

State-Sponsored Terrorism and the Security Dilemma in Developing Nations: The Nigerian Experience and Comparative Perspectives

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Abstract: *This article examines state-sponsored terrorism and the security dilemma in developing nations, with a principal focus on Nigeria and comparative insights from other African contexts and selected states in the Global South. Through Constructivist Security Theory, Neorealism and Conspiracy theory, the analysis highlights how weak institutions, elite competition, and identity politics interact with state practices that resemble sponsorship of non-state violent actors. The article argues that these dynamics intensify insecurity, hinder governance, and exacerbate development challenges across the continent.*

Keywords: state sponsored terrorism, security dilemma, development, governance

INTRODUCTION

State-sponsored terrorism refers to direct or indirect support that a government provides to violent non-state actors to further strategic objectives (Cronin, 2006). The security dilemma explains how defensive measures by one actor are perceived as threats by others, prompting escalation and insecurity (Herz, 1950). The concept of state-sponsored terrorism refers to situations where a government directly engages in, supports, tolerates, or covertly enables violence against civilians for political purposes. In fragile or developing states, this phenomenon often intersects with the security dilemma—a condition in which actions taken by the state to enhance its security unintentionally increase insecurity among citizens or rival groups.

In the Nigerian context, allegations of state complicity in violence—particularly in counterinsurgency operations against groups such as Boko Haram, Armed Bandits, Herdsmen, etc.

have generated conspiracy narratives that shape public perception and deepen mistrust between citizens and the state. Using Constructivist security theory, Neorealist and conspiracy theory, the study offers an analytical lens that helps to explain how and why segments of the population interpret security operations as deliberate or orchestrated violence by the state.

Conspiracy theory is an explanation for an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy by sinister and powerful groups, often political in motivation when other explanations are probable. These concepts, originally formulated for interstate security analysis, are increasingly applied to internal and regional conflicts in developing nations.

In Africa and other parts of the developing world, historical legacies of colonialism, weak state capacity, ethnic polarization, and economic marginalization have amplified the effects of these dynamics. Nigeria exemplifies these phenomena, but similar patterns are observable in countries like Somalia, Sudan/South Sudan, Mali, and Libya. Comparative analysis situates the Nigerian experience within broader regional trends and offers theoretical generalizations.

Conceptual Framework

State-Sponsored Terrorism

Blakeley (2009) defines state terrorism as violence carried out by state agents or their proxies against civilians to intimidate or control populations. Unlike conventional counterterrorism, state terrorism involves systematic coercion beyond lawful parameters. In Nigeria, allegations of: Indiscriminate airstrikes, Secret detention centers, Torture, Collective punishment, have appeared in reports by human rights organizations (Amnesty International, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2014).

The Security Dilemma (Domestic Adaptation)

The security dilemma, initially articulated by Herz (1950) and later refined by Jervis (1978), posits that measures taken by one actor to increase security unintentionally threaten others, prompting escalation. Though developed for interstate relations, scholars have applied the concept to internal conflicts (Posen, 1993). In Nigeria: i. The state increases military deployment, ii. Communities perceive repression, iii. Communities mobilize vigilante groups (e.g., Civilian Joint Task Force), iv. The state perceives rebellion, v. Violence escalates. Thus, the Nigerian state-society relationship exhibits a recursive cycle of mistrust.

Theoretical Frameworks

Constructivist Security Theory:

Constructivism highlights the socially constructed nature of threat perceptions and policies. It posits that:

Identity narratives (ethnic, religious, regional) shape how states and societies interpret security threats. Political elites may instrumentalize identity politics to justify alliances with militias or non-state armed groups (Wendt, 1999). Constructivism emphasizes the role of ideas, identities, and

norms in shaping state behavior (Wendt, 1999). Applied here, this framework suggests that state policies toward non-state actors are constructed through identity politics — particularly ethno-religious narratives — rather than solely material incentives.

The Nigerian state's responses to Boko Haram, Armed Banditry, or communal militias are not purely tactical but reflect broader identity constructs rooted in regional distrust (Akinyemi, 2014). Constructivism enables an understanding of how narratives about security threats influence policy choices that create self-fulfilling cycles of antagonism. This framework helps explain why governments appear to tolerate or even empower violent actors when these groups are viewed as protectors of particular constituencies, as seen in contexts beyond Nigeria like Sudan's use of militia proxies in the Darfur conflict (Flint & de Waal, 2008).

Neorealism and Security Competition:

Neorealism underscores the structural pressures of an anarchic international system that compel states to prioritize survival and power maximization (Waltz, 1979). In weak states:

Domestic governance competition mirrors interstate competition, producing similar security dilemmas. Co-optation of militias serves as a strategy for regime consolidation in the absence of robust formal security forces. This logic is evident in Libya, where competing factions employ militias as extensions of territorial control following state collapse (Pack & Adetula, 2016). Although Nigeria's challenges are internal, the logic of security competition is present: political elites and regional actors engage in behavior intended to secure advantage, often at the expense of collective security (Okonta & Douglas, 2015). State support for militias as proxies reflects a zero-sum calculation in environments where state capacity is weak and threats abound.

Together, these frameworks reveal the structural pressures and socially constructed identities shaping Nigeria's security challenges.

Conspiracy Theory:

Conspiracy theory is an explanation for an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy by sinister and powerful groups, often political in motivation when other explanations are probable. Scot A. Reid (2021), Barkun Michael (2003), David Icke (1998), Richard Hofstadter (1964), and Brain L. Keeley (1999), etc. who are proponents of this theory, maintain that 'conspiracy theory is a belief that a group of people are secretly trying to harm someone or achieve something. They corroborate that conspiracy theory is a belief that the government or a covert organization is responsible for an event that is unusual or unexplained, especially when any such person(s) involved, is denied access. Conspiracy theory rejects a standard explanation for any event and instead, credits a covert group or organization with carrying out a secret plot.' 'It suggests the idea/belief that important political events or economic and social trends are the products of deceptive plots that are largely unknown to the general public' (Michael, 2003).

Hence, this theory is also found suitable especially in the current Nigerian context/scenario because it seems the more Nigerians learn about the activities of the Government and the Security and Intelligence agencies in fighting terrorism (Armed Banditry, Boko Haram, IPOB,

Herdsmen,etc), the less far-fetched they find many geopolitical conspiracy theories. This is made manifest in certain intrigues, colorations, and deliberate actions/inactions given to the acts of terror in the north by the led government of President Muhammadu Buhari and even to the present government of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu.

State-Sponsored Terrorism: Mechanisms and Manifestations

State sponsorship can be formal or informal. In mature state systems, it often involves clandestine support for foreign insurgents. In fragile developing states, it can take subtler forms such as:

- i. Tolerance of vigilante groups in exchange for political loyalty
- ii. Recruitment and patronage networks linking politicians and militias.
- iii. Delegation of security functions to localized armed actors.
- iv. Negotiation with terrorists and granting them Amnesty

These phenomena reveal how weak institutional boundaries blur lines between state actors and violent organizations. Furthermore, other mechanisms of manifestations for instance, are as follows: The Lekki killings and phantom massacre of the Nigerian youths who agitated for the end of SARS brutality on innocent citizens, were denied by the then minister of information and culture, Lai Mohammed even as the Minister called on Amnesty International and CNN to apologize to Nigeria for misinforming the public without evidence. He opined, “Nobody, no families, no convincing evidence, nothing. Where are the families of those who were reportedly killed at the toll gate? Did they show up at the Judicial Panel of Inquiry? If not, why? Sadly, the champions of a massacre at the Lekki Toll Gate, including Amnesty International and CNN, have continued to shamelessly hold onto their unproven stand,” said the minister in President Buhari’s government.” He also flayed Amnesty International (AI) and CNN for what he called the unprofessional manner they handled the issue. The minister noted that with the preponderance of evidence against any massacre at the Lekki Toll Gate on October 20, 2020, he is consequently insisting that the Military did not shoot at protesters and that there was no massacre at the toll gate. “The only massacre recorded was in the social media, hence, there were neither bodies nor blood,” the minister stated.

The Federal Government however said:

“it remained proud of the security agencies for acting professionally & showing utmost restraint allthrough the EndSARS protest and the ensuing violence, an action that saved lives and property” (www.theguardianng/news/endsars-nigeria). Again, the information Minister on another occasion, said that the media is bullying the Government with fake news. He said the Security challenge is badly researched by, especially the media as ‘World War III will be caused by fake news’ (www.cable.ng). However, one wonders: What is fake about the news? Is it on Lekki killings covered up by the Federal Government and its Security and Intelligence agencies? Is it the terror/attacks carried out by Bandits on innocent citizens, which are yet to be labelled terrorist groups even by that present administration of President Buhari that is called media bullying of the Government? Or is it in the Media trying to uncover the covert actions of the government towards terrorism carried out by Boko Haram and its splinter group (Armed Banditry) that is tagged media bullying by that led government even to the present government?

Recently, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) also listed some ‘entities and individuals that sponsor terrorism; including six (6) Nigerians and forty-seven (47) others’ (www.punchng.com/uaelist). This was in the UAE Cabinet issued Resolution No. 83 of 2021, designating 38 individuals and 15 entities on its approved list of persons and organizations supporting terrorism. But surprisingly, instead of the Federal Government acknowledging or mentioning the names of people who work as officials of the government and happen to enjoy the largesse and support of the government as sponsors of terrorism, the Government rather tactically and covertly redrawn from publicly mentioning the names and declaring these people as sponsors of terrorism, stating that ‘they are not interested in mentioning names but will be bent on bringing whosoever they think is behind terrorism or found guilty to justice’ (www.premiumtimesng.com). This intrigues, colorations and interplay exhibited by that government of Buhari in Nigeria, raised so many questions, doubts, thoughts and perceptions even as it suggested a conspiracy theory. It seems the led government of Buhari was definitely aimed at achieving something; either to create fear or to gain perpetual dominance of the system, and which has extended to the present government of Tinubu as they share the same belief/faith.

However, to add to the conspiracy, Lai Mohammed in an interview with *Punch* on Banditry in the North-west, where bandits now imposed levies said: ‘Imposing levies does not mean criminals are in charge.’

‘It takes place in many parts of the country including the south where touts commonly referred to as area boys, impose levies’ (www.punchng/news/october29/2021). Here, one wonders how the then information Minister could liken Armed Banditry which has attracted world attention by its acts of terrorism on many lives and property to area boys in the south that has not attracted global attention.

In this same light, Sheik Ahmad Gumi, an ex-soldier and cleric in the mosque, who is known to be a mediator and peacemaker of Government, advised the Nigerian Government on issues of Bandits to hire them if Nigerians are bothered about school children being kidnapped. ‘They should be hired by the government to guard the forest and save the government the trouble of paying ransom and losing school children,’ he said. In reference to the developments in the southeast, he furthered that ‘the Fulani bandits were benign, stating that they only kidnapped children to make some money while their counterparts in insurgency (IPOB) in the southeast senselessly killed security agents. Sometimes ago, he patted crying bandits on the back and told them the Military onslaught against them was the work of overzealous Christian soldiers’ (www.vanguardngr.com/2021/06). That was sacrilegious but the Military mewed and looked away. The Presidency also pretended Gumi was speaking in a language they did not understand. ‘That attempt by Gumi to sow division in the military was not regarded as an actual or potential breach of national security. The government does not think he is a dangerous bigot as they let him go into the forests to have lunch with terrorists whose location they pretend not to know. He has been found most times taking pictures with the bandits, and the DSS does not think Gumi is a national security threat than Nnamdi Kanu’ (Egbujo, 2021). Similarly, Sheikh Gumi's comments and involvement in banditry negotiations have sparked scepticism among Nigerians of various ethnic backgrounds; for example, ‘the Federal Government's proposed grazing routes in northern

Nigerian states indicate that the government favours the Miyetti-Allah community' (Chidozie, 2021; Onwuka, 2021; *The Guardian*, 2021).

'Mailafia, the opinion leader, also made comments about the country's insecurity as a result of terrorism and was frequently summoned for questioning by the DSS, whereas Sheik Gumi, a pro-bandit Islamic scholar, freely expressed his views in favour of bandits but was only summoned once with levity by the DSS' (Fasan, 2021; Sunday, 2021; Ochieng & Kiriungi, 2021; Nnaem, 2021; Opara, 2021; Ahovi, 2020; Ahovi, 2020; Ufuoma, 2020).

Such observations have led to the conclusion that Nigerians are ethnically uneven in the context of political privileges. In reality, many people believe that President Buhari's administration was working to further the interests of the Hausa and Fulani. 'The preference for Miyetti-Allah and Sheik Gumi is the most straightforward example of political horizontal inequality as the group and the aforementioned Islamic scholar freely expressed their views without rebuttals or questioning from the Federal government or the DSS' (Jimoh, Daka, Njoku, & Lawrence, 2021). Coexistence, will eventually be endangered in a multinational society when one ethnic group feels superior to others, as it is in contemporary Nigeria. Besides, 'the memorial intrigues and interplay behind the raid of the country's second most senior judicial officer, Justice Mary Odili's residence by law enforcement agents barely five years after the midnight raid on judges' homes who were mostly non-Muslims in 2016, still suggests conspiracy by the Buhari's led Government. Studies reveal that Justice Mary could have well become the next CJN by the time the elections will be held in 2023. As such, the intrigues, colorations and interplay suggest that she could have been thwarted same as what they did to former Chief Justice Onnoghen by the conspirators to fulfil a certain purpose/agenda' (Anonymous, 2021).

Frankly speaking, the immediate past and even present leader of the Nigerian Government have expressed a conspiracy of silence by not acknowledging and responding proactively to a given subject of concern, particularly armed banditry, not to talk of its sluggish/reluctant labelling of the group as a terrorist group and/or mentioning the sponsors of terrorism in Nigeria as was published by United Arab Emirate. This action may be motivated by the positive interest in the group solidarity which even the present leader of government may be tied to or by such negative impulses as fear of political repercussion or social ostracism. As such, the current manifestations in terms of dishonesty to the general public/entire citizen; sometimes cowardice; sometimes privileging loyalty to one social group over another, have played in the polity. These covert actions suggest conspiracy, with the intention of either creating fear or achieving a certain agenda or purpose unknown to Nigerians in due course. On the other hand, the glaring acts of terror done by Independent National Electoral Commission towards the recently concluded election of 2023 in Nigeria, where citizens were robbed, maimed, killed and disenfranchised in regions of Nigeria without the intervention of Government over it, further shows conspiracy toward her citizens. Armed Bandits and other terrorists' groups are still invading the territories' of Nigeria and causing serious terror and the Federal government is yet to perform its primary work of safeguarding her citizens' rights and life. Hence, it prompted the U.S government led by Donald Trump to act on behalf of the weakling Government of President Tinubu in a way to combat terrorism to a standstill.

Other major manifestations in Nigeria

i. Alleged Collusion with Armed Non-State Actors

One manifestation is the alleged infiltration or covert support of insurgent or militia groups for strategic or political gains. In Nigeria's case, accusations have occasionally surfaced regarding:

- a. Security force infiltration by extremist sympathizers during the rise of Boko Haram.
- b. Claims of political protection networks shielding certain violent actors for electoral or regional dominance.

Although direct state sponsorship has not been conclusively proven, weak accountability structures create space for suspicion and conspiracy narratives.

ii. Selective Security Response and Strategic Inaction

Another manifestation is strategic negligence—where the state is perceived to respond unevenly to violence depending on political, ethnic, or regional calculations. For example:

- a. The state's heavy military crackdown in the Niger Delta against groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).
- b. Comparatively slower or inconsistent responses to armed banditry or herder-farmer violence in parts of northern Nigeria.

This selective enforcement fuels perceptions that violence is tolerated or indirectly enabled when politically expedient.

iii. Extrajudicial Killings and Repressive Counterterrorism

State agents themselves may engage in terror-like tactics under the guise of counterterrorism. Documented cases include:

- a. The 2009 extrajudicial killing of Mohammed Yusuf, founder of Boko Haram.
- b. Allegations of arbitrary detention, torture, and civilian casualties in counterinsurgency operations in the Northeast.

When state repression targets civilians indiscriminately, it can mirror terror tactics and radicalize affected communities, reinforcing the security dilemma.

iv. Politicization of Armed Groups

During electoral cycles, there have been accusations of:

- a. Politicians arming youth militias for intimidation.
- b. Post-election abandonment of armed groups, who then evolve into criminal or insurgent networks.

This pattern was historically evident in parts of the Niger Delta and some northern states, contributing to the militarization of local politics.

v. Security Sector Corruption and Diversion of Counterterror Funds

Corruption within the security establishment—such as diversion of funds meant for counterinsurgency—indirectly strengthens terrorist groups. The “arms procurement scandal”

under former officials in Nigeria's defense sector undermined operational capacity and prolonged insurgency.

This form of structural complicity may not be direct sponsorship but functions as indirect facilitation.

vi. Manipulation of Ethno-Religious Cleavages

Nigeria's deeply plural society makes ethno-religious polarization a political resource. When elites instrumentalize identity divisions:

- a. Armed groups gain ideological justification.
- b. Conspiracy theories about state favoritism deepen mistrust.
- c. Violence becomes normalized as a political bargaining tool.

Analytical Insight

From a Neorealist perspective, weak state capacity and internal security dilemmas push elites to adopt coercive or covert survival strategies.

From a Constructivist view, narratives, identity politics, and perceived state bias shape how communities interpret violence as state-sponsored—even where evidence is inconclusive.

From a Conspiracy theory framework, information asymmetry and institutional opacity reinforce public belief in hidden state complicity.

Above all in Nigeria, SPT manifests less as open state declaration of support for terrorist groups and more through: Alleged collusion, Strategic negligence, Repressive counterterrorism, Politicization of violence, & Institutional corruption.

These dynamics blur the line between counterterrorism and state-enabled insecurity, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and instability—an issue highly relevant to your broader research on power, state survival, and security dilemmas in fragile systems.

Nigeria's Security Dilemma and State Sponsorship

Nigeria's internal security dilemma manifests in three key dimensions:

i Militarization of Internal Security

Heavy reliance on armed forces for policing blurs the line between defense and repression.

ii Ethno-Religious Suspicion

Communities often interpret federal security deployments through ethnic or regional lenses.

iii Proliferation of Vigilante Groups

Civilian Joint Task Forces (CJTF), ethnic militias, and community defense units emerge when the state is perceived as incapable or complicit.

The state then views these groups as threats, reinforcing coercion.

Using Conspiracy Theory as an Explanatory Framework

Using conspiracy theory analytically (not normatively), the researcher observes:

(a) Political Instrumentalization of Violence

In deeply competitive political systems, elites may manipulate insecurity narratives for electoral or regional advantage.

(b) Information Asymmetry

Opaque security spending and classified operations create fertile ground for suspicion.

(c) Weak Accountability Institutions

When judicial and legislative oversights are weak, citizens are more likely to assume hidden motives.

In Nigeria, repeated cycles of violence without transparent investigations reinforce conspiracy thinking.

Interplay between State-Sponsored Terrorism and the Security Dilemma

The relationship can be structured as follows:

- i. State Action
- ii. Public Perception
- iii. Resulting Response
- iv. Outcome
- v. Increased military force
- vi. Repression/occupation
- vii. Civil resistance
- viii Escalation
- ix Counterterror funding
- x Corruption scheme
- xi Distrust
- xii Legitimacy erosion
- xiii Arrests & detention
- xiv Political targeting
- xv Ethnic mobilization
- xvi Polarization

Thus, perceived state terrorism intensifies the domestic security dilemma. Furthermore, another dimensions of Nigeria's Security Dilemma and State Sponsorship follows thus:

a. Boko Haram Insurgency:

Boko Haram's evolution illustrates how state repression, uneven governance, and militarized response strategies contribute to insurgent resilience (Agbibo, 2013). The Nigerian security establishment's heavy-handed tactics, sometimes drive civilian alienation, feeding extremist recruitment (Ukeje, 2016). This pattern reflects a security dilemma where defensive measures inadvertently escalate conflict.

Again, "The challenge posed by Boko Haram in Nigeria is not only about the viciousness of either its terror campaigns or the sect's avowed mission to impose Islamic law on the country, but about the confusion regarding the exact cause(s) of the violence" (Alozieuwa 2012, as cited by Anyadike, 2013). A lot of factors have been attributed to the cause of Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria such as socio-economic, political and religious factors. First of all, the people subscribing to the teachings and philosophies of the Boko Haram revolve around the idea of Jihad and on the notion of fighting things that are "haram". This self-definition is the beginning of the division of the Nigerian society into two sharply contrasting groups/beliefs. Besides, Boko Haram's

unwillingness to accept the dictates of modernity and the attendant social change, have disturbed governance, destroyed lives and property, affect economic activities and religious institutions like churches, mosques and above all, disturbs peace, stability and sustainable development in Nigeria. According to Eme and Anthony (2011), the inability of the State to provide some basic services for the populace, have generated conflict and renew old ones manifested through politicized agents who have used the conditions of the poor to address the responses and non-responses of the State to legitimate yearnings of the people. However, Awojobi (2014) and Onuoha (2014) posit that the high-rate of poverty in Nigeria has made the youths to enroll in the ranks of Boko Haram foot soldiers, thus heightening the conflict/security dilemma since 2009. However, many theories that have emerged to explain the problem, are broadly revolving around socio-economic, political and religious themes, all of which in the writers' estimation, does not explain the reason for such violence, brutality and cruelty in one's own country against his/her brothers. But frankly subjective, insecurity, occasioned by Boko Haram, has affected peace and sustainable economic development in Nigeria (Udosen & Umo-udo, 2017).

b. Farmer–Herder Conflicts:

Competition over arable land and water in Nigeria's Middle Belt has produced cycles of retaliation between pastoralists and farming communities. Weak state intervention has, at times, resulted in tacit tolerance of local militias aligned with community leaders (Lewis, 2020). These militias' emergence mirrors dynamics in other African states, where local defense groups fill security vacuums. In Nigeria, in recent times, the killings recorded by Fulani herdsmen and farmers clash, has rampaged most communities displacing them of their farmlands and loss of their major source of livelihood. This is becoming unbearable with the Fulani herdsmen always having their ways leaving the farmers at their mercy. Herdsmen attribute the roots of the crisis to religious differences resulting in the killing of their cows while the farmers see the herdsmen as a threat to their crops and agricultural produce since the herdsmen allow their cows to feed on the farmer crops (Udosen, 2021).

This recent wave of violence in Nigeria as observed by Kasarachi (2016), has disrupted socio-economic, religious and educational activities, political instability and threatened the national unity in Nigeria. These extra judiciary killings have forced thousands of people to abandon their homes and farmlands for safety. The rate of insecurity occasioned by Farmers-Herders crisis in the north-central, middle-belt and southern parts of Nigeria, has reduced the rate of food production in the country, thereby making farmers not to produce food in surplus as a result of fear of being killed in their various farmlands. As such, it reduces the chances of food availability in the country (Osumah, 2018). Therefore, this work posits that the crisis of Farmers and Herdsmen in Nigeria threatens peace, security and sustainable development of the nation.

Farmers-Herders crisis has threatened Nigeria's peace and development. This crisis is widespread and a formidable challenge to food security in Nigeria. Herder-Farmer crises have not only directly impacted on the lives or livelihoods of those involved, but have also disrupted and threatened the sustainability of agricultural and pastoral production and invariably the sustainability of livelihoods of rural communities (Moritz, 2010). Again, the crisis have reinforced circles of

extreme poverty and hunger, destroys social status, food security and affects mostly the most marginalized groups which include women and children (Ikezue and Ezeah, 2017). The livelihood structure, food security and wellbeing of farmers are threatened and compromised as it further contributes to poverty, food and nutrition insecurity and poor health of farming in communities, with further escalation of conflicts. The instability caused by the incessant conflict between farmers and herdsmen, will likely lead to food shortages for the communities that depend on subsistence farming. Ibrahim, Ismaila and Umar (2015) further observe that the farmers-herdsmen crises have caused a sharp and substantial increase in prices for crucial northern agricultural crop exports such as cowpeas, maize, millet, rice and sorghum, and to the rest of Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon. The rise in prices is mainly due to a decrease in agricultural output, uncertainties in markets and an increase in transportation. This therefore becomes a widespread and formidable challenge to food security in Nigeria even as urgent and sincere steps are needed to be effectively taken by the Nigerian government to end these crises as they reoccur from time to time in regions of Nigeria.

c. Armed Banditry:

According to Ademola (2021), ‘banditry violence is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. The history or origin of banditry can be traced to the pre-civil war period when the government deteriorated in certain parts of the old western region, resulting in Political violence, crime and organized insurgency. Accordingly, during the civilian reign, local bandits were reportedly stealing domestic animals. But recently between 2011-2018 in the northwest area of Nigeria, particularly, in Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, Niger, Kaduna and Kebbi States, the activities of the bandits have been worrisome even as the origin of the newest northwest conflict however started because of a fight over depleting lands and water resources between farmers and herdsmen, with the farmers belonging mostly to the Hausa people and the herdsmen being predominantly Fulani.’ As a result, there has been a bottle-neck expression of frustration, anger, violence and aggression, leaving the innocent victims of the conflict. Since 2011 -to-2018 when it increased, even to date, many lives and property have been lost, while many children and women have been displaced; dropped out of school; sexually abused; and rendered widows and orphans.

Their activity ranges from kidnapping to murder, robbery, rape, cattle rustling and the like. Their modus operandi involves maiming and killing their victims when they least expect. They usually mobilize themselves through forests into the neighborhood, riding on fast motorcycles, especially at night and shooting at will. Sometimes in the afternoon once they were sure there was no security presence of the police or military around, they unleashed terror in the communities. Besides, this growing threat is claiming victims’ lives by hundreds, while several children have been orphans and women have become widows overnight, even as the issues of food security, as well as humanitarian tragedy, further make life unbearable for many Nigerians (Udosen & Uko, 2021). ‘In a recent case in Ondo State, a figure of forty (40) people were killed in St Francis Catholic Church, Owo by ISWAP, an affiliate to Armed Bandits and Boko Haram terrorists, six people were also killed by gunmen in the same Ondo town headquarters in an attack which occurred at Sabo and Igba areas of the town on Wednesday night three days after scores of worshippers were killed in Owo, headquarters of Owo LGA of the state on June 5, 2022. The victims of the attack

were said to include tea sellers, a commercial driver and roadside traders. It was gathered that the commercial driver had stopped at Sabo to eat before he was shot dead. The gunmen were said to have stormed the area on three motorcycles after which they opened fire on the victims. Besides, as at press time, the identities of the victims were yet to be ascertained although one of the casualties who was hit by a bullet, was rushed to an undisclosed hospital in the area for treatment' (www.guardian.ng.news). 'On Monday (March 8, 2022), a train heading north of Kaduna from Nigeria's capital, was also ambushed by suspected bandits who bombed its tracks. Dozens of passengers were abducted and unconfirmed numbers of people were killed during the attack. Many are still missing' (www.alazeera.com). The incident happened only a couple of days after local daily Premium Times reported that unidentified gunmen had stormed the Kaduna Airport, killing an official on the runway. 'Soldiers reportedly repelled the attack and the airport was shut down' (www.premiumtimesonline.com). The facts are scary from the foregoing and many more, and it is glaring that the activities of armed banditry are on the increase in northern Nigeria and have even extended to other parts of Nigeria, even as their intent or drive is principally to steal and plunder for economic accumulation. Hence, tracing or knowing who bandits are and the origin of the conflict or armed banditry will help the government and other active agencies to be proactive in fighting this menace to a standstill if they actually want.

Comparative African Cases

Somalia

Somalia's decades-long civil war and the rise of Al-Shabaab demonstrate how collapsed state structures foster environments in which violent non-state actors flourish. Neighboring states and regional powers have been accused of using proxies to pursue strategic aims, contributing to multilayered insecurity (Hanes, 2015). The absence of central authority has turned security competition into a self-reinforcing spiral of violence.

Sudan and South Sudan

In Sudan's Darfur conflict and the South Sudanese civil war, government forces engaged militias such as the Janjaweed and South Sudanese armed factions, respectively, to suppress dissent and consolidate control. These relationships often involved state support that blurred military and militia roles, contributing to humanitarian crises and regional instability (Flint & de Waal, 2008; Young, 2012).

Mali and the Sahel

In Mali and the broader Sahel, state weakness has led to alliances of convenience between governments and local self-defense forces known as rroupes d'autodéfense, particularly against jihadist groups. Regional governments have also been accused of covert support for armed groups to counter rivals, reflecting a security dilemma where measures taken for survival fuel fragmentation (Thurston, 2019).

Libya

Post-2011 Libya has witnessed the proliferation of militias aligned with competing political authorities. External states have backed different factions, intensifying the conflict. The absence

of a central security monopoly demonstrates how state collapse fuels an interstate and intrastate security dilemma, with militias functioning as proxy forces in broader rivalries (Pack & Adetula, 2016).

Global South Parallels

Afghanistan

Although outside Africa, Afghanistan's use of local militias and the Taliban's relationships with patron states reflect similar processes. Competing states have historically leveraged proxies to secure interests, culminating in a fragmented security architecture that mirrors the dilemmas seen in African states (Rashid, 2010).

Colombia

In Latin America, Colombia's alliance with paramilitaries during its internal conflict illustrates how state-linked non-state violence can become entrenched. Although national contexts vary, the underlying dynamics of blurred boundaries, patronage, and security competition resonate with patterns in developing states globally (Brittain, 2010).

State Complicity and Sponsorship Dynamics

In Nigeria, multiple dimensions of state complicity have been noted:

- i. Political patronage of armed groups for electoral or regional advantage.
- ii. Fragmented security institutions, where local and federal forces operate with limited coordination.
- iii. Informal alliances between politicians and armed actors for influence in rural areas.

These structures can resemble state sponsorship even if unofficial, blurring lines between legitimate security operations and collusion with violent actors.

Impacts on Development and Governance

The interplay between state sponsorship and the security dilemma deeply impacts development:

Economic disruption: Violence disrupts agriculture, trade, and investment.

Social fragmentation: Ethnic and communal mistrust widen, diminishing social cohesion.

Governance deficits: State legitimacy erodes as citizens perceive the government as incapable or complicit in violence.

Across cases, state-linked sponsorship of violence and security dilemmas, produce similar effects: Erosion of the State's Monopoly on Violence. When governments rely on militias, they undermine formal security architectures and public trust (Richards, 2011).

Humanitarian Crises

Civilian populations bear the brunt of insecurity, displacement, and economic disruption.

Stunted Development

Persistent insecurity diverts resources from socio-economic needs and deters investment.

Fragmented Identities

Ethnic and religious divisions harden, complicating nation-building efforts.

Human Security

The deteriorating situation of human security in Nigeria accounts for the increasing incidents of rural banditry and cattle rustling. 'Human security' is much broader than national security, which tends to focus on the security of the state in military terms, and the protection of the state from external aggression. Human security shares the conceptual space of the people-centric approach to human development pioneered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994). Central to the idea of human security, as espoused by the 1994 Human Development Report on Human Security, are two important concerns: freedom from fear intended to indicate freedom from violence, and freedom from want, which is intended to indicate freedom from poverty (Greiner, 2013). In this conception of human security, human beings become the 'vital core', with a 'fundamental set of functions related to survival, livelihood and dignity' as the irreducible minimum.

The multidimensional nature of human security is underlined by the recognition given to economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. The number of central issues is greatly expanded to include the welfare of citizens, larger issues of development, and redistribution of wealth among the different strata of society (Fabusoro, 2007). There is also concern given to issues of governance, the realization of social citizenship for subaltern social groups and classes, and respect for group identity and self-determination of minority groups. The key assumption is that a nation cannot be secure if it fails to address issues of governance, unemployment, and corruption, all of which can subvert the rule of law and can undermine the welfare of the citizenry, even if the state has the most modernized army or the most sophisticated police force (Fiki & Lee, 2004).

The human security situation in Nigeria has remained precarious despite the results of the 2013 rebasing of the Nigerian economy, which identified the country as having the 28 largest economy in the world and the largest in Africa, with the per capita GDP raised from \$1,555 to \$2,688 (The Economist, April 12, 2014). For example, Nigeria is ranked low on the Human Development Index (HDI) report of the UNDP, which focuses on life expectancy, school enrolment, and income indices, and is similarly ranked low on Inequality Adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) since 2010; from the countries measured, the report ranked Nigeria 153 in 2011 and 2012, and 152 in 2013. These rankings tell the sad story of the declining material wellbeing of Nigerians. The crisis of human security in Nigeria has its roots in high levels of corruption and an entrenched culture of impunity; these are coupled with an absence of efforts on the part of government at all levels to implement pro-poor policies, and to effect redistribution of wealth (Imobighe, 1990).

The human security challenge is also evidenced by Nigeria's declining global status as a peaceful country where people can live in happiness. Once described as having one of the happiest populations on earth, it has become a country torn by civil strife, violence, and crimes of all sorts, including rural banditry that has made existence oppressive. The 2014 Global Peace Index, which

ranked 162 countries by measures, such as security, extent of conflict, and degree of militarization, puts Nigeria as the 14 -least-peaceful country in the world. Noting that the level of peace in Nigeria had fallen by 5% since 2008, the report rates countries like Chad, Lebanon, and Yemen as more peaceful than Nigeria (The Fund for Peace, 2014). The *Boko Haram*-led insurgency in the northeastern part of Nigeria, the frequent ethno-religious combustions in different parts of the country and the activities of ethnic militias, cattle groups and rural bandits, have made Nigeria the 20th saddest country to live, according to the latest ranking by Forbes Magazine. Nigeria's global ranking along these dimensions, is a consequence of the debilitating state of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, all of which are compounded by the failure of democratic governance and state inadequacies (Abbas, 2013).

However, many countries around the globe are facing one form of insecurity or the other, and as such, security threat is global in nature with few countries not facing the menace. According to Divsallar (2014), the global community is under increasing insecurity around the world. These threats ranges from emerging new terrorist groups to renewed Russia-US and China-US power struggles in Europe, South East Asia, Middle east turbulences and also failing States in Africa. There are rising insecurity in many developing countries especially those in the continent of Africa. This is manifested in civil wars in countries like (Central African Republic, Libya and South Sudan), attack by terrorist groups (Cameroun, Kenya and Somalia), political upheavals (Guinea Bissau and Sudan), militants attacks (DR Congo and Egypt) among others making the issues of insecurity going beyond the capability of some nations to the extent that foreign troops are invited to come to assist in tackling the insecurity (Osamba, 2008). Examples include the presence of US troops in Niger Republic and French troops in Mali. In order to form a common front against the rising insecurity, countries have been organizing a conference of the Committee of Intelligence and Security Services in Africa (CISSA) whose 16th edition was hosted at Abuja, Nigeria in July 2019.

In Nigeria, it was observed that the level of insecurity has increased since the return to democratic governance in May, 1999. These insecurities are caused by communal clashes, ethnic/tribal conflicts, religious riots/conflicts, militancy and ritual killings, cultism and ethnic militia attacks and the farmers-herdsmen conflicts (Akinola, 2016). These further increased with the arrival of the *Boko Haram* insurgency in the North-East from 2009 to date. The level of insecurity further increased with the changing of the farmer-herdsmen clashes into banditry and cattle rustling between 2010 - 2015. In some states of the North. This form of insecurity further changed to not only banditry, cattle rustling but to also include kidnapping of people for ransom.

Katsina State is one of the States in the North-West that is presently affected by banditry, cattle rustling and kidnapping which started from July 2018 to date. This affects mainly the eight frontline Local Government Areas (LGAs) namely Jibia, Batsari, Safana, Danmusa, Kankara, Faskari, Dandume and Sabua. This situation has become so bad that in January 2019, the Governor of Katsina State lamented that “Katsina State is under serious siege by bandits and kidnapers, even me as a Governor am not safe” (Aminu, 2019).

Concerning capitalist society like Nigeria, the material arrangement of the system is characterized by structural imbalance with manifestations of some features of inequality, unemployment, poverty, injustice, and inhumanity which could thereby be responsible for the occurrences of social problems, such as armed robbery in the country. For example, the political arrangement in a society like Nigeria is such that there is an unequal access to power among the citizens to the extent that only the tiny group of elites can have it (Umar, 2010).

This violence has taken terror dimensions, such that violent agitations have claimed thousands of lives, other thousands displaced and inestimable properties have been destroyed, rendering the region one of the most dangerous zones to live in Nigeria today. Each of these dimensions, singly and conjointly, greatly affects the nation's stability and well-being (Sheima & Usman, 2008). Threats to human and national security ranges from the menace of separatist demands, illegal militia armies, ethnic and religious conflicts, terrorism, armed robbery, corruption and poverty to sabotage public properties, economic sabotage and environmental degradation. This predominant threats and security challenges in the area are emanating from un-abating attacks on arm proliferation, youth restiveness, kidnap and hostage taking among others, becomes order of the day. This has resulted to the multifaceted conflicts across different geo-political zones in the country as there is insurgency in the North-East, pipeline vandalization and activities of militants in the Niger Delta in the South-South and endemic cattle rustling and rural armed banditry in the North-West and North-Central zones respectively. Thus, Nigeria needs the involvement of informal security actors in peace and conflict resolution more than ever before. Nigerian leader(s) also needs to be an unbiased umpire towards peace and stability of the Nation.

CONCLUSION

State-sponsored terrorism (SPT) and the security dilemma in developing states are deeply intertwined phenomena, and the Nigerian experience illustrates how structural pressures, identity politics, and clandestine narratives converge to sustain insecurity. Drawing on Neorealism, Constructivism, and conspiracy theory, this study demonstrates that insecurity in Nigeria is not merely a product of weak governance but the outcome of layered systemic and ideational dynamics. From a Neorealist perspective, Nigeria operates within an anarchic regional and global order where survival, regime security, and relative power remain paramount (Waltz, 1979). In such a context, states—particularly in fragile regions—may adopt indirect strategies, including tolerating or covertly manipulating armed non-state actors, to balance internal rivals or external threats. The proliferation of insurgent movements such as Boko Haram and its splinter, Islamic State West Africa Province, intensified Nigeria's internal security dilemma: as the state increased militarization to restore order, communities perceived bias, repression, or selective protection, thereby deepening mistrust and cycles of retaliation. The security measures designed to enhance stability paradoxically generated further insecurity—an outcome consistent with the security dilemma logic.

However, Constructivist theory reveals that material insecurity alone cannot explain the persistence of violence. Competing identities—religious, ethnic, and regional—shape threat

perception and political mobilization (Wendt, 1992). In Nigeria, narratives of marginalization in the North-East, historical grievances, and contestations over national identity have constructed environments in which violence is framed by some actors as resistance or divine obligation rather than terrorism. The labeling of violence as “terrorism,” “banditry,” or “self-defense” is socially and politically constructed, influencing both domestic legitimacy and international response. Thus, SPT—whether direct or alleged—operates within a contested normative framework where legitimacy is continuously negotiated.

The conspiracy theory dimension further complicates Nigeria’s security landscape. Allegations of clandestine state sponsorship, elite manipulation of insurgent groups for electoral or economic gain, and covert foreign interference circulate widely within public discourse. Whether empirically substantiated or not, these narratives significantly affect public trust in institutions. In fragile states, perceptions of hidden sponsorship or selective state complicity erode legitimacy, weaken intelligence cooperation, and intensify communal suspicion. Conspiracy discourses therefore become part of the security dilemma itself: distrust fuels defensive behavior, which in turn reinforces suspicion.

The Nigerian experience ultimately demonstrates that SPT and the security dilemma in developing states are multidimensional. Structurally, systemic anarchy and regional rivalries incentivize indirect warfare (Neorealism). Socially, identity constructions and normative contestation shape how violence is justified and perceived (Constructivism). Politically, secrecy and opaque governance environments enable conspiracy narratives that magnify insecurity.

Therefore, resolving the cycle of violence requires more than military containment. It demands institutional transparency, inclusive nation-building, credible accountability mechanisms, and regional cooperation. Without addressing structural incentives, identity-based grievances, and perception-driven mistrust simultaneously, the security dilemma in developing states like Nigeria will persist, reinforcing conditions under which state-sponsored or state-tolerated violence can thrive.

Recommendations

Institutional Reforms

► Strengthen oversight and accountability of security forces to reduce the incentives for reliance on non-state armed actors.

Inclusive Governance

► Address marginalization and promote political inclusion to counter narratives that fuel mobilization of violent groups.

Regional Cooperation

► Enhance cross-border security coordination to mitigate spillover effects of internal conflicts.

Transitional Justice Mechanisms

► Implement truth and reconciliation processes to address grievances and foster social cohesion.

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