

Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem:

Explaining the conflict drivers

Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD)
Abuja, Nigeria

February 2022



Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem:

Explaining the conflict drivers



Centre for Democracy and Development
16, A7 Street, CITEC Mount Pleasant Estate,
Jabi- Airport Road, Mbori District, Abuja, FCT.

www.cddwestafrica.org

cddav@cddwestafrica.org

T: [@cddwestafrica](https://www.instagram.com/cddwestafrica)

F: [facebook.com/centrefordemocracy.anddevelopment](https://www.facebook.com/centrefordemocracy.anddevelopment)



This publication was produced with financial support from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK Government".

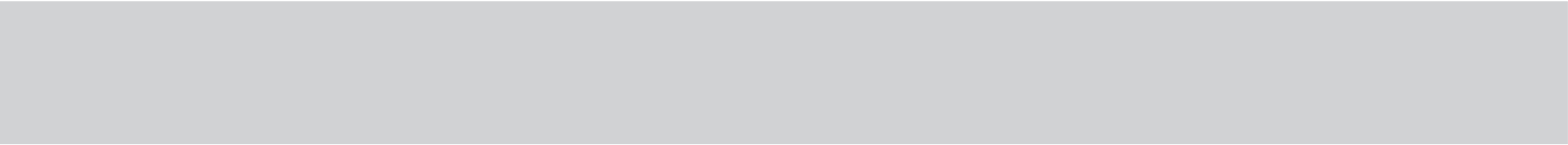


Table of Contents

Executive Summary	01
Introduction	04
Methods and limitations	05
Methods	05
Limitations	06
Root Causes and Drivers of Banditry	06
Environmental Degradation	07
Land Use Disputes	08
Failure of the Justice System	09
Growing intercommunal tensions	10
Breakdown of Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms	11
Criminal Activities	13
Porous Borders and Transnational Arms Flows	13
A Fluid Yet Intractable Conflict	15
Conflict actors	16
Bandits	16
Foreign militants	20
Jihadists	21
The military	24
Yan Sakai and Vigilantes	25
Traditional Rulers	27
Women and children	28
Amnesties or Bullets? Assessing State and Federal Responses to Insecurity	30
Why peace deals don't work	32
Conclusion	33

Acknowledgment

This report was written by Idayat Hassan and James Barnett.

We acknowledge the support of Dr Sa'eed Hussaini, Dr Murtala Rufai, Damian Ihekonye, Esther Yusuf and Jamie Hitchen for their contributions during fieldwork and finalisation of the report.

We are very grateful to our interviewees and focus group participants for their contributions.

CDD received funding for the research from the Foreign and Commonwealth and Development Office.

Photos Credit: Abdulaziz Abdulaziz



Executive Summary

Nigeria is suffering from a devastating criminal insurgency in its northwestern states. Thousands of militants, known colloquially as bandits, have taken over swathes of the countryside, using military-grade weaponry to rustle cattle, terrorise communities, stage mass kidnappings for ransom, and overrun security forces. The conflict is liable to have immense long-term impacts on the socioeconomic development of the northwest due to both the humanitarian crisis it has engendered and its second-order effects such as the high number of children who are presently out of school for fear of kidnappings.

Drawing on extensive interviews with dozens of sources from across the northwest and wider country, this report identifies the root

causes of the conflict and present conflict dynamics to inform policy responses. Dispelling the sensational narratives of “Fulanization” that have gained prominence in the national discourse, it identifies how the conflict is rooted in various factors - such as the growing salience of ethnicity in land use disputes, under-development and environmental degradation, the failure of the criminal justice system, the rise of vigilantism and militia-based local security, and the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms - that have overlapped and exacerbated each other over the preceding two decades, paving the way for the current crisis.

The research sheds light on the following dimensions of the crisis in the northwest:



The historical factors and root drivers of conflict



The identities, motivations, and modus operandi of the bandits



The role of additional conflict actors such as anti-bandit vigilantes and the federal security forces



The roles of traditional rulers and institutions in the conflict and their potential for peacebuilding



The presence of foreign militants in the northwest



Relations between bandits and Nigeria's jihadists



The gender dimensions of insecurity in the northwest



The inadequacy of current government efforts to address the conflict



It analyses how the bandits mobilise popular support by exploiting political grievances in northwestern communities, particularly with pastoralists, even as they fight primarily for personal gain. It finds that local vigilante forces, particularly the Hausa self-defence groups known as Yan Sakai, have helped fuel insecurity by engaging in egregious and indiscriminate human rights violations against Fulani and pastoralist communities; directly or indirectly pushing many pastoralists into banditry.

Federal security forces have also sought to compensate for insufficient manpower and intelligence by profiling, harassing, or indiscriminately attacking pastoralists with little concern for collateral damage, exacerbating many of the underlying drivers of conflict.

Many local politicians and traditional rulers have also been complicit in aggravating the

underlying causes of insecurity by, for example, managing matters of land use in a divisive or corrupt manner. On the question of the bandits' links to jihadists, the report finds that jihadists have occasionally offered tactical support or advice to bandits but have failed to recruit a significant number to their ideology. It shows that foreign militants are a minority among the bandits, despite widespread rumours within Nigeria to the contrary.

To conclude the study argues that efforts to mitigate insecurity in the northwest must look beyond kinetic approaches, which have repeatedly failed to ameliorate—and have indeed exacerbated—the underlying drivers of conflict. First and foremost, to have any hope of addressing the crisis in the northwest, local, national, and international stakeholders must understand the multivariate factors that drive insecurity in the region.



Introduction



over
12,000
people Killed



over
1,000,000
displaced



over
1,000,000
out of school children

The rise of conflict in northwest Nigeria is one of West Africa's most pressing, yet underexamined, security issues. The conflict has no clear start date but follows a general trajectory of deteriorating rural insecurity: rural banditry and criminality grew throughout the late 2000s, with the first major instances of violence occurring in the early 2010s.

The security situation quickly deteriorated thereafter, particularly in the middle of the decade when the state's response became increasingly militarised, while several peace deals intermittently brokered by governors proved short-lived. As of October 2021, over 12,000 people had been killed (though the real number is likely to be higher),¹ one million displaced, and approximately another million children are out of school because of criminal violence known colloquially as banditry.²

The epicentre of the conflict is Zamfara state, although violence also rages in parts of neighbouring Sokoto, Niger, Kaduna, Katsina and, to some extent, Kebbi states. The conflict has undermined public trust in the state's monopoly on the use of force, as heavily armed criminals have staged bold attacks on security forces and kidnapped high-level figures, with some bandits even shooting down a military jet and others storming the Nigerian Defence Academy in 2021.³

As the security situation in the northwest has deteriorated in recent years, heated debates have emerged in Nigerian media, on social media, and within the political arena over the identities and motivations of the bandits and the appropriate response to insecurity. In a country as polarised as Nigeria, misinformation and sensationalist narratives often dominate the discourse. Consequently, various popular

theories have posited that the bandits are an extension of Boko Haram; are Fulani ultra-nationalists conspiring to conquer the country; are the mercenaries of local politicians and mining companies, or are otherwise sponsored by foreign powers. But as this report shows, the conflict in the northwest cannot be reduced to a single factor or actor. Rather the crisis is rooted in several overlapping economic, political, and social problems.

While today's conflict is unprecedented in Nigerian history, neither banditry nor the intertwined issue of farmer-herder conflicts are recent phenomena in the northwest. Northwestern Nigeria has long been a commercial hub at the southern edge of the trans-Saharan caravan routes, making it an attractive region for thieves. The amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria under Lord Lugard in 1914 was premised, in part, on the need to curtail the activities of bandits in the north.

Folklore and traditional songs in northwestern Nigeria pay homage to famous bandit families from the colonial and pre-colonial periods. It was widely believed in these times that bandits had mystical powers. According to our interlocutors, what has changed is that previously the bandits used mysticism to steal but today, mysticism has been replaced or complemented by sophisticated weapons. This use of sophisticated weaponry is one of four themes that distinguish today's conflicts from the banditry of the past. The others are that conflict is intensified and waged on a greater scale with an increase in the proliferation of actors involved, conflicts have become ethnicised and they have spread from the border communities with the Niger Republic into states across northwestern Nigeria.

1. Rufai, A. M. (2021), "I Am a Bandit": A Decade of Research in Zamfara's Bandit's Den," (Sokoto, Nigeria: Graphic Concept Academy, September 2021), 6.

2. Some interlocutors interviewed by the authors have put the number as high as five million when IDPs are accounted for.

3. Rufai, A. and Umar, S. (2021), "Ali Kachalla: Unveiling The Zamfara Terror Kingpin Who Downed NAF Jet," *Daily Trust*, August 2, 2021, <https://dailytrust.com/ali-kachalla-unveiling-the-zamfara-terror-kingpin-who-downed-naf-jet> (Accessed on 24/9/2021); Omonobi, K. et al., (2021), "Attack on NDA: No where is safe any more in Nigeran, bandits are in total control – Retd AVM Ararile," *Vanguard*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/08/attack-on-nda-no-where-is-safe-any-more-in-nigeria-bandits-are-in-total-control-ret-d-avm-ararile/> (Accessed on 11/9/2021).



Methods and limitations

This research draws primarily on qualitative fieldwork conducted across several northwestern states between April and October 2021 as well as phone interviews with key informants, daily monitoring of open-source source data, access to visual and audio files from select sources, and consultations with key informants held in Abuja. This primary research was supported by available secondary literature and built, where possible, on previous understandings developed by CDD.

Qualitative fieldwork included a mix of interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) as well as site visits. For security reasons, most interviews were conducted in the state capitals of five northwestern states: Sokoto, Gusau (Zamfara), Katsina, Kaduna, and Minna (Niger). The approach of bringing participants from surrounding afflicted communities into the state capital for a meeting at a discrete location was determined to be safer for both our research team and our interview/FGD subjects. However, we also conducted several field visits to communities afflicted by the conflict. This included Rabah local government area (LGA) in Sokoto, Anka and Birnin Magaji LGAs in Zamfara, Chikun LGA in Kaduna, and Jibia and Batsari LGAs in Katsina.

The primary research team consisted of one female and two males and relied on interlocutors

or field assistants in each location, each of whom were male. In most instances, either our interlocutors or one member of our research team served as a translator. Everyone that served as translator was a native Hausa speaker, while in several instances in Minna we used a local translator who was a fluent Gwari speaker.

The study sought to speak with a wide range of stakeholders in each of the states. This included state government officials and advisors, security officials, members of local paramilitary outfits, repentant bandits, traditional rulers, religious leaders, district heads and village chiefs, representatives of herders' groups such as Miyetti Allah, local NGOs and activists, local academics and researchers, businessmen and community leaders, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other victims of the conflict. These interviews and FGDs were recorded, and detailed notes were taken. The team also gained rare in-person access to several senior bandits in Zamfara state. Our goal in interviewing such a diverse array of actors was to hear perspectives from all sides of the conflict and to learn from both those who could give a longer historical perspective as well as those with first-hand experience of the conflict one way or another. Targeted efforts to gain a balance of voices in terms of gender and ethnicity of our interview and FGD subjects were not achieved.

Limitations

We found it difficult to connect with individuals from Fulani pastoralist communities, particularly from September onwards, as it became increasingly dangerous for many to travel into towns or state meetings due to the risk of profiling and violence from Yan Sakai on the roads. Representatives of Miyetti Allah were much easier to reach as they have offices in each state capital, but while they have insights into many dynamics affecting herding communities, they are not without their own agenda and bias.

Our interviews and FGDs were also male-dominated. While we sought to achieve equal gender representation, many government bodies, NGOs, and unofficial outfits such as the Yan Sakai are dominated by men. But the women we interviewed, who are mainly from senior state government officials to officers in vigilante groups to heads of NGOs to IDPs - were willing to speak candidly about the gender dimension of the conflict.

There remain gaps in our research, however, particularly as the conflict is very fluid and fast-moving and many of our interview and FGD subjects have only partial information and/or strong biases. On some issues - for example, the

Root Causes and Drivers of Banditry

The conflict in the northwest must be understood in the context of the region's development challenges. 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.⁴ The region also has three of the four states with the lowest literacy rates in the country.⁵ Conflict is exacerbating these low

question of several bandits' links to jihadists and transnational elements - we received conflicting information from different, seemingly trustworthy sources, that we were unable to corroborate. Additionally, while we gained various insights into the roles of politicians or traditional rulers in supporting or indirectly fuelling banditry and/or militancy, this is an area that merits further investigation, as many of our interview and FGD subjects were hesitant to speak in specific detail owing to the sensitive nature of the topic. There was a similar reluctance to speak officially about security operations. Here we utilised back channels to eventually gain some insights into successes and challenges of the operation.

Finally, whilst we gained unique insights into banditry through rare interviews with active and former bandits and other well-placed sources, it is near-impossible to precisely assess the motivations and modus operandi of each of the 100-plus bandit gangs. As such, the report's findings may not apply to every group and conflict. Further interviews with other bandits - for example younger gang leaders or non-Fulani bandits - would add important nuance to this analysis, if they can be conducted safely.

levels of education and development as one million Nigerian children are estimated to be out of school due to insecurity in the northwest.⁶

These conditions of low socioeconomic development provide fertile ground for conflict and criminal violence. However, they are not sufficient explanations for the present conflict, which emerged gradually for more than a decade. Rather, today's conflict is rooted, to a large extent, in land-use disputes that have escalated and taken on an increasingly ethnic

4 National Bureau of Statistics (2019), "Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria: Executive Summary" Abuja: National Bureau of Statistics.

5 Amzat, A. (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-remainslow/>. (Accessed on 24/9/2021)

6 France 24, (2021), "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>. (Accessed on 24/9/2021).

dimension because of official corruption, the security sector's lack of capacity and professionalism, the failures of the criminal justice system, environmental degradation and a breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms between farmers and herders. The formation and intervention of self-help groups such as the Yan Sakai and vigilante forces as either state or community responses indiscriminately targeted ethnic Fulani, further heightening conflict. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has contributed

significantly to the breakdown of law and order currently being experienced.

These factors have not produced a coherent insurgency or mere conflict between farmers and herders, but instead, criminal violence in the form of banditry has increased dramatically because of the general breakdown in intercommunal relations and law and order. This section offers a detailed overview of the following drivers of insecurity in the northwest:



Environmental Degradation

Population growth and the effects of climate change have contributed to a sense of land scarcity and fuelled resource competition in many communities, even though Nigeria is not presently facing a Malthusian crisis of any sort. Per the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, Nigeria's agricultural sector has been underdeveloped and neglected since the oil boom of the 1970s, leading to inefficient use of arable land and groundwater resources.⁷

As Nigeria's population has grown, so too has the farmland needed to feed the country, leading to deforestation and encroachment on traditional grazing areas.⁸ Climate change, pollution, and overuse of existing water resources have led to desertification and the disappearance of rivers

and watering holes, increasing competition over remaining sources of groundwater. For example, 50-75% of ten northern states may be experiencing desertification, with some entire villages buried under sand in the far north of the country.⁹ Both farming and cattle rearing are water-intensive activities and Nigeria's north is generally quite arid for a little more than half of the year, meaning that even minor alternations in annual rainfall can cause significant drought and the attendant loss of groundwater and pasture. Unfortunately, alterations in rainfall have not been minor: Nigeria's National Meteorological Agency estimates that the rainy season has decreased from ¹⁵⁰ to ¹²⁰ days on average over the past thirty years because of climate change.¹⁰

⁷ Federal Republic of Nigeria (2012), "FAO Country Programming Framework (CPF) Federal

⁸ Brottem, L. (2021), "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies Africa Security Brief No. 39, July 12, 2021, <https://africacenter.org/publication/growingcomplexity-farmer-herder-conflict-west-central-africa/> (Accessed on 24/9/2021).

⁹ Per the FAO, these states are Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara. FAO CPF, p. 6.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, (2017), "Herders against Farmers: Nigeria's Expanding Deadly Conflict," Report No.

252, September 19, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/252-herders-against-farmersnigerias-expanding-deadly-conflict/> (Accessed on 11/8/2021).

Republic of Nigeria 2013-2017", p. 3. Accessible at <https://www.fao.org/3/au053e/au053e.pdf>.

Land Use Disputes

Over the past two decades, it became increasingly common for farmers in the northwest to encroach onto the grazing reserves, corridors, and watering holes of herders. These lands are quite fertile owing in large part to the manure that accrues from passing livestock. Grazing reserves and corridors had been established at several points in the colonial and post-colonial eras, but few were clearly demarcated or gazetted, with land-use arrangements often being based, in practice, on tradition and an honour system. The 1978 Land Use Decree, with its antecedents in the British system of indirect rule in northern Nigeria, created conflicting and parallel systems of land tenure - traditional yet legally non-binding vs. “modern” and legally binding - that lies at the heart of many of Nigeria's land-use conflicts.

Beginning in the 2000s, farmers found that they often had tacit or explicit permission from local authorities to farm on restricted grazing lands. Certain politicians, newly empowered by the return to democratic rule in 1999, sold restricted land to farmers and developers for profit or distributed it as a form of political patronage. Certain emirs - the traditional rulers of the north who continue to hold informal authority - did the same, brokering deals with farmers to encroach onto grazing lands. Retired civil servants or military officers who had accrued fortunes in the era of military rule also purchased large swathes of land in the northwest, often on top of untapped mineral deposits whose locations were unknown to those who farmed or grazed their herds over them. In short, the 2000s saw a significant flurry of development and farming expansion in the northwest. Whilst some of these developments were legal, others were less so. Many dispossessed herders of lands that had traditionally been understood as at least

seasonally restricted for them, leading to herders taking their herds to pasture in contested areas. Grazing reserves, including those that were gazetted in the 1965 Grazing Reserve Law and those which were reserved by local custom and traditional authorities at the village or district level for livestock, were not protected by law. The seizure of grazing land from reserved areas in Zamfara state affected an estimated 20,000 Fulani people, dispossessing many of them and constraining their access to land.¹¹ Social alienation caused by the maladministration of land in Zamfara was identified by livestock officials and pastoral leaders as a root cause of conflicts that degenerated into rural banditry. A 2018 report identified 37 grazing reserves in Zamfara - gazetted and ungazetted - but found that some had been completely lost, while most were largely taken over.

Access to land at the village level primarily depends on reciprocal relations between crop farmers and pastoralists, usually facilitated by village and district heads, and arrangements at the individual or family level between herders and farmers. Traditional land-use arrangements, in which herders would be allowed onto farmlands after the harvest to graze cattle on the crop residue, also began to break down. Some farmers would intentionally start farming late in the season with the expectation that the herds would move onto the land before the harvest, thus destroying the crops and forcing the herder into paying compensation higher than the underlying crop value. Whereas herders used to graze their herds on crop residue for free - since the manure from the cattle would, in turn, help boost the next harvest - some farmers started charging herders for the residue. The cumulative effect of these profit-driven calculations was to create a sense of exploitation among herders.

¹¹ KII 15 August 2021 Gusau, Zamfara state.

Failure of the Justice System

Nigeria suffers from a weak justice sector due to underlying structural problems. The period it takes to get cases assigned to judges, heard, and then a judgment issued is significant. This is coupled with a lack of formal access to justice for most, poor salaries and judicial infrastructures, a lack of interpreters, and corruption. In northwest Nigeria, the formal justice system operates parallel to traditional justice mechanisms mediated by local authorities; ranging from the Emir, district heads, and ward leaders. Land matters are mediated either through the formal court system or the traditional local justice system. The local system is also afflicted by some of the challenges plaguing the formal justice system.

This failure of the administration of justice is one of the drivers of the northwest conflict and has historically changed the nature of conflict in Nigeria. For instance, the extrajudicial killings of the founder of Boko Haram, Muhammad Yusuf, and 700 of his followers led the sect towards jihad-inspired conflict after 2009.

In addition to a lack of judicial redress, the high-handedness of security operatives - both formal and informal - have aggravated the conflicts. According to a bandit leader, this combination led him to join banditry:

“The Emir of Shinkafi has known me since I was a little boy, and I am sure even if you tell him I will later become a bandit, he will say no. This is because I was an obedient boy in Shinkafi until the evolution of Yan Sakai. The Emir witnessed how 1,000 of our cattle were rustled away by criminals in Shinkafi to the area of Zurmi and Maradun LGAs in Zamfara state. My parents and family reported the matter to the court but

unfortunately, nothing was done. Not long after, the soldiers and Yan Sakai killed my stepfather, and nothing was again done about it. There is no place to report this injustice. Therefore, I feel the only way out is to bear a gun and fight for my freedom. All the security agents and the emirs that were supposed to protect me were unable to protect me. But had these agencies have assisted me and provided me with justice, I would never kill anybody.”

Corruption amongst the judiciary, lawyers, and the police were identified as being partly responsible for the take up of arms by the bandits. One court official explained that the lack of administration of justice occasioned a high level of injustice, which led many Fulani to take up arms.¹² One repentant bandit claimed he did not go to the police to file a report after some of his family's herd was rustled because he feared the police would take the remainder of his herd.¹³ Many interlocutors recall instances in which a herder's cattle would destroy a farmer's crops worth N10,000, yet they would be ordered by police to pay up to N100,000 in compensation, with police and the farmers splitting the pay off.¹⁴ Miyetti Allah, the powerful pastoralist sociocultural organisation, will often intervene in court cases involving herders. But there are complaints that Miyetti Allah officials merely do this to also extort the herder in question.

For the average herder, pursuing legal recourse to justice is thus a daunting, drawn-out, and often futile exercise.¹⁵ One bandit leader gave the example of his father who spent seven years pursuing a case in the courts. At the end of the case, despite having spent 100 heads of cattle, no justice was served, “we became impoverished by judicial cases hence the decision to take up arms

¹² KII 21 August 2021, Gusau, Zamfara state

¹³ KII 20 August 2021, Gusau, Zamfara state

¹⁴ KII 4 December 2021, Minna, Niger state

¹⁵ KII 21 December 2021, Shinkafi, Zamfara state

against injustice.¹⁶ Farmers also alleged that they are often denied justice even after paying bribes to judges and police. As a result, they prefer to forgo formal justice and rely on Yan Sakai and other vigilante groups, especially now that the herders are armed with guns.¹⁷

Even when the justice sector does prosecute criminals, they can bribe their way out of detention. This in part explains the rise of local vigilante groups. Local vigilante outfits have existed in the northwest for decades and were traditionally relatively non-violent, akin to neighbourhood watch organisations. However, when vigilantes saw that criminals whom they had apprehended were quickly released, they began taking the law into their own hands. There was a gradual transition to violent vigilantism of

the Yan Sakai (Hausa for “volunteer guards”). These groups began emerging independently in communities across the northwest in the 2000s, using homemade weapons to defend villages from bandits. However, these Hausa self-defence outfits often employ excessive and indiscriminate violence against Fulani on suspicion of being bandits or bandit sympathisers.

In short, these failures to pursue justice have allowed impunity to reign and led to the spiralling of the conflict. Across all actors interviewed, there is a consensus that without injustice and impunity, the conflict would not have evolved so quickly or reached such an alarming height.

Growing intercommunal tensions

The ethnic dimension of farmer-herder conflicts became increasingly salient in the early 2010s. In the northwest, many farmers are Hausa, while most herders are Fulani. That said, some Fulani has taken to farming or urban livelihoods, and there are strong social divisions between pastoralist and urban Fulani. The latter includes the traditional emirs of the northwest who are largely Fulani but have little in common with pastoralists. As one key informant noted, a Fulani herder sees a city dweller, even a fellow kinsman, as a “lost soul.”¹⁸ Additionally, the northwest has small populations of Kanuri and Tuaregs. While not considered “indigenous” to the region, some Kanuri and Tuaregs have been in northwest Nigeria for more than a century, often working as cattle or camel herders. Consequently, some Kanuri and Tuareg herders are mistakenly identified as Fulani by their location and occupation; even more so after generations of assimilation into local cultures. Additionally, some Hausa have taken to cattle rearing.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, there was high a degree of integration between Hausa and Fulani, with Hausa becoming the lingua franca of the north. But as tensions between farmers and herders increased in the northwest in the 2000s, the longstanding notion of a joint Hausa-Fulani identity began to break down. Fulani became stigmatised as violent rogue herders and, by extension, bandits. Security forces, and even more so the Yan Sakai, began harassing, robbing, or killing ordinary herders on suspicion of them being bandits. As herders increasingly left the northwest for other states - or countries - because of the attacks on their communities, they spread a narrative among fellow Fulani that they were being persecuted, in Zamfara in particular.

In response, many Fulani herders began to see Hausa farmers as their antagonists, particularly any farming community that raised a Yan Sakai militia. Older herders lament that some youths, after facing extortion at the hands of a farmer or policeman, would drive their cattle through

¹⁶ KII 22 December 2021, Shinkafi, Zamfara state

¹⁷ KII 31 March 2021, Zamfara state

¹⁸ KII 20 September 2021, Sokoto state

farming land simply to destroy crops as a form of revenge. In some instances, Fulani would even attack and burn entire farming communities over the killing of one herdsman to send a signal that they were not to be mistreated. As one traditional ruler in Zamfara, himself Fulani,

stated, “the Fulani wanted to show that they are the superior ethnic group in Africa, so they sent a message that no Fulani can be targeted with impunity.”¹⁹

Breakdown of Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

The breakdown of the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms historically used in resolving disputes between farmers and herders has also led to the escalation of conflicts. These mechanisms predate the formal court system and traditionally involve an ardo, the most respected leader within a Fulani pastoralist community,²⁰ as well as the village head who acts as representatives of the farmers in question. Any decision an ardo and village head agree to was generally accepted by their respective communities since each party believed the other would not dare challenge their community leader.

These mechanisms based on arbitration between ardo and the village head began to break down in the 2000s owing to a lack of faith in their effectiveness. Herders claimed that

farmers were no longer respecting the decisions of their village heads while farmers claimed that ardo were powerless or disingenuous. Some interlocutors also suggest that the politicisation of traditional institutions with the onset of the Fourth Republic contributed to the erosion of these institutions' legitimacy. For example, in Zamfara Governor Sani Yerima (1999-2007) created new positions within Fulani communities that served to elevate his political allies more than they served community interests.²¹ As a result, some traditional authorities have ceased to be rulers of all the people in their domain but instead choose to rule and represent their ethnicity.²² However, this is not the case across the northwest. In some areas, traditional leaders play a positive role in conflict prevention and resolution.

¹⁹ KII 23 August 2021, Zamfara state.

²⁰ Traditionally, the Ardo is akin to the chief of a band of nomadic cattle-rearing Fulani.

²¹ FGDs 19-20 September 2021 Gusau, Zamfara state

A Case Study: The killing of Alhaji Isheyi

Alhaji Isheyi was a prominent figure in Nigeria's pastoralist community whose murder by *Yan Sakai* in August 2012 sparked a series of reprisals against Hausa villages in Zamfara. Multiple sources pointed to Isheyi's death as an inflection point in the northwest, a rallying cry for bandits, and a point from which inter-communal relations never fully recovered. In many ways, Isheyi's killing signalled the shift from isolated acts of rural banditry and cattle rustling into full-blown intercommunal conflict and terrorism.

Alhaji Isheyi was a senior official in Miyetti Allah who had connections to herders across West Africa. While based in Dansadau Emirate in Zamfara, Isheyi fell out with the emir, Hussaini Umar, who allegedly began eying Isheyi's cattle. According to one source involved in the affair,²³ in 2012, Umar secretly conspired with two criminals to steal 200 of Isheyi's cattle. When the thieves were later caught, Umar paid a policeman to have them released in transit, a common practice in the northwest. Isheyi took matters into his own hands by having a relation of the emir who had sold the rustled cattle killed. Umar responded by conspiring with some *Yan Sakai* to have Alhaji Isheyi murdered under the pretext that Isheyi was connected to bandits. In short, the *Yan Sakai* were co-opted into settling the emir's personal feud.

The fallout from Isheyi's death was significant. No traditional dispute mechanisms were pursued as any shred of trust between Hausa and Fulani in Dansadau had now evaporated: the emir was Hausa and Isheyi a Fulani. Instead, Isheyi's relatives organised herders from Dansadau and further afield to attack the villages from which Isheyi's *Yan Sakai* killers hailed. To avenge Isheyi's death, the herders killed over 70 Hausa across three villages. Seemingly emboldened, a few months later, the same herders killed over 100 people in another Dansadau village where a relative of theirs had been murdered. Several *Yan Sakai* stated that after these attacks, they feared the Fulani would try to remove all Hausa from the emirate, so they began attacking any Fulani they saw until Governor Yari ordered them to stop in 2014.

In 2021, current Zamfara Governor, Bello Matawale, suspended Umar over his role in Isheyi's death, but the damage has already been done. Dansadau is currently one of the bandit hotspots in Zamfara.

The incident is a tragic example of how a single dispute between influential individuals can spark an internecine localised conflict when people have no trust in either the criminal justice system, their neighbours, or traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. Umar's role in Isheyi's death, moreover, is a warning against relying too heavily on traditional rulers in any peacebuilding efforts in the northwest. Traditional rulers remain important facets of northern society and must be integrated into any attempted solutions to banditry. But they are not inherently peaceful or impartial individuals.

23 KII 19 August 2021, Gusau, Zamfara state.

Criminal Activity

Banditry in the northwest long predates the intercommunal conflict of the 2000s and early 2010s. However, the bandit's ranks grew exponentially in the 2010s as a second-order effect of the increased ethnic tension between Hausa and Fulani. The bandits exploited herder's grievances, recruiting those who felt they needed a means of protecting their lives, lands, and herds. Two cattle rustlers, Buharin Daji and Kundu, staged recruiting exercises in 2011 and 2012 in which they either lured young, predominantly Fulani men with promises of cash, cows, and women or simply force them into joining their 'gang'.²⁵

Other Fulani took up arms to defend themselves from Yan Sakai yet came to see criminal activity as the best, or only, way to finance this self-defence. As one key informant noted, "if communities force a herder into the forest where criminals reside, [the herder] must be armed to defend himself [from cattle rustlers]. Once he is armed, it is tempting for the herder to take up cattle rustling or robbery himself.

One set of four closely aligned bandit commanders in Zamfara claimed that they started cattle rustling in 2011 as a means of buying weapons for self-defence following a series of attacks on their communities by *Yan Sakai*.²⁶ "We did this because we had no choice. Other [bandits] do it just for the money"²⁷ they argued. Alternatively, one repentant bandit claimed to have joined the bandits to reclaim cattle that had been rustled. Because the security forces were already treating him as a bandit by virtue of his ethnicity, "there was no reason not to become a bandit."²⁸

The line between economic necessity – 'I must rustle some cattle to buy guns to defend my people from Yan Sakai' - and economic opportunism – 'The more cattle I rustle, the more guns I can purchase, the more powerful and wealthy I become' - is thin, and many herders who first took up arms out of self-defence have since adopted a more criminal modus operandi.

Porous Borders and Transnational Arms Flows

The conflict in the northwest could not have reached the intensity it has today without the widespread proliferation of small arms and light weapons across West Africa. Military stockpiles in Libya and Sahelian states such as Mali have been seized or stolen by militants on numerous occasions since 2011, with the weapons subsequently finding their way onto the regional black market.²⁹ Security sources claim that several bandits, such as Shehu Rekep, used their connections with arms smugglers and militants in the Sahel and Libya to bring military-grade weaponry into the northwest from around the mid-2010s.³⁰ The firepower that bandits have been able to acquire allows them to overpower

smaller security force outposts and police checkpoints, such that bandits enjoy significant freedom of movement in all but the larger urban areas of the northwest. The proliferation of military-grade weapons has also made it easier for relatively small numbers of bandits to destroy a village or stage a mass kidnapping. The sources of bandits weapons are today more diversified than in the early 2010s, with some weapons reportedly coming from overseas via West African ports,³¹ posing a serious challenge to security operatives. The *Yan Sakai* and vigilantes, for their part, rely on homemade guns that are difficult for authorities to interdict and regulate.

24 Rufa'i, A. M. (2021), "I Am a Bandit": A Decade of Research in Zamfara's Bandit's Den," (Sokoto, Nigeria: Graphic Concept Academy, September 2021), Pp:16-18.

25 KII 20 August 2021, Zamfara state.

26 KII 21 August 2021, Birnin Magaji, Zamfara state.

27 KII 21 August 2021, Birnin Magaji, Zamfara state.

28 KII 20 August 2021, Zamfara state.

29 Koné, H. (2020), "Where do Sahel terrorists get their heavy weapons?" Institute for Security Studies ISS Today, February 12, 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/where-do-sahel-terrorists-get-their-heavy-weapons>; "Nigeria's Farmer-Herder Conflict: Domestic, regional, and transcontinental weapon sources," Conflict Armament Research, January 2020.

30 Rufa'i, A. M. (2021), "I Am a Bandit": A Decade of Research in Zamfara's Bandit's Den," (Sokoto, Nigeria: Graphic Concept Academy, September 2021), pp.21.

31 Koné, H. (2020), "Where do Sahel terrorists get their heavy weapons?" Institute for Security Studies ISS Today, February 12, 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/where-do-sahel-terrorists-get-their-heavy-weapons>; "Nigeria's Farmer-Herder Conflict: Domestic, regional, and transcontinental weapon sources," Conflict Armament Research, January 2020.



A Fluid Yet Intractable Conflict



The situation in the northwest represents a fluid and mobile conflict. Zamfara remains the centre of banditry while the LGAs within Sokoto, Katsina, Niger, and Kaduna states bordering Zamfara are also heavily affected. Sabon Birni, Isa, and Rabah in eastern Sokoto, which border Zamfara's Shinkafi LGA, have been among the hardest hit, while the Birnin Gwari region of western Kaduna has experienced some of the highest levels of violence owing to its forests, which stretch into Zamfara and other states [Figure 1].

Within the northwest, however, the base of operations of any given bandits may shift in a short period. Furthermore, gangs will sometimes conduct attacks, often with other bandit gangs, far from their camps. The movement of bandits is driven by both opportunity and necessity. For example, the bandit Dogo Gide, normally based in Bwirni Gwari forest straddling Kaduna and Niger states, chose to target distant Birnin Yauri in Kebbi state for a mass kidnapping in July 2021 because many of the schools closer to his camps had closed because of banditry.³² The bandits generally move on bikes but have also taken advantage of waterways, particularly in the rainy season, to move themselves and their weapons via canoe.

The bandits demonstrated their adaptability in September 2021, when the northwestern governors of Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, and Sokoto imposed a telecommunications blackout and array of restrictions on movement and commerce in conjunction with an increased troop presence aimed at choking bandit's logistics. These measures took the bandits by surprise and hampered their operations and mobility, with many ditching their bikes on the side of the road for lack of fuel.³³ One kidnapping victim in Katsina recounted how the measures forced the bandits to trickle out of their camp for two weeks before just one bandit was left to

A similar incident played out in neighbouring Goronyo LGA several weeks later when bandits killed over 40 people at a market in apparent reprisal for the Yan Sakai's killing of 15 Fulani days prior

guard the gang's hostages. As the man recounted, "we were all starving, including the bandit who was guarding us. So each day we told him to go to the village to buy us food. One day when he left us, we ran."³⁴

But the bandits quickly adapted, moving into new areas to loot supplies, securing ransom from kidnap victims in foodstuffs and fuel rather than money, and by using human couriers, walkie-talkies, or the cell networks of neighbouring Niger Republic, to circumvent the communications blackout. Reports from mid-October suggested the bandits had also found ways to circumvent the fuel restrictions.³⁵ At the same time, residents in the northwest suffered under the restrictions, which coincided with the harvest season and food insecurity worsened. An official in Batsari LGA noted in October that "the bandits are making worse the food insecurity. Since now they are hungry from the restrictions, they are attacking the villages to rob the farmers' food supplies."³⁶

Finally, in a troubling development, the measures have had the indirect effect of exacerbating intercommunal tensions in areas that were previously less impacted by banditry, as the measures have disrupted the bandits to the extent that many rank-and-file fighters have dispersed beyond their usual range. In Tangaza LGA in Sokoto state, for example, hungry bandits raided a market on 17 September 2021. When

³² Exclusive audio of Dogo Gide communication with interlocutors.

³³ Barnett, J. and Rufa'i, M. (2021), "The Other Insurgency: Northwest Nigeria's Worsening Bandit Crisis," War on the Rocks, November 16, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-other-insurgency-northwest-nigeriasworsening-bandit-crisis/>. (Accessed on 24/9/2021).

³⁴ KII 15 October 2021, Batsari, Katsina state.

³⁵ KII 14 October, Katsina state.

³⁶ KII 15 October 2021, Batsari, Katsina state.

several of the bandits were captured the next day, the district head ordered the police to release the detained bandits to an angry crowd of residents who then executed them. In the following days, the Yan Sakai killed as many as 50 unarmed Fulani in the area.³⁷ A similar incident played out in neighbouring Goronyo LGA several

weeks later when bandits killed over 40 people at a market in apparent reprisal for the Yan Sakai's killing of 15 Fulani days prior.³⁸

In recognition that it had adversely impacted local communities without decisively degrading the bandits, the Zamfara state government lifted the telecommunications ban in early December.³⁹

Figure 1: Old and New Conflict LGAs Bordering Zamfara



If previous military operations in the northwest are any indicator, the bandits will be able to bounce back from any temporary displacement or losses, perhaps even stronger than before if they achieve greater unity in the process. All but a few of the major bandit leaders still seem to be alive - and many of them seem to have remained in Zamfara - owing to a lack of intelligence-

driven strikes or serious offensive operations. Pro-military social media accounts are exploiting the information vacuum to circulate fake reports or old footage that inflates the military's success, which risks further undermining public confidence in the security forces once these narratives are debunked.

³⁷ Key informant interviews with Tangaza resident and other interlocutors, Sokoto, September 19-20, 2021.

³⁸ Daily Trust (2021), "How Bandits Killed Dozens in Sokoto Market," Daily Trust, October 19, 2021, <https://dailytrust.com/how-bandits-killed-dozens-in-sokoto-market/> (Accessed on 3/4/2021).

³⁹ Sahara Reporters (2021), "Zamfara Governor Announces Lifting of Telecoms' Ban In 48 Hours Amid Worsening Banditry," Sahara Reporters, November 27, 2021, <http://saharareporters.com/2021/11/27/zamfara-governorannounces-lifting-telecoms%E2%80%99-ban-48-hours-amid-worsening-banditry/> (Accessed on 3/4/2021).

Conflict actors

at least
100 bandit groups
operating in the northwest
constituting about
30,000
militants.



The conflict in northwestern Nigeria is not a two-sided affair. There are an array of actors involved in the violence. But the relationships among these actors - and even the conceptual lines between them - are often vague and fluid. What follows below are brief, non-exhaustive overviews of key conflict actors.

Bandits

The bandits are a heterogeneous collection of militants. While estimates are tenuous at best, there are probably at least 100 bandit groups operating in the northwest constituting between 10,000 and 30,000 militants.⁴⁰ While predominantly Fulani, the bandits include Hausa, Kanuri, and Tuareg among their ranks and rely on local informants of various ethnicities whom they pay or coerce into informing. They engage in illegal activity, are adaptable, and wield sophisticated weapons, possibly more than the Nigerian security agencies.

The bandits are highly mobile, traversing the length and breadth of forests in Zamfara, Kebbi, Niger, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and the neighbouring Niger Republic. But the modus operandi of the bandits varies. Cattle rustling has long been the hallmark of bandits in the northwest, but mass kidnappings for ransom have become more common in recent years. Some bandits are noted for kidnappings for ransom and killings of victims, such as Balleri operating in Chikum and Birni Gwari LGAs in Kaduna state. Others are notorious for cattle rustling accompanied by kidnapping and mass killings of victims such as Turji operating in Shinkafi, Zamfara state. Another group which includes Shehu Rekep and Halilu operating in Zamfara state, self-identify as ethnic nationalists, claiming they are fighting to prevent the extermination of the Fulani race.

The bandits fight the military as it suits their interests, but they have never waged anything like a concerted, coordinated insurgency against

security forces akin to Boko Haram in the northeast. This is due, in part, to the fact that the bandits are fragmented. They were more unified under the leadership of a few powerful figures in the early and mid-2010s but have fractured significantly since 2018 when Buharin Daji, the main kingpin in Zamfara, was killed in a feud with Dogo Gide with Daji's gang subsequently splintering.

Some bandits command more than 1,000 fighters, though such groups tend to be loosely organised, granting significant autonomy to sub-commanders, often colloquially called lieutenants. One former bandit noted that in many groups, lieutenants may even seek their commanders' permission to form their group once they get enough weapons and fighters. If the commander believes his lieutenant "has demonstrated his courage" then the commander may give his blessing for them to form their own group.⁴¹ Such group fragmentation may occur peacefully, with the younger bandit continuing to cooperate with his erstwhile mentor. However, splintering can leave bitter divisions, as is the case with Halilu Sububu and his one-time protégé Kachalla Turji, the two major kingpins in Zamfara's Shinkafi LGA.⁴²

The most powerful bandits act as warlords, exercising de facto sovereignty over multiple villages or even entire districts. Controlling villages is generally done through protection rackets that have villagers handing over money, foodstuffs, livestock, or engaging in forced labour on farms or in the bandit camps. Turji has

40 Rufa'i, A. M. (2021), "I Am a Bandit": A Decade of Research in Zamfara's Bandit's Den," (Sokoto, Nigeria: Graphic Concept Academy, September 2021), pp:5; for the estimate of 30,000 bandits, see The Cable (2021), "Matawalle: There are over 30,000 bandits in the north," The Cable, April 2, 2021, <https://www.thecable.ng/matawalle-there-are-over-30000-bandits-in-the-north> (Accessed on 3/4/2021).

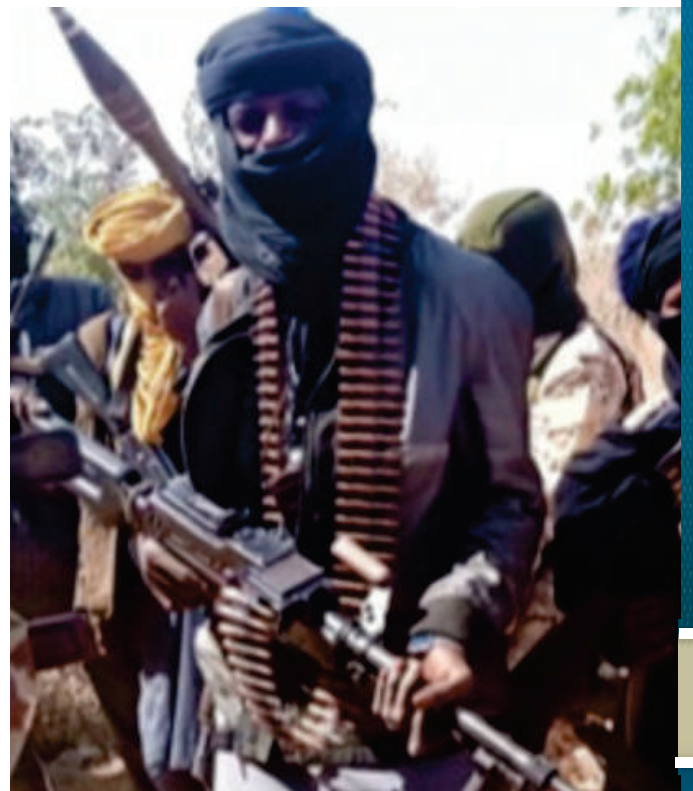
41 KII 20 August 2021, Cusau, Zamfara state.

42 Halilu and Turji resumed cooperating with each other in September 2021 to reassert bandit control over Shinkafi and neighbouring districts after the deployment of new military units to then northwest.

gone so far as to appoint his own village heads over various communities in Sabon Birni and Isa LGAs in Sokoto who are tasked with raising monthly levies.⁴³ Apart from these semi-feudal “taxation” arrangements, some bandits have profited off local gold mining by taxing artisanal miners,⁴⁴ though there is little evidence to suggest the bandits seriously collide with powerful mining interests. Other bandits claim to have refused to allow mining in their areas. The late bandit Alhaji Auta claimed that he has been approached by Chinese operators seeking to mine in his area but he did not allow it because “we do not know what these foreigners want with our land.”⁴⁵ However, some villagers in Dangulbe in Maru local government of Zamfara state also claimed to have sighted Chinese supplying food to bandits protecting their mines,⁴⁶ while bandit warlords Halilu and Rekeb are alleged to protecting miners in return for money.⁴⁷

But it is not just an extractive relationship. Some bandits also try to build local legitimacy through the provision of basic goods and services – such as offering food relief or constructing a mosque – the arbitration of local disputes, and the sensitisation of local communities to herders' grievances. For instance, a bandit warlord in Zurmi Dankaranmi is said to have built a large mosque in Lambar Gabas Zurmi.⁴⁸

Some bandits such as notorious gun runner Shehu Rekep have even tried to mobilise support around political grievances. But they do not promote a coherent or proactive political agenda such as regime change, secession, or greater ethnic autonomy. Many bandits claim to be fighting in defence of the Fulani and demand that the government respect the rights of pastoralists by respecting traditional grazing arrangements, disbanding the Yan Sakai, and otherwise ceasing the harassment of Fulani. In



this sense, the bandits are traditionalists of a sort. One older bandit claimed that groups collect money “for national development” and that once they get enough influence, things “will return to normal, just like it was during Abacha's time”.⁴⁹ But the bandits never include political demands in actual hostage negotiations and most use the bulk of ransom money to buy weapons.

To the extent that one can gauge their motivations, the bandits seem to be driven by some combination of self-preservation, material self-interest, and concern for the wellbeing of herders and the Fulani community. With the relative salience of each of these factors varying among individual bandits and likely changing over time. That said, the extent to which the bandits compete and even clash with each other suggests that most bandit leaders are first and foremost concerned with their relative wealth and stature above all else.

43 Anka, Y. (2021), Twitter post, November 9, 2021, 11:53 AM, <https://twitter.com/ankaboy/status/1458024973906423811>. (Accessed on 9/11/2021).

44 A repentant bandit who used to operate in Dangulbe district in Zamfara stated that the late Buharin Daji exercised a protection racket over miners in Dangulbe, protecting them from other bandits in the district.

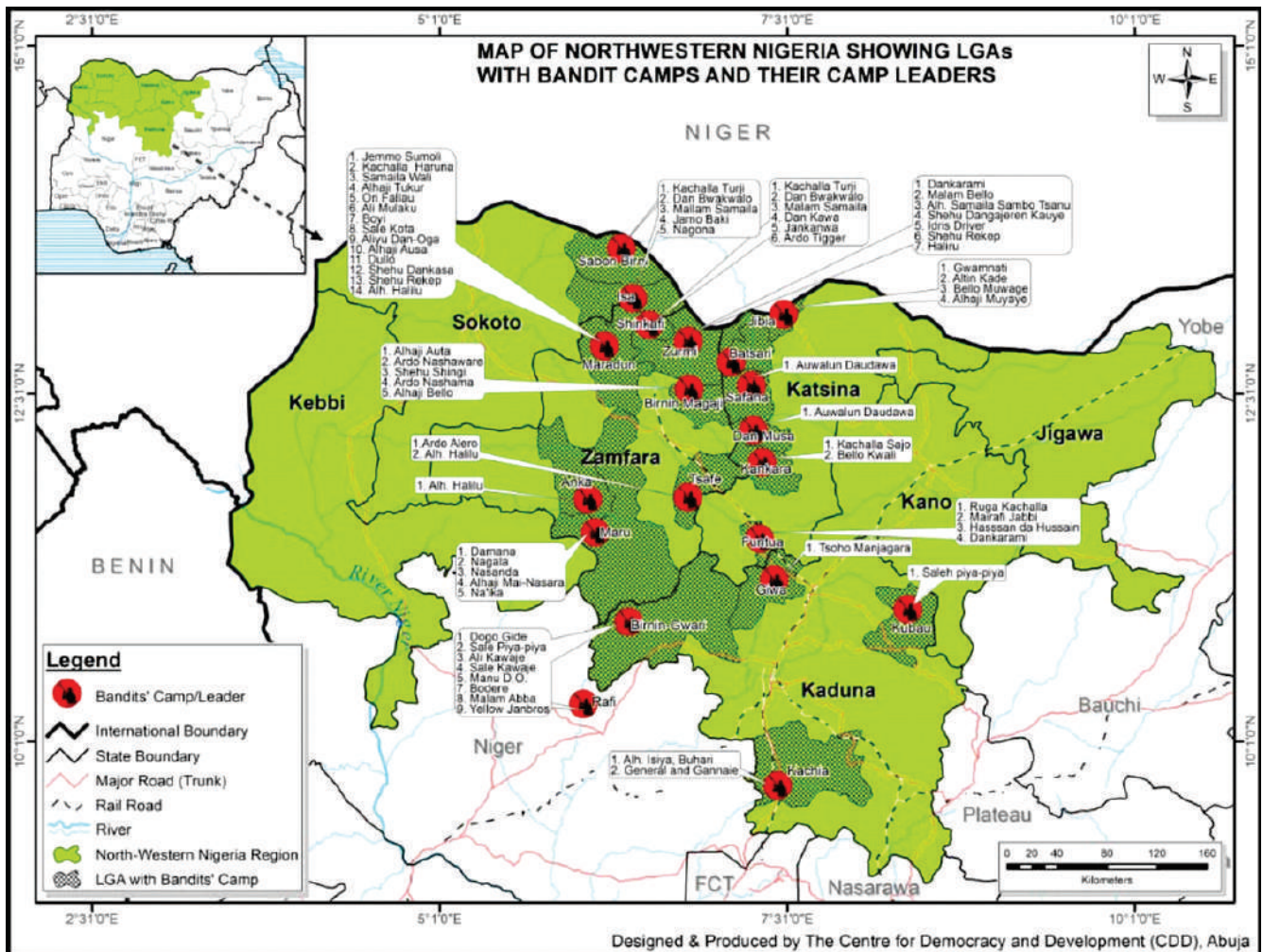
45 FGD 21 August 2021 Birnin Magaji, Zamfara.

46 FGD 24th July, Gusau Zamfara State

47 KII 13 November 2021, Zaria, Kaduna state

48 KII 15 January 2022, Abuja

49 KII September 2021.



Foreign militants

A popular narrative has emerged, sometimes pushed by senior government officials, in which the bandits are depicted as predominantly foreigners who are attempting to destabilise Nigeria. Some opponents of President Muhammadu Buhari even claim that the Commander-in-Chief invited his Fulani kinsmen from neighbouring countries during the 2015 election to secure his victory.

However, the evidence suggests that foreigners make up a small minority of the bandits. Reliable

sources note that most of the bandits in their areas are locals or hail from neighbouring states. But the presence of a small number of foreigners within a group is also no evidence of any conspiracy. Nigeria's northern border has always been porous, with individuals crossing freely to conduct trade, seek employment, study, or simply visit family. That the bandits have begun attacking across the border in Niger's southern region of Maradi demonstrates the limited degree of policing across the nearly 1,500 km border.⁵⁰ What Nigerians mean by "foreigner" may also vary, as the nomadic nature of

50 International Crisis Group (2021), "South-western Niger: Preventing a New Insurrection," Report No. 301, April 29, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/301-sud-ouest-du-niger-prevenir-un-nouveau-frontinsurrectionnel/> (Accessed on 3/11/2021).

pastoralism means that some herders who have spent years in neighbouring countries but are legally indigenes of Nigeria may be seen as “foreigners” by local communities.

Foreigners who have joined the bandits primarily did so for two reasons that are not mutually exclusive: ethnic solidarity and economic self-interest. As intercommunal tensions increased in the 2010s, some Fulani called on their ethnic brethren from elsewhere in West Africa to relocate to Nigeria to enhance collective self-defence. There is no precise estimate of how many foreigners answered these calls, but several sources noted instances in their states in which Nigerian and non-Nigerian Fulani shared kola nut, a traditional celebration meant to cement new relationships, as a way of promising support. Such ceremonies, as well as the wider concept of fulako - under which a pastoralist may receive any support he needs from the local Fulani when he arrives in a

new area - are important underpinnings of the nomadic lifestyle.

Other foreign Fulani who has travelled to the northwest may have done so opportunistically, as the region has long been known for its fertile lands while the Sahel has grown arider in recent years. Additionally, foreign gun runners, particularly Tuaregs, started moving into northwestern Nigeria in the mid-2010s as the region destabilised and demand for weapons grew. However, as certain Nigerian bandits such as Halilu and Shehu Rekep became more involved in the arms trade, acting as brokers between their fellow bandits and arms suppliers in the Sahel,⁵¹ these bandits came into conflict with some of the Tuareg arms dealers and eventually expelled them. While the presence of foreign militants in northwestern Nigeria might therefore be less than is popularly imagined, it seems that foreign connections still play an important role in fuelling the conflict.

Jihadists

Nigeria's three major jihadist groups—the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li-Da'wa wal-Jihad (JAS), and Ansaru - each of which traces its origins to the original Boko Haram - have attempted to exploit the instability in the northwest to expand their area of operations from the northeast. There have been limited levels of tactical cooperation between bandits and different jihadist outfits even though both Ansaru and JAS have established footholds in the northwest - the former in Kaduna's Birnin Gwari LGA and the latter in Niger's Shiroro LGA. However, the influence of jihadists on the conflict and the degree to which there is a “crime-terror nexus” in the northwest has been overstated.

Nigeria's jihadists have faced several challenges in their efforts to expand into the northwest and

build meaningful ties with bandits. First, jihadists in the al Qaeda and Islamic State mold generally have ideological and strategic aversions to the wanton pillaging of Muslim communities. Such a political economy has little appeal for bandits whose wealth is derived from precisely such plunder. Additionally, any jihadist in the northwest must navigate a volatile and fragmented militant landscape in which dozens of warlords are frequently shifting allegiances and clashing with each other in pursuit of their interests. Given that the bandits have yet to unite into a coherent insurgency even though many of them share the same ethnicity and grievances, jihadists face difficulties in rallying any sizable portion of the militants under one banner.

Given these challenges, jihadists have coexisted and cooperated with bandits but there is no evidence of a serious convergence of bandits

⁵¹ 51 Rufa'i, A. M. (2021), “I Am a Bandit”: A Decade of Research in Zamfara's Bandit's Den,” (Sokoto, Nigeria: Graphic Concept Academy, September 2021), pp:25.

with jihadists in which the latter meaningfully recruit the former to their cause.⁵² In terms of cooperation, jihadists have advised bandits on ransom negotiations and hostage tactics⁵³ and may have also offered weapons training to bandits⁵⁴ and provided manpower for certain bandit attacks.⁵⁵ In terms of convergence, we have seen more evidence of jihadists transitioning into banditry than bandits transitioning into jihadism.

One senior ISWAP defector stated that the northwest is a tempting area for disgruntled ex-jihadists to settle because it is so lawless and

anyone with weapons and the knowledge of how to use them can make good profit. He stated “they come with some money and weapons, but once they run out of money, they take up banditry to get cash. This makes them become invested in banditry.”⁵⁶ Additionally, some JAS members have fled the northeast since the death of their leader, Abubakar Shekau, in May 2021, joining bandit groups in Zamfara. According to a bandit leader in the state, the ex-JAS fighters have valuable skills and contacts and if he were not to accept them, they might join one of his rivals.⁵⁷

Cooperation, confluence, and clashes: Jihadists and bandits

- **Ansaru**, a one-time Boko Haram splinter, has had the most durable presence in the northwest, having been based in Kuyumbana forest since at least the mid-2010s. It has preached anti-government sermons in mosques near Kuyumbana in Birnin Gwari LGA and attempted to implement an al Qaeda-like political economy. Its ideological rigidity has prevented it from winning over many bandits, however. It has had tactical cooperation with some powerful group in Kuyumbana whose support it likely needs for survival, but it has clashed with other groups over both ideological and parochial issues, at times presenting itself as a source of protection for communities victimised by bandits. Residents of Birnin Gwari who have heard Ansaru's preaching claim that their community leaders are apprehensive of aligning closely with the group, however, for fear that “Birnin Gwari will become like Maiduguri [sic]”.⁵⁸ In short, they are concerned any jihadist presence in their community will lead to terrorism and instability of the sort the northeast has faced.
- **JAS**, which was led by Abubakar Shekau until his death in May 2021, has cooperated with some bandits, though many of these relationships have likely been transient. One group allowed Shekau to claim credit⁵⁹ for its kidnapping of schoolchildren in Katsina to increase the government ransom - because the bandit assessed that the government would be more likely to pay ransom to Boko Haram than bandits.⁶⁰ However, the group appears to have one meaningful cell in the northwest in Niger state's Shiroro LGA. ⁶¹This cell has been in Shiroro for roughly two years and has recently grown emboldened, taking over several villages in September 2021.

52 This framework of coexistence, cooperation, and convergence for assessing the degree of a “crime -terror nexus” was first proposed by Erik Alda and Joseph L. Sala. See Alda, E. and Sala, J. L. (2014), “Links Between Terrorism, Organized Crime and Crime: The Case of the Sahel Region,” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 3, No 1 (2014): unpaginated, accessed online via: <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.ea/>. (Accessed on 3/4/2021).

53 Parkins, J. and Hinshaw, D. (2021), “Nigeria's Gangs Raised Millions”. *The Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nigerias-gangs-raised-millions-by-kidnapping-children-now-the-government-cant-stop-them-11634400009> (Accessed on 1/3/2022).

54 Sahara Reporters (2021), “Boko Haram Fighters Training Bandits in Northern Nigeria To Use Anti-aircraft Guns, Explosives—Report,” *Sahara Reporters*, September 26, 2021, <http://saharareporters.com/2021/09/26/boko-haramfighters-training-bandits-northern-nigeria-use-anti-aircraft-guns-explosives> (Accessed on 11/12/2021).

55 Zenn, J. and Weiss, C. (2021), “Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, No. 5 (October 2021): 187-199.

56 KII 25 June 2021 Maiduguri, Borno state.

57 FGD 21 August 2021, Birnin Magaji, Zamfara.

58 FGD 31 October 2021, Kaduna state.

59 Zenn, J. (2020), “Boko Haram – Abubakar Shekau Kankara Kidnap Audio and Kankara Schoolboys Proof-of-Life Video – December 15 and 17, 2020,” uploaded by Jacob Zenn, December 22, 2020, available at: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2020/12/22/boko-haram-proof-of-life-of-kankara-schoolboys-video-december-17-2020/>. (Accessed on 18/11/2021).

60 Interviews with “Alhaji Abdu,” former associate of the bandit responsible for the Kankara abduction (Auwulun Daudawa) and intermediary in the Kankara ransom negotiations.

61 Barnett, J. (2021), “Investigating the ‘Boko Haram’ Presence in Niger State,” *HumAngle*, April 30, 2021 <https://humangle.ng/investigating-the-boko-haram-presence-in-niger-state/> (Accessed on 18/11/2021).

- **ISWAP's** political economy is similar to that of Ansaru and this holds little appeal for most bandits. Historically, efforts at outreach to the bandits by the (possibly now late)⁶²head of ISWAP, Abu Musab al Barnawi, largely ended in disappointment.⁶³ Many sources report that the bandit Dogo Gide is presently aligned with ISWAP, though he still appears to operate as an independent warlord, suggesting any cooperation is pragmatic and limited. ISWAP's most likely avenue for expansion into the northwest would be through the Ansaru or JAS cells in the region, and the group has indeed put out calls for JAS members in Niger to defect. It remains to be seen whether these efforts prove successful.

Case Study

The emergence of the Lakurawa

Headquartered in Balle LGA, the Lakurawa have been operating around the border settlements of Gwangwano, Mulawa, Wansaniya, and Tunigara since 2017. Membership is drawn from Nigeria, Nigeria, and Benin Republic in addition to Mali. Besides, intimidating and harassing the locals, they also claim to implement the Islamic legal system (Shariah). Members of the group have been seen carrying heavy arms and forcing people to pay zakat (Islamic taxes). They also conduct preaching at various village centres where residents were forced to listen.⁶⁴ They are not bandits according to the locals, as members have been seen harassing bandits and kidnappers.

Some youth in the area have already joined the organisation and have been rewarded with a small stipend. They are trained in different defensive mechanisms and given ideological orientation. Informants put its membership at 500 in 2018; a figure that could have grown to over 1,000. The increase in membership is associated with the abject poverty in the area that has created an opportunity for the group to gain followers which the local people called Yan- Lakurawa.

Whilst their activities were initially checkmated and repelled by Nigerian Army personnel in charge of border patrol stationed in Balle LGA since the army left in 2018, the group has continued their activities and even killed the District Head of Balle in May 2019. It is alleged the District Head was responsible for inviting the Lakurawa into the area in 2017 to address the emerging and growing rate of rural banditry in the district. The Lakurawa had several meetings with the traditional and religious leaders in the area and money, members, and intelligence support were all given to the Lakurawa to fight the bandits. Initially, they conquered the banditry, but then they started harassing people and trying to impose their ideology. Attempts to curtail the growing impact of the Lakurawa led to a crisis that made them become aligned with the bandits. From fighting the bandits, the Lakurawa now connived with them against the communities. This is reflective of the complexity and fluidity of the actors in the conflicts.

62 Maclean, R. and Alfa, I. (2021), "Key Leader of West African Terrorist Group Is Dead, Nigerian Army Says," New York Times, October 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/15/world/africa/nigeria-islamic-state-abu-musabal-barnawi-dead.html>. (Accessed on 20/12/2021).

63 KII 25 June 2021, Maiduguri, Borno state.

64 KII 12 September 2021, Sokoto state.

The military

Tackling banditry should theoretically fall under the purview of law enforcement agencies, but the issue has become heavily militarised since the launch of the army's major anti-banditry operation, Harbin Kunama I, in 2016. These responses were necessitated as the bandits had become too powerful and dispersed for the limited number of law enforcement agents in the northwest states to handle the threat alone. In many small towns in the northwest, the police presence is woefully inadequate, with only a handful of officers and even fewer functioning rifles. For instance, Niger state has 40,000 police but 20,000 are assigned to the capital Minna, leaving communities and villages in more rural areas poorly protected.⁶⁵

But the military has also struggled to contain banditry for several reasons. The armed forces are overstretched across the country and therefore have struggled to maintain sufficient forces in the region to secure much beyond large towns. Military units deployed generally lack intimate knowledge of the local terrain and communities, so they must rely on other security agencies or residents and vigilantes for intelligence. Setting aside issues of coordination, the military's reliance on local informants in the context of heightened inter-communal tensions creates its problems given the prejudices of these informants. Various sources accuse the military of indiscriminately targeting Fulani communities and of engaging in cattle rustling, property destruction, and extrajudicial killings.

Under the Buhari administration, the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) has become increasingly engaged in combatting banditry, with NAF conducting 150 missions in Kaduna State in the first quarter of 2021 alone.⁶⁶ Deployments of NAF missions across affected states are uneven; for



instance, interlocutors suggest more operations in Kaduna and Niger than Zamfara. The NAF's guidelines for target selection and mitigating civilian casualties are opaque and its track record in the northeast gives cause for concern about collateral damage. Some bandits have claimed that the airstrikes mostly scatter their livestock but rarely hit any militants.⁶⁷ Communities have also complained of being victims of these airstrikes.⁶⁸ However, in early 2022, the NAF scored a notable success with killing a notorious warlord, Alhaji Auta, in Birni Magaji, Zamfara state.⁶⁹

However, the fact that ground forces do not complement air raid operations limits their effectiveness.

⁶⁵ KII 12 November 2021, Niger state.

⁶⁶ Kaduna State Ministry of Internal Security and Home Affairs (2021), "The Security Situation in Kaduna State for the First Quarter of 2021". Kaduna State Ministry of Internal Security and Home Affairs, April 2021.

⁶⁷ FGD 21 August 2021 Birnin Magaji, Zamfara state.

⁶⁸ Abba, A. (2021), "Shadow war: Military airstrikes that killed, injured unarmed civilians in Zamfara". International Centre for Investigative Reporting May 8, 2021. <https://www.icirnigeria.org/shadow-war-military-airstrikes-that-killed-injured-unarmed-civilians-in-zamfara/> (Accessed on 18/11/2021).

⁶⁹ Abulaziz, A. (2022), "How NAF airstrikes killed Zamfara bandits' leaders, others". Daily Trust, January 2, 2022. <https://dailytrust.com/how-naf-airstrikes-killed-zamfara-bandits-leaders-others> (Accessed, 1/3/022)

Yan Sakai and Vigilantes

Vigilantism, and particularly the actions of the Yan Sakai, has been central to the growth of conflict in the northwest by fuelling tit-for-tat violence. In addition to their ethnic profiling, harassment, and extrajudicial killings, vigilantes and Yan Sakai have at times engaged in behaviour like that of the bandits, including cattle rustling, looting, and kidnapping for ransom.

Each Nigerian state has a formal vigilante network organised under the auspices of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN). VGN supplements law enforcement agencies by providing intelligence and logistical support. Some governors subsidise VGN activities with salaries or equipment donations, though group members often complain that this support is inconsistent, politically motivated, or simply another means for officials to syphon funds. Other groups, such as state hunters' associations, also work in conjunction with VGN in states including Katsina.

In contrast to the VGN, the Yan Sakai are a loose, leaderless, and theoretically illegal movement. The Yan Sakai alleged have up to 10,000 men in Zamfara state alone but comprehensive figures about membership across the northwest do not exist.⁷⁰ The formation of the Yan Sakai was gradual and decentralised, with various communities taking up arms in stages over the past two decades in response to insecurity and the shortcomings of the justice system. As one emir in Zamfara noted:

“We don't really know where the first Yan Sakai emerged, but they became a force because they saw that police would release criminals and so they decided to take law into their own hands... Yan Sakai don't have anyone's permission [to



operate], they are not constitutional.”⁷¹

Like the VGN, Yan Sakai engages the bandits on a more consistent basis than federal security forces, relying on sticks, machetes, or homemade guns known colloquially as “Dane guns” or wagila, which have become surprisingly sophisticated to the point of building truck-mounted cannons.⁷² Both Yan Sakai and VGN place great value in the use of mystical rituals and amulets to provide protection. As one vigilante in Niger state claimed, “those vigilantes who are well equipped with the grass root, the bullet doesn't penetrate their body.”⁷³ Yan Sakai and VGN members claim that the bandits fear their mystical powers and that this helps compensate for the fact that the bandits are better armed.

69 Abulaziz, A. (2022), “How NAF airstrikes killed Zamfara bandits' leaders, others”. Daily Trust, January 2, 2022. <https://dailytrust.com/how-naf-airstrikes-killed-zamfara-bandits-leaders-others> (Accessed, 1/3/022)

70 KII 31 August 2021, Gusau, Zamfara state.

71 KII 22 August 2021, Anka, Zamfara state.

72 In Katsina, some vigilante use 18-round Wagila cannons that mount on a truck bed. See James Barnett, Twitter post, October 15, 2021, 3:23 PM, https://twitter.com/jh_barnett/status/1449018005363560465?s=20.

73 KII 28 April 2021 Minna, Niger state.

Governors in Zamfara and Katsina states have at different points declared the Yan Sakai illegal and the Yan Sakai have sometimes clashed with security forces.⁷⁴ But they continue to operate, sometimes with the tacit support of the state provide additional funding and support to complement the funds raised by the communities they protect. The case of one senior Yan Sakai leader represents the confusing legal status of the group. He has been arrested multiple times in various states over the past decade, yet he is presently a special advisor to the Zamfara governor.

Official distinctions notwithstanding, the VGN and Yan Sakai have effectively merged across the northwest and members of both outfits express unabashed anti-Fulani sentiment. In fact, in Sokoto, the convergence of the two was effectively formalised in March 2021 when the state governor banned any organisation calling itself Yan Sakai. But Yan Sakai can opt to join the VGN, which theoretically involves undergoing vetting and receiving training from the security agencies. In reality, Yan Sakai does not join VGN but they do coordinate more closely though in many areas they outnumber the VGN and are likely the ones in charge. Katsina is heading in this direction as the governor announced a ban on Yan Sakai in October 2021, whilst encouraging

members to join their local vigilante office.⁷⁵ In Zamfara, the VGN and Yan Sakai have different state-level commands but have effectively merged at the local level.

The northwest governors have taken this approach of formally banning the Yan Sakai to gain political cover even as they, in effect, gave a green light to the inevitable excesses of these same militias once they undergo a superficial makeover. With the new containment measures in place in northwestern Nigeria and many bandit groups dispersing outside Zamfara, the Yan Sakai/VGN appear to be as strong as ever, even establishing checkpoints on some federal highways. The continued strength of Yan Sakai is concerning from the perspective of intercommunal relations and raises the likelihood of more tit-for-tat ethnic violence. While some VGN officials downplayed concerns over ethnic profiling in interviews, blaming the Yan Sakai for such tactics, rank-and-file vigilante members expressed unabashed anti-Fulani sentiments, as did the Yan Sakai officials interviewed. As the secretary of one local VGN branch in Katsina stated, “a Fulani man cannot enter this district without being apprehended... There cannot be peace with the Fulani because they have abused previous offers of peace.”⁷⁶

	Deputised by state government	Formal security training	Cooperation with security forces	Types of arms
VGN	Yes	Yes (at least for some members)	Frequent	Stick, Dane Gun, wagila
Yan Sakai	No	No	Infrequent	Stick, Dane Gun, wagila, AK -47

⁷⁴ As recently as October 18, 2021, Yan Sakai clashed with police in Anka local government while trying to free two of their detained members. Yusuf Anka, Twitter post, October 18, 2021, 3:35 PM, <https://twitter.com/ankaboy/status/1450108305528037377?s=20>.

⁷⁵ KII 14 October 2021, Katsina state.

⁷⁶ KII October 2021, Katsina state

Traditional Rulers



Traditional rulers are neither a uniformly positive nor negative influence on security in the northwest. Some have shown selflessness and foresight while others have jeopardised the security of their subjects for personal gain.

The Emir of Argungu in Kebbi has a reputation for mediating disputes between farmers and herders fairly. In Zamfara, the Emir of Gummi led a peacebuilding effort with bandits that resulted in the near elimination of violence in the emirate, in large part by taking a hard line on vigilante and Yan Sakai excesses and authorising a separate, multi-ethnic community watch group instead. Other traditional rulers, like the Emir of Anka in Zamfara, have used their personal wealth to provide shelter or other provisions to IDPs. More ambitiously, the Anka Emirate Council even attempted to broker a peace agreement using one local bandit, Shadari, as an intermediary to reach his peers. However,

Shadari has since walked out of the discussions. Bandits often prefer to negotiate with emirs rather than state government officials since the state authorities cannot always guarantee the protection of the bandits in the manner the emirs can. This contact between bandits and emirs often makes the latter suspect in the eyes of the security forces and politicians.

But traditional rulers are not inherently above corruption, and many have been complicit in fuelling banditry by selling land to farmers that encroaches onto grazing areas or taking bribes while settling land disputes. According to the 2019 report commissioned by the Zamfara state government, all but two of Zamfara's 17 emirs were negligent with regards to the security situation in their emirate.⁷⁷ In response, many emirs contend that they lack the resources or legal authority to address insecurity.

⁷⁷ "Zamfara report on banditry," Vanguard.

Women and children



Women and children are both victims and perpetrators of violence in northwestern Nigeria. The rise of banditry has led to a dramatic increase in sexual and gender-based violence in a region where it was already high due to prevailing cultural norms. Bandits will frequently rape women and capture “war brides” in their raids. The conflict has exacerbated the commodification of women, as some families give their daughters (many of whom are still children) to bandits as brides in return for protection. Children are also victims of the conflict, both in terms of direct violence and because many become orphans or are forced out of school.

However, neither women nor children are entirely passive actors in the conflict. Children have joined the bandits as well as VGN and Yan Sakai in large numbers, often against their will. In one bandit outfit, the youngest fighter was nine years old.⁷⁸ Some women also work with the bandits, serving as informants, wives, and camp attendants, or, in rarer cases, fighters. Women

have also smuggled food and weapons for the bandits and will conduct reconnaissance and infiltrate communities disguised as traders or beggars ahead of attacks. In other instances, women have lured victims to their kidnapping. The motivations of female collaborators vary. Some are coerced while others see the financial rewards. Beyond banditry, some women are involved in criminality in the northwest on their initiative. One of the biggest drug dealers in Sokoto state is a woman known by the name of Mama Jazina.⁷⁹

While they are a minority, women also serve as vigilantes. The head of the hunters' association in Katsina is a woman who seems to command significant respect from the governor's (overwhelmingly male) officials and advisers. In Sokoto, the chief intelligence officer of the VGN is female and estimates that there are more than 50 women in the state's VGN (out of an estimated 7,000 total fighters) who engage in reconnaissance and intelligence gathering.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ FGD 22 August 2021, Birnin Magaji, Zamfara state.

⁷⁹ FGD 20 September 2021 Sokoto state.

⁸⁰ KII 20 September 2021 Sokoto state

Amnesties or **Bullets?**

Assessing State and
Federal Responses to
Insecurity



In response to banditry in the northwest, the Nigerian state has launched at least 10 military operations since 2014. But this approach fails to address Nigeria's policing challenge. For a country of around 200 million, the total police workforce stands at around 400,000 personnel. As a result of this shortage, the military are maintaining law and order, traditionally the responsibility of the police force, in 35 states with Lagos the only exception. However, allegations of human rights abuses, the inability of the military to quell the violence, and a failure to grapple with the grievances of residents have reduced the effectiveness of these interventions.

Increasingly amnesty and peace deals have been used by the Nigerian government at local, state, and national levels to try and resolve conflicts. Since the 2009 Niger Delta amnesty peace programme, the Nigerian federal government and federating units at the state levels have brokered peace agreements with agitators such as militants or bandits. In the northeast, Nigeria currently runs two programmes for repentant bandits - Operation Safe Corridor which takes in lower level Boko Haram (JAS and ISWAP) members, and the [Sulhu](#) programme, used to encourage defections of high-level JAS and ISWAP fighters and officials. The northwest governors have also supported and introduced peace deals as a strategy for addressing the insecurity in the region.

Peace deals were first brokered in the northwest by the Zamfara and Kaduna state governments in 2015. Upon assuming office in 2015, Kaduna Governor Nasir El-Rufai claimed to have negotiated and paid Fulani bandits killing and causing mayhem in Southern Kaduna to halt the violence. In the same vein, Governor Abdullahi Yari of Zamfara organised an amnesty



programme in 2016 to encourage the return of bandits' guns in exchange for cash. The Yari peace deal was negotiated with the now late bandit [Buharin Daji](#), who reneged two years into the agreement. Despite this subsequent reversal, the 2016 peace deal was not a complete failure as some bandits returned to their home states or repented.

In September 2020, the Zamfara state government-brokered another peace deal aimed at de-escalating violence. The peace deal centred around a cow for guns swap policy, promises of job opportunities for unemployed youth, offered an amnesty for petty crimes committed in the region, and importantly supported the construction of Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlements for repentant bandits. Katsina, home state of President Muhammadu Buhari, signed peace agreements with bandits in 2016, 2017, and 2019. The terms of these

81 The Guardian (2021), "Sheikh Gumi, banditry, and governance failure ". Guardian Nigeria February 17, 2021. <https://guardian.ng/opinion/sheikh-gumi-banditry-and-governance-failure/> (Accessed on 1/3/2022).

agreements include the identification of cattle routes and free movements of herders to bring livestock to the markets and the banning of vigilante activities in the state. However, the most recent peace agreement was terminated by the government in June 2020 as despite the agreements, killings, kidnapping, and cattle rustling persisted.

In addition to these state-led peace efforts, there have also been individual-led peace initiatives. The most prominent of these is that of Sheikh Ahmad Gumi of Kaduna state. Sheikh Gumi, a prominent Islamic leader who has held meetings with bandits across the northwest, argues that these groups should be accorded the same treatment given to the Niger Delta militants who “were integrated by the Federal Government and are even in the business of pipeline protection.”⁸¹ But these individual efforts can be challenged by concurrent state-led military efforts. The Emir of Anka⁸² in Zamfara and Shadari, the bandit leader of Anka LGA, reached an agreement in 2020 but it fell apart in April 2021 after Shadari claimed that the security operatives were still arbitrarily arresting and killing his people.

Peace deals⁸³ have also taken place between local communities and bandits. In parts of Zamfara, Niger, and Katsina where the state is largely absent, the bandits operate as the state and negotiate peace in return for money, motorbikes, taxes, and even adjudication of conflicts. In Shiroro LGA of Niger state, villagers reportedly signed peace deals with bandits who, in return for money and motorcycles, would not attack the communities. In some instances, bandits have also granted amnesty to communities, either from their home communities or in other ones in which they wish to show goodwill. In December 2021 several bandits in Zamfara agreed to allow villagers to access their farms to avoid aggravating food insecurity and possibly because the bandits worried that their movements would be more visible to NAF jets due to the seasonal decrease in foliage.⁸⁴ But amnesty granted to communities by bandit leaders such as Ado Aliero alias Yankuso and Turji - who operate from Tsafe and Shinkafi LGAs in Zamfara, respectively - collapsed when the Department for Security Services arrested their fathers in separate instances. For the most part residents and communities are the ones caught in the crossfire that continues to take place between bandits and security agents.

82 KII 20 April 2021, Abuja

83 In most of the areas close to the forests, the bandits serve as police, army, judges and traditional rulers, because they are the major arbiters in the forest. KII 24 April 2021, Kaduna.

84 Abdulaziz. A, (2021), “Bandits stranded, make peace with communities,” Daily Trust, December 8, 2021, <https://dailytrust.com/bandits-stranded-make-peace-with-communities>. Accessed on 1/3/2022).



Why peace deals don't work

In northwestern Nigeria, peace deals and amnesty agreements are rarely implemented. This is in part due to the lack of a legal and implementation framework. Furthermore, there are no written documents⁸⁵ outlining the terms of the peace agreement, which makes the monitoring of adherence difficult for all actors. For one bandit leader, the lack of documentation is why it is called a peace deal not an agreement; a deal is a deal and non-binding.⁸⁶ Peace deals are further weakened by a lack of consultation with citizens and other stakeholders. As a result, victims continue to feel perpetrators' rights are prioritised over their rights. Vigilantes or Yan Sakai support groups claim that with all peace deals, they just hear the terms of the deal on the radio just like anybody else.

Peace deals are also complicated by the proliferation of bandit groups each with its interests and objectives. Currently, it is estimated that more than 100 groups are operating in the northwest alone, not including smaller groups

aligned to the bigger warlords such as Turji, Ado Aliero, Dogo Gide, DanKaranmi, Halilu Sububu, and Ali Kachalla. Negotiation is further complicated by the fact that these peace deals are entered into with the leaders of the groups without the involvement of their followers. Convincing low-level bandits to embrace the terms of the agreed deals remains difficult, particularly as they often stand to gain little when compared to the leaders who negotiate the agreement. In Zamfara one example was given of a single warlord who owned around 1,000 cattle, whilst "his boys" had nothing. In such scenarios, low-level bandits continue to take part in attacks in defiance of their leader's orders.

Evidence also suggests that while there are lots of arms in circulation it is only self-help vigilante groups who surrender a considerable number of weapons while the bandits surrender only a few AK47s. Despite the fact bandits are known to possess sophisticated weapons, a lack of monitoring means they often retain them. The

⁸⁵ Often, only recordings are available, but no written, formal text.
⁸⁶ KII April 2021. Remote.

lack of formal disarmament, demobilisation, and rehabilitation (DDR) programme that supports the reintegration of repentant bandits is also a challenge. Without drug rehabilitation support, economic empowerment, education, and psychosocial support the repentant bandits are left stranded and frustrated. This failure to disarm them fully means that they can easily return to criminality.

The composition of the peace deal panel is another challenge. Some respondents opined that members appointed into the committees are not familiar with the situation, lack sincerity and instead view the assignment as an avenue for self-enrichment. In fact, one interlocutor alleged that when peace deals are being arranged, it is always whispered to the bandits that there is more to gain from surrendering as this opens doors to other opportunities such as becoming a negotiator for the government in its dialogues with other bandits. According to one interlocutor, “the bandits and the negotiators are both entrepreneurs”.⁸⁷

Some peace agreements have also failed due to the overestimation of the bandit warlord's influence. In April 2021, warlord Shadari walked out of the peace deal with the Emir of Anka LGA in Zamfara state. Shadari had claimed that the government was reneging on its agreement by continuing to arrest Fulanis. However, further probing of the issues reveals that Shadari left because he was afraid of being killed by his fellow bandits. One thing that came out strongly from this case is that the Emir overestimated Shadari's influence based on his claims to be a powerful bandit. After agreeing to the amnesty, he spent more time trying to fight for his own life and safety than enforce peace in the community. Shadari is alleged to have been killed by other bandits in February 2022.⁸⁸

In Zamfara one example was given of a single warlord who owned around 1,000 cattle, whilst “his boys” had nothing. In such scenarios, low-level bandits continue to take part in attacks in defiance of their leader's orders.

A lack of policy cohesion between the federal and state government contributes to the challenges facing peace deals. For instance, at the same time as Zamfara state has offered amnesty, the federal government has been conducting a military offensive against the bandits in the forests. The bandits have pointed to the lack of a coordinated approach as a reason to renege on the peace deals. It is alleged that the late Buharin Daji walked out of the peace agreement with former Zamfara governor Abdullahi Yari following the arrest and detention of his friend, Dogon Bangaje.

The modus operandi of the bandits means they roam across states and thus any amnesty affecting them needs to be coherent across state borders. But there is a lack of cooperation between affected states. Bandit Adamu Ailero was declared wanted in Katsina, until recently he operated freely in Zamfara state. Whilst Dogo Gide operates as a roaming bandit on the borders of Niger, Kaduna, and Kebbi, he can hide in Dansadau LGA in Zamfara after any operation where he remains untouchable as he has amnesty in that state

⁸⁷ KII 26 September 2021, Sokoto state

⁸⁸ KII 22nd February 2022, Abuja.



Conclusion





The conflict in the northwest has arisen from various factors - failures of the criminal justice system, environmental degradation, the unimpeded flow of weapons - that are realities for Nigerians across the country. In the northwest, however, these problems have interacted in such ways as to create a serious crisis: the emergence of criminals so powerful they become subnational sovereigns and the eruption of conflict between communities with a long history of assimilation and collective identity.

Any serious efforts to roll back the conflict in the northwest will require greater political will and unity from Nigerian leaders than they have heretofore demonstrated. It will also require patience, the willingness to make difficult trade-offs, and a holistic view of security. It is not enough to arrest or kill bandit kingpins. Similar “decapitation” strategies have had mixed results at best in conflicts as diverse as Latin America's drug wars and the “U.S. War on Terror.”⁸⁹ Indeed, the killing of the late bandit kingpin Buharin Daji - by a rival bandit rather than security forces - led his bandit group to fracture into roughly thirty

different groups, some of which fought each other, thus increasing insecurity rather than reducing it.

Any solution to the banditry crisis will be contingent on security sector reform and improving trust between security agencies and local communities. Equally, as critical, non-state armed groups of all stripes must be reined in. The bandits will continue to find recruits so long as the Yan Sakai operate as violently as they have, regardless of whether they rebrand as VGN or something else. The federal and state governments can look to the experience of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) militias in northeastern Nigeria for lessons on how to temper the excesses of vigilantes and make them more accountable, although the CJTF should not be used as a rigid template for the Yan Sakai without consideration of unique local factors. Any future peace agreement or amnesty involving the bandits and the state governments should be closely coordinated with the federal government and formally documented to avoid the pitfalls of previous agreements.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Brian J. Philips, “How Does Leadership Decapitation Affect Violence? The Case of Drug Trafficking Organizations in Mexico,” *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 2 (April 2015): 324-336.



However, peace deals alone are not a silver bullet in the fight against banditry and the northwest conflict cannot be reduced to a blanket amnesty or peace deal approach that does not address the root causes of the conflict. For starters, peace deals are not popular among ordinary people as they believe that the perpetrators are well rewarded for harm caused against the population instead of being punished. To many, the peace deal is just another form of political dialogue from which they are excluded and this community hostility towards peace deals themselves represents a big challenge that needs to be addressed. Another important element to recognize is that most of the bandits are soldiers of fortune who are fighting with no ideology. Understanding that the bandits are now businessmen living large on the conflict economy reduces the viability of the peace deal as they are beneficiaries of the status quo. Questions about what incentives can make a bandit repent to join society need to be asked. There can also be lessons to be learned from successful efforts like that of Buharin Daji's son who returned to Zamfara and continues to live peacefully.

Given all the harm, dispossession, and trauma that various communities have experienced, collectively and individually, as a result of this conflict, federal and state authorities should

consider how a transitional justice initiative might begin to rebuild trust and social cohesion in a post-conflict setting. There is a need for accountability. More pressing, however, are the humanitarian priorities. State government officials have often downplayed the severity of the humanitarian crisis in the northwest, refusing to acknowledge the high number of IDPs or establish a transit IDP camp. But the humanitarian condition is worsening daily and trust in the government is dwindling.

In the immediate term to establish peace, the government must first gain legitimacy by protecting the people. In the long run, it must address the root causes of the conflict which include, a lack of accountability, poor access to education, the impacts of climate change, and the challenges of policing and grazing rights. Banditry may never disappear entirely in the sense that rural criminality has always been an aspect of life in northwestern Nigeria. But the violence need not be as intense and widespread as it is today. Understanding how the conflict emerged and what drives it is the first step towards finding solutions.

1. Rufai, A. M. (2021), "I Am a Bandit": A Decade of Research in Zamfara's Bandit's Den," (Sokoto, Nigeria: Graphic Concept Academy, September 2021), 6.

2. Some interlocutors interviewed by the authors have put the number as high as five million when IDPs are accounted for.

3. Rufai, A. and Umar, S. (2021), "Ali Kachalla: Unveiling The Zamfara Terror Kingpin Who Downed NAF Jet," *Daily Trust*, August 2, 2021, <https://dailytrust.com/ali-kachalla-unveiling-the-zamfara-terror-kingpin-who-downed-naf-jet> (Accessed on 24/9/2021); Omonobi, K. et al., (2021), "Attack on NDA: No where is safe any more in Nigeran, bandits are in total control – Retd AVM Ararile," *Vanguard*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/08/attack-on-nda-no-where-is-safe-any-more-in-nigeria-bandits-are-in-total-control-retd-avm-ararile/> (Accessed on 11/9/2021).



Centre for Democracy and Development
16, A7 Street, CITEC Mount Pleasant Estate,
Jabi- Airport Road, Mboru District, Abuja, FCT.

www.cddwestafrica.org

cddav@cddwestafrica.org

T: [@cddwestafrica](https://www.facebook.com/cddwestafrica)

F: [facebook.com/centrefordemocracy.anddevelopment](https://www.facebook.com/centrefordemocracy.anddevelopment)