns of terrorist groups [4]. Though such bandit groups do not have an overt ideological foundation such as that of Boko Haram, they also perpetrate organized violence against civilian groups, confront state power, and destabilize economic life features popularly linked with terrorism [5]. Their activities, involving intentional killings, extortionate taxation, and mass abductions, express a calculated rationale extending beyond common criminality. Scholars have observed that although banditry is usually driven by opportunistic agendas, like ransom and cattle rustling, its destabilization impact on government and local stability is largely identical to that of ideological terrorism [6].

The difference between terrorism and banditry in Nigeria is coming under increasing questioning from academics, policymakers, and security practitioners, who contend that the binary difference may be more semantic than real. The absence of an internationally agreed definition of terrorism exacerbates this

problem, as it allows violently active organizations to be categorized inconsistently according to political expediency or geographical preferences [7]. For example, whereas Boko Haram has been commonly categorized as a terrorist group driven by crisply articulated ideological ambitions, bandits have typically been described in both popular discourse and official accounts as ordinary criminals, which has yielded a less comprehensive and more fragmented policy reaction [8]

The semantic drift observed has important consequences for counter-terrorism, especially law enforcement, military planning, humanitarian intervention, and international collaboration [9]. The failure of the Nigerian government to appreciate the terrorism-like characteristics of banditry can lead to underestimating the degree and range of the threat, thus compromising national security and postponing prompt action. State media and institutions are critical in constructing the discourse of terrorism and banditry since words influence both popular opinion and policy making. Scholars argue that media frames often reflect broader political agendas at times downplaying the severity of banditry or avoiding the language of terrorism to evade international condemnation or political embarrassment [10]. The selective use of terminology provokes a binary discourse that can mask the relationship between types of violence in Nigeria, particularly where empirical data proves operational connections between bandit networks and jihadist insurgents [11]. Further, the mislabeling of banditry can also be an impediment to global support mechanisms that are routinely activated by labels of terrorism in global counter-terrorism apparatus [12]. There is, therefore, an urgent imperative to undertake a serious reassessment of the vocabulary of scholarly as well as policy discourse to guarantee that responses to organized violence are holistic, logically consistent, and proportionate in relation to the changing dynamics of insecurity in Nigeria. As distinctions between banditry and terrorism increasingly become more blurred, there is an imperative need to transcend such simplistic semantic differentiation and embrace an integrated framework of analysis that mirrors the true situation on the ground.

Research Objectives: The general aim of this seminar is to carry out a detailed analysis of the character and modus operandi of Boko Haram and armed bandit groups amidst the changing security landscape in

Nigeria. Alongside operational variances analysis, the seminar aims to unearth the underlying conceptual and empirical similarities and differences between terrorism and banditry. One of the central concerns of this present study is examining how Nigerian society and the state understand the threats of Boko Haram and armed banditry and how such understandings influence policy-making, popular sentiment, and retribution measures. Lastly, the seminar will determine whether Nigeria's armed banditry amounts to terrorism or not within the current international legal and normative frameworks. By examining the intersections, convergences, and divergences between these two most salient violent formations in Nigeria, the seminar makes a significant and timely intervention in academic scholarship, policy-making, and public knowledge.

II. RESEARCH ELABORATIONS: CONTEXTUALIZING BOKO HARAM AND ARMED BANDITRY

Boko Haram Structure, Tactics, and Goals

The rise and development of Boko Haram as a terrorist group in Nigeria can be linked to the ideological background and leadership of the founder, Mohammed Yusuf, who established the group in the early 2000s in Maiduguri in Borno State. Initially characterized as a nonviolent Islamic movement that was against Western education traditions and government models, Boko Haram became an increasingly militant insurgency after its founder, Yusuf, was extrajudicially killed while in police custody in 2009. This served as a catalyst for the group's radicalization, especially under Abubakar Shekau's leadership, who redirected its trajectory towards violent jihadism. Its evolution from a religious sect into a transnational terrorist group was influenced by both local grievances and transnational jihadist ideologies [1]. The failure of the Nigerian state to address socio-economic marginalization and youth unemployment in the northeast zone served to render Boko Haram appealing to disenfranchised groups. Its militarization was also helped by the proliferation of small arms and the tactical exploitation of Nigeria's porous northern borders [13]. By 2010, Boko Haram had begun launching violent attacks on police stations, military installations, and religious centers, and it became a major security concern in and beyond Nigeria.

Boko Haram's ideological basis is founded on a radicalized form of Islam that inherently rejects Western civilization and secular forms of education. The organization's rejection of Western-style institutions is summed up in its Hausa name "Boko Haram," which literally translates to "Western education is forbidden." The group's purported goal is the creation of an Islamic caliphate governed by Sharia law in Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad area [3]. This ideological stance, although expressed within a religious context, is politically manipulated to validate terrorist acts and de-legitimize state power. The organization has consistently explained its activities as a holy war (jihad) against non-believers and apostates, thus casting itself as a champion of divine retribution [14]. This religious background is not only used to recruit susceptible persons who are looking for meaning or revenge but also to justify violence against civilians and state officials. As [15] have highlighted, Boko Haram's ideological framework is a combination of religious extremism and political militancy that is pitted against the secular foundation of the Nigerian state and global human rights standards. The organization's communications, usually published in audio format and pamphlets, always underscore its dedication to the removal of Western influence from society and the establishment of a theocratic state.

The strategic weaponry utilized by Boko Haram illustrates a development from guerrilla-style attacks to carefully coordinated acts of terrorism aimed at maximizing both psychological effect and physical destruction. Its most notorious strategies include suicide bombings, which have often been perpetrated by women and teenage girls a strategy that underscores the group's brutality as well as its manipulation of social conventions [16]. Boko Haram has also perpetrated mass kidnappings, with the 2014 abduction of over 270 schoolgirls from Chibok being a grim emblem of its modus operandi as well as global infamy. Besides, the group constantly launches attacks on villages, seizes resources, and conducts mass killings of civilians in a bid to assert dominance and create terror [17]. The violent acts are primarily aimed at delegitimizing the state and propagating insecurity in the targeted areas. [18] points out that Boko Haram's targeting decisions are essentially performative in nature and intended to convey the message of terror and inform political discourse both locally and globally.

The deliberate use of media to spread news of attacks has greatly amplified the psychological impact of its activities. The group's ability to utilize tactical innovations evidenced through the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), ambush tactics, and coordinated attacks on military formations has made it a persistent threat, despite the frequent claims by the Nigerian government of its destruction. Boko Haram's functional geographic reach is concentrated primarily in the northeast Nigerian states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa but more broadly in the Lake Chad Basin area spanning Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The difficult terrain, lax border control, and thin state presence within these zones afford the group strategic benefits of mobility, cover, and border crossing [19]. The vast territorial landscape allows Boko Haram to plant sleeper cells, make surprise attacks, and fall back into impenetrable areas, including the Sambisa Forest and Mandara Mountains. The group's capacity to take advantage of ungoverned spaces has rendered sections of the nation what [6] refers to as "ungoverned territories," where other types of authority and justice are forcibly asserted. These areas are also beset by acute humanitarian crises, including mass displacement, food insecurity, and collapsed health systems. Regional and international efforts at combating Boko Haram, like the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), have recorded some gains but continue to face operational challenges due to coordination weaknesses and resource constraints [2]. The persistence of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region is a mirror of the intricate relationship among local grievance, ideological extremism, and transnational security threats. By extension, it is logical that any successful counterterrorism approach would consider the socio-political factors that enable the group's activities to transcend national boundaries.

Banditry in Nigeria: Rise, Actors, and Activities

The rise and spread of armed banditry in Nigeria pose a serious and expanding menace to both national security and human development. In contrast to previous forms of organized violence in the country that were driven mainly by political or ideological factors, banditry is essentially driven by socio-economic dislocations, environmental transformation, and state weakness. The reasons behind this phenomenon are due to the dissolution of the customary grazing arrangements, persistent drought seasons, and land use conflicts, which have fueled tensions between herders and agriculturalists

[20]. These have fostered an enabling environment for the spread of small arms and light weapons, thus deepening insecurity in the northwest. The evolution of cattle rustling into violent activities provided a fertile ground for criminal syndicates to take advantage of the fallouts, and thus the emergence of armed organizations that exist beyond any familiar ideological foundation. [4] note that the inability of the state to deliver justice in peasant clashes has empowered criminal organizations to take advantage of the existing vacuum for pecuniary benefits.

The group of actors involved in the environment of banditry in Nigeria is heterogeneous and dynamic and includes loosely allied criminal groups, aggrieved former military personnel, and elements of ethnic militia organizations. They exist in informally organized units, often without coherent leadership hierarchies or longer-term objectives beyond the immediate pursuit of monetary benefit through violent predation. The persistence of their operations can be attributed to illicit economic activities, such as arms dealing, cattle rustling, and ransom kidnappings, that are profitable and reinforce cycles of violence [6]. Furthermore, empirical evidence points to a degree of trans-border coordination between Nigerian bandits and Sahel-based transnational criminal networks, which implies a measure of sophistication in their operations [1]. Earlier research described individuals as unique criminal groups; however, recent analysis suggested potential links with terror groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP in terms of logistical resource sharing and tactical expertise [20]. This convergence raises concern for the increasingly blurred lines between ideologically driven terrorism and economically driven banditry, and consequently, the complexity of both definitions and strategic responses by the Nigerian government.

The strategies employed by Nigerian armed bandits indicate their development from opportunistic criminal groups to well-organized terror groups. They employ the large-scale kidnappings of school children, extortion of communities, armed assaults against villages, and random killing of civilians. These activities are not necessarily of a criminal nature; they often also display features that are typical of terrorism, especially in their ability to promote terror, undermine local governance systems, and undermine public confidence in the state's ability to provide security [5]. One of the most disturbing

features of banditry is the scale and frequency of abductions, which are usually conducted openly in public view and sometimes include hundreds of people. The regularity of these high-impact attacks has garnered extensive media coverage, thereby magnifying the psychological damage and social dislocation wrought by these attacks [18]. The tactical application of violence to obtain ransom payments has incentivized more attacks, thereby establishing a self-perpetuating criminal economy that feeds on terror and government inaction. Scholars like [13] argue that the inability of the security forces to effectively contain these factions has emboldened their operations, leading to some regions becoming almost ungovernable.

The geographical spread of banditry has predominantly focused in the northwest region and parts of the north-central region of Nigeria, with some states like Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Niger, and Sokoto being hotspots of continued violence. In these regions, vast expanses of rural territories have been outside state control, and as a result, the people in these communities have suffered from indiscriminate taxation, displacement, and large-scale violence carried out by armed formations [6]. The geography of these regions, with their dense forest cover and porous borders, has offered terrorists tactical cover, hence rendering surveillance and counter-insurgency operations cumbersome. Furthermore, the confluence of local ethnic political dynamics, socioeconomic marginalization, and the restricted role of the state has facilitated the establishment of bandit groups within the socio-political arena of the affected society [4]. Further evidence suggests that some of the local leaders, either from fear or complicity, have participated in negotiation or coordination on ransom, thereby inadvertently giving legitimacy to non-state actors. The normalization of armed violence has resulted in the weakening of formal institutions and an amplification of an emerging culture of impunity. The continued spread of bandit operations into new areas underscores the imperative of an integrated national strategy consolidating law enforcement, intelligence gathering, and socio-economic development to dismantle these networks and re-establish the state's monopolistic hold on violence.

III. RESULTS OR FINDING: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BOKO HARAM VS. BANDITS

The comparative examination of Boko Haram and the armed banditry phenomenon in Nigeria explains fundamental disparities in their underlying motivations, organizational systems, and strategic goals, although both are characterized by the same implications for civilian security. Boko Haram's activities are fundamentally motivated by ideological convictions, based on an extremist interpretation of Islam aimed at annihilating the secular Nigerian state and establishing an Islamic caliphate governed by Sharia law [21]. The group's recruitment strategies, public pronouncements, and target selection are fundamentally religio-centric, routinely resulting in attacks on religious centers, educational institutions,

and security operatives [16]. Armed banditry in Nigeria's northwestern and central parts, however, is primarily driven by economic motives, including cattle rustling, ransom taking, and fighting for control over territory to exploit resources [20]. Banditry, while equally exploitative, also lacks Boko Haram's grand ideological ambition. Instead, it is more of a survivalist and mercenary venture, bred from local grievances, poverty, and state failure to provide security and justice [4]. This motivational difference has significant counterinsurgency and counter-criminality implications since ideological violence necessitates deradicalization and ideological counter-narratives, whereas criminal violence necessitates law enforcement, economic empowerment, and community-based conflict resolution [1].

Table 1: Comparisons between Boko haram and Banditry

Feature	Boko Haram (and ISWAP)	Banditry
Primary Motivation	Ideological/jihadist, though with criminal elements	Primarily financial (e.g., ransom, extortion)
Geographic Focus	Northeast Nigeria (Adamawa, Borno, Yobe)	Northwest and North-Central Nigeria
Main Activities	Large-scale insurgency, attacks on government, religious and civilian targets, suicide bombings, kidnapping	Kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, extortion, armed robbery, village raids
Relationship to each other	Some evidence suggests a nexus, with counter-insurgency efforts possibly pushing some insurgents toward banditry, and some bandits potentially linked to ISWAP or other extremist groups	The rise of banditry is sometimes seen as a separate but overlapping security crisis, although it is not a direct subset of the original Boko Haram insurgency
Impact	Widespread violence, abductions, and displacement, with a focus on ideological and political goals	Widespread violence and displacement, but with a primary focus on economic gain and control over territory through criminal activities

Source: Extracted from reports by [22], [23].

Boko Haram is a quasi-political insurgency with distinct factions, a conventionally centralized command system (previously under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau and currently spread across several groups), and a hierarchically organized command system [11]. It has built areas that it controls, launches coordinated attacks, and disseminates propaganda to instill fear and prove its superiority [24]. This level of organization makes it different from bandit groups, which are often fluid, loosely connected, and operate without a central idea or command structure [6]. Bandit gangs operate in small, often ethnically uniform groups, using their extensive familiarity with the local geography and

informal information networks to conduct their activities [4]. Although Boko Haram has on occasion participated in criminal ventures, like kidnapping for ransom, these activities are typically incidental to their larger ideological goals. In the case of bandits, however, these activities constitute the very foundation of their modus operandi.

The absence of ideological unity in bandit camps makes them easier targets for internal disintegration and discourages harmonized strategy development for government agencies. However, recent indications of collaboration and contact between Boko Haram and certain bandit camps raise fears

about hybridization of terrorism and organized crime [20], a situation that would complicate national security operations and demand multi-faceted countermeasures. Both the violent activities of Boko Haram and armed bandits share a comparable degree of violence but are radically dissimilar in terms of modus operandi and motivation. Boko Haram has made a name for itself using tactics of terror through suicide bombings, synchronized mass attacks, and symbolic violence to generate media publicity and instill generalized fear [18]. Attacks by the groups are frequently designed for strategic intent to delegitimize and deny the Nigerian government its authority, especially through spectacular actions like the kidnappings of the Chibok and Dapchi schoolgirls [16]. Bandits, however, use violence opportunistically against vulnerable rural settlements that are not likely to offer resistance, driven primarily by economic incentives [5]. Their war has fewer ideologically defined objectives and more improvisative behavioral patterns, with goals being resource accumulation and not necessarily the destruction of symbolic targets. However, their effects on civilian populations are similar and include mass displacement, livelihood destruction, and psychological trauma. The apparently indiscriminate nature of both Boko Haram ideologically driven violence and banditry points to the breakdown of security across vast tracts of Nigeria. Furthermore, the government's persistent failure to respond satisfactorily to either challenge has also fueled public outrage and fostered an increasing view of government ineffectiveness or complicity [17], pointing to the necessity for the formulation of customized, context-sensitive strategies.

Media and state framing of both Boko Haram and banditry also assist in explaining the binary nature of public opinion and institutional response. Boko Haram is officially designated a terrorist organization by the international community and the Nigerian government, as they warrant a counterterrorist approach under Nigeria's Terrorism Prevention Act [7]. This designation provides for the use of military force, international intelligence collaboration, and donor support for counterterrorist operations. Bandits, nevertheless, are more commonly described as "criminals" instead of terrorists, though their actions could be described as acts of terrorism under international law since they habitually employ violence to generate terror and dominate communities [25]. Refraining from labeling banditry as an act of terrorism has been contentious, especially against the backdrop of the magnitude of atrocities carried out by such groups. The terminological difference has implications for both the character of state responses and public perception as well as for media coverage of these threats. Boko Haram provokes a sectarian anxiety, particularly within Christian and secular communities, whereas banditry provokes a broader concern associated with criminality, impunity, and state failure [26]. The media tends to sensationalize these representations, casting Boko Haram as an existential threat to the nation and banditry as a criminal regional issue, thus shaping policy agenda and public approval for intervention. It is necessary to correct these framing differences in order to develop a coherent security strategy that echoes the sophisticated realities of Nigeria's changing violence landscape.

Table 2: Boko haram versus banditry activities

Feature	Boko Haram (and ISWAP)	Banditry
Primary Geographic Focus	Northeast Nigeria: Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe are major strongholds.	Northwest Nigeria: Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, and Taraba states.
Key Activities	Coordinated attacks on security forces, raids on communities, targeting civilians, schools, and humanitarian workers.	Kidnapping, cattle rustling, armed robbery, extortion, and attacks on communities.
Nature of Conflict	Insurgency with territorial control and ideological goals, though it has also engaged in criminal activities.	A security crisis driven by organized criminal groups, often involving clans and factions.
Recent Violence Levels	While significant, has been overshadowed in terms of overall civilian deaths by banditry in recent years.	Has surpassed Boko Haram in the number of civilian deaths in some recent years.

Displacement	Causes significant displacement due to attacks on communities.	Has displaced a large number of people in rural communities across the Northwest.
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Source: Extracted from reports by [27], [28]

Case Studies

The Chibok (2014) and Jangebe (2021) school abductions are two major case studies through which the changing dynamics of terrorism and crime in Nigeria can be understood. The Chibok abduction involved 276 girls abducted by Boko Haram, an insurgent movement whose ideological motivations were founded upon opposing Western-styled education and establishing an Islamic caliphate. This attack, which was widely condemned across the globe, was a hallmark of terrorism through the intentional targeting of civilians with the aim to promote fear and religious-political agendas [29]. The Jangebe kidnapping, however, entailed the abduction of more than 300 schoolgirls by armed bandits who mainly demanded the payment of ransom. Although both attacks had similarities in how they were carried out, including mass abduction and assault on unarmed civilians, their motive, as well as the Nigerian state's framing, differed. While the Chibok episode was unmistakably identified as terrorism, it elicited global solidarity responses and military build-ups, the Jangebe episode was treated in everything but name as a criminal act despite its mass effect and traumatic resemblance to Chibok [18]. This taxonomic divergence reflects an underlying difficulty within Nigerian security discourses, wherein the conceptual borders between terrorism and organized criminality are blurry, and definitions are too frequently influenced by political expediency as opposed to dispassionate threat analysis [30]. Such inconsistencies affect not only the strategic response to insecurity, but also the long-term psychosocial care and justice processes provided to victims and their communities.

The escalation of raids in Nigeria's North-West has occasioned extensive communal displacement and long-term socioeconomic disruption. Armed formations, commonly known as "bandits," have systematically attacked rural settlements, stealing property, destroying infrastructure, and creating an atmosphere of generalized insecurity. In contrast to Boko Haram's ideologically driven campaigns, these raids are motivated largely by economic opportunism and territorial control [4]. But their effects on victim communities are in no way different from the effects

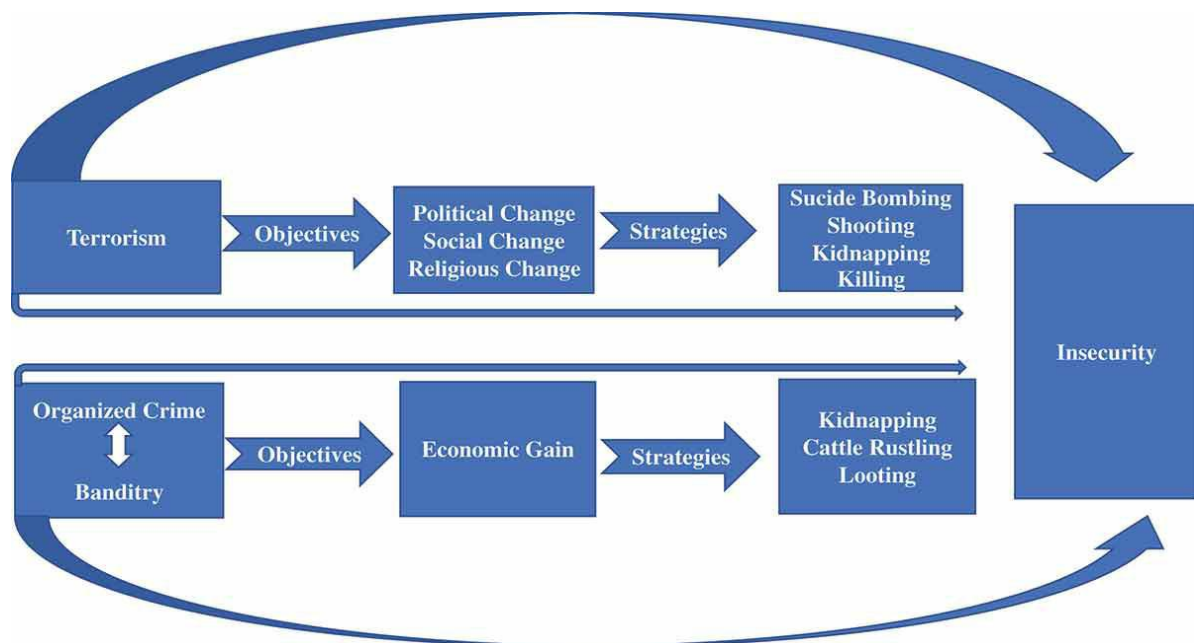
of terror attacks in terms of traumatization, displacement, and loss of livelihood. Displaced persons endure worsening situations in congested camps, where scarcity of food, lack of access to healthcare, and lack of access to education further increase their vulnerability [5]. In addition, tardy or asymmetrical state responses worsen these circumstances, compelling citizens to depend on vigilante groups or bargain with attackers. Such coping strategies, though providing relief in the short run, have also justified recurrent cycles of violence and rival systems of authority, effectively undermining state legitimacy [3]. The long-term consequences include erosion of local economies, stunted development, and intergenerational trauma, especially for children who are denied stable homes and uninterrupted schooling. The raids and displacements, therefore, are to be viewed not just as criminal incursions but as part of a wider ecosystem of insecurity that replicates terrorism in its effect and erodes national cohesion [18].

The growing convergence between terrorist and criminal groups in attacks throughout Zamfara and Niger States offers strong indication of the strengthening link between ideological insurgency and organized crime. Although banditry in both states began as economically driven violence, recent field research and intelligence reports indicate greater coordination between bandit factions and extremist organizations like Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) [20]. This collaboration is evident in the exchange of weapons, training, and tactics, as well as in planned assaults on security organizations and civilian populations. For instance, certain attacks in Niger State have exhibited the characteristic violence of Boko Haram attacks, including targeted mass killings and symbolic wanton destruction of public infrastructure [17]. In Zamfara, proof of the use of religious rhetoric by attackers during attacks and forced conversions suggests the incorporation of ideological narratives into what would otherwise be profit-motivated attacks [14]. This duality poses a particular challenge to state security operatives, who are not sufficiently trained to deal with hybrid threats that do not conform to traditional crime and terrorism classifications [31].

In addition, the trend is hindering global counterterrorism cooperation, considering that mischaracterizing or downplaying such partnerships can postpone firm action or commensurate resource deployment. According to [7], the legal conceptualization of terrorism needs to keep pace with changing threat typologies to enable consistent and timeous response. Omitting this convergence threat can lead to empowering a more agile and adaptive security threat that destabilizes nations and undermines regional peace.

The side-by-side presentation of these three case studies Chibok and Jangebe kidnappings, North-West mass attacks, and Zamfara-Niger hybrid attacks is the most effective approach to identifying the theoretical and practical challenge of separating terrorism from criminality in Nigeria's modern security environment. In the view of [30], the inferential definition of terrorism is constantly disputed, founded on power dynamics, political interests, and media narratives instead of empirical differences. Such uncertainty undermines the consistency of state policy and impedes the

development of adequate counter-strategies. It also reinforces impunity, as "bandits" so characterized manage to avoid international legal attention and sanctions attendant to terrorism, even if their actions satisfy definitional criteria established in international conventions [26]. In addition, the inconsistency in labeling impacts the moral gravity of victims' pain and shared understanding of the threat, which equates to mobilization of resources and activism. As terrorism in Nigeria continues to decentralize and localize in nature, scholars and policymakers are compelled to embrace a more sensitive, context-specific understanding that acknowledges the continuum of violence and the intersectionality of economic, ideological, and political motivations [18]. By doing this, the state can advance to a coherent and fair security design that does not favor certain victims over others on the basis of controversial definitions or political interests. The policy lessons from these cases not only highlight the porous boundaries between terror and crime but also demand a critical revision of national and international security designs in confronting them.



Source: Ojo [32]

IV. DISCUSSION: GOVERNMENT AND SECURITY RESPONSES

The Nigerian federal government has created a sequence of military operations to counter the escalating threats of Boko Haram and various armed bandit factions, mostly in the North-East and North-

West of Nigeria. One of the most important counter-insurgency operations aimed at Boko Haram is Operation Lafiya Dole, initiated in 2015 as an extension of past endeavors to stem the geographical spread of the faction. This military campaign sought to restore peace in the North-East by targeting the sites of strength of Boko Haram, destroying their

training camps, and recovering territory that had been occupied [13]. Although Operation Lafiya Dole achieved some strategic successes, e.g., freeing municipalities like Gwoza and Bama, the group's continued resilience and ability to reorganize point to the limitations of using military power in addressing ideologically driven insurgencies. As opposed to this, in 2016, the Nigerian government-initiated Operation Hadarin Daji to check the rising threat of armed banditry in the North-West region, most notably Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna states. In contrast to Boko Haram, whose activities are typically religiously motivated, these bandits are largely driven by economic reasons, including cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and extortion [4]. Although the two campaigns illustrate the state's dependence on kinetic responses to domestic security challenges, researchers have contended that the difference in the state's strategic precedence and synchronization of operations between the two campaigns reflect more profound deficiencies in the national security architecture [6].

In addition to military operations, the Nigerian government has taken a variety of legal and policy steps to counter terrorism and related criminality. Most prominent among these legislative efforts is the Terrorism (Prevention) Act of 2011, which was amended in 2013 with a view to expanding the legal definitions relating to terrorism, enhancing prosecutorial powers, and improving international cooperation [7]. The law criminalizes acts intended to cause fear among the public, interfere with governmental operations, or compel policy changes through violence. Yet whereas scholars contend that although the Act is comprehensive, its usage has been selective and politicized, leading to unequal application in prosecuting members of Boko Haram and armed bandits [33]. Another prominent feature of the government's strategy has been the contentious use of amnesty and dialogue, particularly with repentant insurgents. Although some researchers contend that deradicalization and reintegration programs for ex-Boko Haram members are realistic solutions to the cessation of hostilities, critics point to the absence of transparency, victim justice, and moral hazard risk in such solutions [34]. The state's erratic reaction to managing bandits from dialogue and cash compensation to full-blown military assaults also demonstrates a fragmented policy landscape. This discrepancy undermines the validity of government reactions and leaves us wondering

about the coherence of Nigeria's national security policy [35].

Effectiveness in military and policy reactions has been greatly hampered by long-standing structural and institutional issues. Counter-terror efforts have been frustrated by intelligence failures, with successive attacks on civilian and military institutions, against which there had been prior warnings or intelligence cues [31]. Corruption in the security sector has massively undermined public trust, diverted invaluable resources, and enabled the escape or premature release of captured insurgents and criminals [2]. Porous national borders, especially along the Lake Chad fringes, have enabled the circulation of arms, fighters, and illegal commodities, hence perpetuating transnational terrorist and criminal networks [17]. Furthermore, the asymmetrical conceptualization of policies through which Boko Haram is most thoroughly described as a terrorist organization and bandits are commonly referred to as either criminals or insurgents has had asymmetrical security responses and confused international collaboration [18]. This discrepancy in labeling significantly impacts the allocation of resources, the ordering of threats, and the perception of Nigeria's internal security dynamics by foreign partners [36]. In short, these difficulties call for a comprehensive, intelligence-led, and well-coordinated national security approach that is directed at both symptoms and causes of violent crime and terrorism.

The poor cooperation between the different security agencies is a significant obstacle to the efficient use of counter-terrorism and anti-banditry operations in Nigeria. Although institutions like the Nigerian Army, Nigerian Air Force, Department of State Services (DSS), and Nigeria Police Force are seriously involved in maintaining national security, the presence of competing jurisdictions and interagency rivalries has typically hindered their effectiveness in operations [37]. Furthermore, these institutional rivalries are exacerbated by inadequate training, logistics support, and technology-driven assets that are needed for surveillance, communication, and prompt response. Moreover, civil-military relations have also deteriorated in most affected communities through human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and forced displacement of people during operations [38]. Such actions disenfranchise the local

communities and undermine community-based intelligence, which is critical in asymmetric warfare contexts. In addition, the perception of the government's actions is negatively impacted by a seeming lack of political will to bring to book known financiers of terrorism and banditry, which creates a culture of impunity [39], [40]. To these compound vulnerabilities, experts prescribe a comprehensive multisectoral strategy that combines security operations with development programs, justice sector reforms, and participatory governance to tackle the underlying causes of terrorism and armed criminality in a sustainable way [41]. In the absence of such a sweeping strategy, Nigeria stands to be thrust into a long-term cycle of violence that may further deteriorate its state capacity.

V. CONCLUSION

The changing security contours of insecurity in Nigeria, and specifically the advent of armed banditry in addition to the persisting threat of Boko Haram terrorism, necessitates a direct reexamination of the frameworks through which violence is identified, classified, and responded to by both state governments and society in general. This research has demonstrated that, despite the divergences in ideological frameworks and operational modalities between Boko Haram and bandits, there is a convergence trend in their modus operandi, intensity of violence, and effects on civilian societies. The binary distinction established between terrorism and banditry (frequently porous to political narrative, media representation, and juridical uncertainties) has entrenched irregular state behavior, frustrated cooperative security initiatives, and rendered the quest for sustainable peace elusive.

The labelling and classification procedures extend beyond semantic interests; they have significant resource implications for the distribution of resources, the delivery of international assistance, the execution of legal proceedings, and state action legitimacy. By not addressing the terrorist aspects of organised banditry, especially where groups engage in mass kidnappings, selective killings, and concerted attacks on civilians, Nigeria risks underestimating the extent and character of the threat it is facing. Moreover, the research stresses the urgent necessity for comprehensive counter-measures that unite military action with strong community outreach,

legal reform, regional cooperation, and active involvement of civil society and media.

In sum, it is imperative to reinterpret the security threat environment of Nigeria by a single conceptual and policy framework with a view to re-building public trust, consolidating national security, and building resilience to the pervasive culture of violence. As non-state armed groups constantly mutate and adapt, so also must the approach and narrative employed in combating them. An acknowledgement of the blurred boundaries between terrorism and banditry is the starting point for forging a more cohesive and workable national security paradigm.

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