

ARMED GROUPS AND NIGERIA'S INTERNAL SECURITY CHALLENGES: ISSUES, TRENDS AND THE WAY OUT

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Abstract

Nigeria's internal security environment deteriorated remarkably in 2025 to early 2026, with multiple armed non-state actors—jihadist insurgents (Boko Haram/Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad and Islamic State West Africa Province), Northwest criminal bandit networks, Middle Belt farmer-herder militias, and Southeast separatist formations including the Eastern Security Network and “unknown gunmen”. Banditry emerged as the single deadliest category, while ISWAP exhibited tactical resurgence through drone strikes, night-vision raids, and repeated overruns of military forward operating bases. Hybrid bandit-jihadist alignments (notably Lakurawa) and persistent separatist enforcement in the Southeast further entrenched ungoverned spaces. Drawing on triangulated data from Nextier Nigeria Violent Conflicts Database (2020–2025), ACLED (through March 2026), the Global Terrorism Index 2025, Amnesty International (2025), International Crisis Group, and SBM Intelligence, this article examines the historical genesis, spatial-temporal evolution, operational interconnections, and multi-dimensional impacts of these groups from 2020 to early 2026. Employing an integrated theoretical framework that combines state fragility, environmental security, rational choice, hybrid warfare, and elite instrumentalization perspectives, the analysis identifies weak governance, climate-induced resource stress, small-arms proliferation, elite complicity, and self-financing ransom economies as the principal sustaining drivers. The article concludes with a phased, multi-pillar resolution strategy informed by comparative lessons from Colombia (FARC peace process), Sri Lanka (post-LTTE stabilization), and the Lake

Chad Basin (Multinational Joint Task Force). Without coordinated, high-intensity reforms across security, governance, socio-economic, legal-institutional, and regional domains, Nigeria faces heightened risk of territorial fragmentation and cross-border contagion by the 2027 electoral cycle.

Keywords: armed non-state actors, banditry, ISWAP, farmer-herder conflict, separatist violence, hybrid threats, state fragility, climate-security nexus, ransom economy, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The restoration of civilian rule in Nigeria in May 1999 was widely anticipated to mark the beginning of sustained democratic consolidation following prolonged periods of military authoritarianism. Instead, the intervening decades have witnessed a progressive and increasingly multidimensional erosion of internal security. What began as relatively localized insurgencies has evolved into a nationwide, overlapping, multi-theatre crisis characterized by ideologically driven jihadist groups, profit-oriented criminal syndicates, resource-based communal militias, and separatist formations. By 2025, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) documented 11,968 conflict-related fatalities—a figure that surpassed the combined reported deaths in five major Middle Eastern conflict zones during the same year (ACLED, 2026). Banditry in the Northwest and emerging North-Central corridors alone claimed 2,724 lives across 599 incidents and an estimated 2,000+ kidnappings (Nextier Advisory, 2025), while the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) demonstrated renewed operational sophistication through the use of commercial drones for reconnaissance and strikes, night-vision equipment for nocturnal raids, and repeated successful assaults on military forward operating bases in southern Borno and Lake Chad islands.

The crisis now encompasses virtually every geopolitical zone. In the Northeast, jihadist insurgency persists with ISWAP asserting dominance over Boko Haram remnants. The Northwest and North-Central regions are dominated by banditry increasingly marked by hybrid alliances with emerging jihadist factions such as Lakurawa. The Middle Belt experiences intensifying farmer-herder violence driven by climate-induced southward herder migration. The Southeast remains characterized by entrenched separatist enforcement linked to the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Eastern Security Network (ESN), alongside cycles of assassinations and reprisals attributed to “unknown gunmen”. Residual oil-related militancy and cult violence continue to affect the South-South.

The economic cost is substantial, exceeding US\$15 billion annually (SBM Intelligence, 2026). Agricultural production has collapsed in key conflict-affected zones, contributing to acute food insecurity projections of 33.1 million people during the 2025–2026 lean season (FAO/Cadre Harmonisé, 2025). Millions remain internally displaced, and state legitimacy continues to erode as armed actors establish parallel taxation and rudimentary governance structures in ungoverned spaces. While military operations have achieved tactical successes in isolated theatres, they have consistently failed to deliver strategic outcomes

due to persistent governance deficits, elite complicity, widespread small-arms proliferation, climate-driven resource stress, and the emergence of self-financing ransom economies that now rival or exceed defence budgets in several local government areas.

This article provides a comprehensive longitudinal and multi-theatre analysis of Nigeria's internal security crisis as of March 2026. It integrates the most recent empirical datasets—Nextier Nigeria Violent Conflicts Database (2020–2025 full release plus 2026 outlook), ACLED real-time events (through Q1 2026), Global Terrorism Index 2025 trend extrapolations, Amnesty International follow-up reporting, International Crisis Group monthly briefs, and SBM Intelligence updates—to systematically examine the historical origins, organizational structures, operational signatures, spatial-temporal evolution, and interconnections of the principal armed actors. The analysis assesses multi-dimensional impacts across humanitarian, economic, food-security, governance, and social-cohesion domains; diagnoses interlocking structural and proximate drivers; applies an integrated theoretical framework combining state fragility, environmental security, rational choice, hybrid warfare, and elite instrumentalization perspectives; and proposes a phased, multi-pillar resolution strategy informed by comparative international experience.

The central argument is that Nigeria's security crisis is no longer a series of discrete, containable threats but a systemic syndrome rooted in deep institutional fragility, environmental stress, rational economic incentives, adaptive hybrid tactics, and elite manipulation. Military-centric approaches alone have proven inadequate; only simultaneous, high-intensity, long-term reforms across security, governance, socio-economic, legal-institutional, and regional-international domains can reverse the current trajectory before the 2027 electoral cycle precipitates further escalation and potential territorial fragmentation.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data Sources

This study adopts a multi-source triangulation strategy to maximize empirical robustness, recency, and reliability in an environment where official Nigerian conflict statistics are frequently incomplete, politicized, or inaccessible in active theatres. The analysis draws principally on eight complementary, independently produced datasets and reporting streams, each selected for its methodological rigour, temporal coverage, geographic granularity, and actor-attribution transparency. These sources are cross-validated against one another to mitigate individual biases (e.g., under-reporting in remote areas, inconsistent perpetrator labelling, or reliance on media-derived events).

1. **Nextier Nigeria Violent Conflicts Database (NNVCD):** The NNVCD constitutes the core quantitative backbone of the study. Compiled by Nextier Advisory—a Nigerian security and policy research organisation—it provides the most comprehensive, granular, and continuously updated domestic conflict dataset currently available. The full dataset (2020–2025) contains systematically coded incident-level information on date, location (down to local government area and community where possible), actor types (perpetrator/victim), event type (battle,

remote violence, strategic development, violence against civilians), fatalities (disaggregated by civilian/security-force/non-state armed actor), kidnappings (number and outcome), property destruction, and displacement estimates. Coding follows strict inclusion criteria based on at least two independent media or eyewitness sources. The 2026 outlook report (released January 2026) supplements the historical series with forward-looking trend projections, hotspot forecasts, and early-warning indicators derived from pattern analysis of 2025 data.

2. **Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED):** ACLED supplies real-time, event-level data with daily updates through March 2026, offering the highest-frequency temporal resolution in the study. Unlike NNVCD (which prioritises Nigerian domestic coverage), ACLED maintains a standardised global coding protocol, enabling direct comparability with other conflict theatres. Each event record includes precise geo-coordinates (where available), date, actor dyads, interaction type, fatalities (best estimate, civilian/security-force breakdown), and source footnotes. ACLED's strength lies in near-real-time capture of violence (typically within days of occurrence) and conservative fatality counting; its limitation—less granular perpetrator identification in complex multi-actor environments—is mitigated by cross-referencing with NNVCD and ICG reporting.
3. **Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2025:** Published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, the GTI 2025 provides the most recent full-year (2024) terrorism-specific dataset together with preliminary 2025 trend extrapolations based on partial-year coding. It includes country-level and sub-national terrorism death counts, incident numbers, attack types, target types, and perpetrator attributions (with particular attention to Boko Haram, ISWAP, and emerging hybrid groups). GTI scores and rankings also contextualize Nigeria's trajectory relative to global peers. While less granular than ACLED or NNVCD, GTI's strength is its rigorous, transparent methodology and use as a benchmark for international policy audiences.
4. **Amnesty International Reporting:** Amnesty International's flagship 2025 report *A Decade of Impunity: Attacks and Unlawful Killings in South-East Nigeria* (covering 2015–2024, with 2025 follow-up notes) offers the most detailed, field-verified documentation of Southeast separatist violence, “unknown gunmen” activity, sit-at-home enforcement killings, reprisal operations by security forces, and vigilante/cult involvement. Amnesty employs witness interviews, photographic evidence, hospital records, and open-source geolocation to attribute responsibility and document patterns of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, and collective punishment. The 2025 follow-up dispatches provide critical continuity into early 2026.
5. **International Crisis Group (ICG) Nigeria Briefs:** ICG's monthly and quarterly

Nigeria publications (2025–Q1 2026) deliver high-level political-economy and conflict-dynamics analysis, combining open-source data, confidential interviews with political, security, and community actors, and field assessments in accessible areas. These briefs are particularly valuable for contextualizing elite complicity, political instrumentalization of violence, ransom economy dynamics, and the interaction between electoral competition and armed-group activity.

6. **SBM Intelligence Security & Political Economy Reports:** SBM Intelligence's 2025–2026 monthly and quarterly security & political economy updates provide Nigeria-specific macroeconomic and conflict-economy analysis, including estimates of ransom flows (? 2.3 trillion cumulative 2020–2025), illicit mining taxation, agricultural output losses, food-price inflation attributable to insecurity, and investment flight. SBM triangulates media reports, market surveys, Central Bank of Nigeria data, and informant networks to produce credible economic-impact figures absent from official sources.
7. **FAO/Cadre Harmonisé Acute Food-Insecurity Projections:** The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and Permanent Inter-State Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (Cadre Harmonisé) conduct twice-yearly food-security classification exercises using household surveys, market-price monitoring, satellite-derived vegetation indices, and conflict-event overlays. The 2025–2026 lean-season projection (33.1 million acutely food-insecure) directly links agricultural disruption in the Northwest, North-Central, and Middle Belt to conflict-induced displacement and farm abandonment.
8. **Verified Official Nigerian Sources and Media Triangulation:** Where official Nigerian sources (Nigeria Police Force situation reports, Defence Headquarters press releases, National Emergency Management Agency displacement figures) can be cross-checked against independent datasets, they are incorporated. Media triangulation (aggregating credible Nigerian and international outlets—Premium Times, Daily Trust, The Cable, Reuters, BBC Hausa, Al Jazeera) fills gaps in remote-area reporting and provides qualitative texture to quantitative event data.

2.2 Analytical Approach

The study combines quantitative and qualitative techniques. Descriptive statistics summarize fatalities, incidents, kidnappings, and displacement by actor, geopolitical zone, and year. Spatial-temporal mapping identifies violence migration patterns (e.g., banditry expansion from Zamfara/Katsina into Kwara/Plateau). Trend-line visualization tracks annual fatalities, banditry surge rates, and hybridization indicators. Thematic qualitative interpretation examines tactical mutations, alliance formation, governance failures, and elite complicity. Comparative benchmarking evaluates resolution strategies against Colombia (FARC peace + rural development), Sri Lanka (post-LTTE reconciliation), and Lake Chad Basin (Multinational Joint Task Force).

3. Major Armed Groups and Operational Anatomy

3.1 Northeast Jihadist Insurgency: Boko Haram (JAS) versus ISWAP: Since the factional split of 2021–2022, ISWAP has emerged as the dominant actor in the Northeast theatre, employing sophisticated asymmetric tactics including commercial drones for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and occasional precision strikes; night-vision goggles for nocturnal raids; vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices; and coordinated battalion-sized assaults on military forward operating bases. Key 2025 incidents documented by ACLED and Nextier include multiple overruns in southern Borno (New Marte axis, Wulgo, Marte town), Lake Chad island clashes (Doro Gowon, Kaiga Kinjiri), and roadside ambushes resulting in 50–200 Nigerian Army fatalities per major engagement. Boko Haram/JAS remnants remain active but significantly weakened in Sambisa Forest and northern Borno, with persistent infighting with ISWAP reducing overall operational pressure while sustaining civilian targeting through market bombings and village raids. Nextier's 2026 outlook anticipates further ISWAP drone proliferation and attempts to expand operations into Yobe and Adamawa states.

3.2 Northwest and North-Central Banditry: Banditry constitutes the single deadliest category of violence in 2025, with 599 incidents and 2,724 fatalities recorded by Nextier Advisory. Groups ranging from 10 to 1,000 fighters control forest bases, artisanal gold mines, cattle-rustling corridors, and ransom networks. Core strongholds remain in Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Sokoto, with rapid expansion documented into Niger, Kebbi, Kwara, Plateau, and southern Kaduna in 2025–early 2026. High-profile field commanders (Bello Turji, Kachalla Halilu, and others) issue public audio and video threats via social media, while operational tactics include mass village raids, highway ambushes, school abductions, and taxation of mining sites. Loose alliances with the jihadist group Lakurawa in Sokoto and Kebbi introduce ideological rhetoric, shared forest bases, arms trading, and occasional joint operations. Nextier projects continued North-Central spillover and potential consolidation of bandit networks into larger confederations capable of challenging state authority across multiple local government areas in 2026.

3.3 Middle Belt: Farmer-Herder Militias and Communal Violence: Farmer-herder violence in the Middle Belt is primarily driven by climate-induced desertification and shrinking northern grazing land, which force Fulani herders southward and intensify competition over water points, pasture, and farmland. Nextier recorded 467 deaths in 2024, with an upward trend confirmed in 2025; Benue State alone reports more than 7,000 fatalities since 2015. Principal zones include Plateau (Mangu and Bokkos local government areas), Benue (Agatu, Logo), Nasarawa, and Taraba. Mutating actors encompass herder militias, reprisal farming vigilantes, ethnic militias (e.g., Ombatse, Irigwe), and spillover bandit groups from the Northwest. Escalation remains probable in 2026 unless grazing reserves, transhumance corridors, and community-based conflict-resolution mechanisms are effectively implemented.

3.4 Southeast: Separatist Violence, IPOB/ESN, and “Unknown Gunmen”: Following the 2020 proscription of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the emergence of the

Eastern Security Network (ESN) and subsequent enforcement of sit-at-home orders triggered revenge cycles targeting security forces, traditional rulers, suspected informants, politicians, and rival factions. Amnesty International (2025) documents at least 1,844 deaths between 2021 and 2023, with violence persisting through 2024–2025 via targeted assassinations, arson of public buildings, road-block attacks, and communal reprisals. Principal actors include ESN fighters, “unknown gunmen” (frequently cultists and criminals exploiting the chaos), Ebube Agu vigilantes, state security forces (Operation Udo Ka), and inter-communal reprisals. Key zones encompass Imo, Anambra, Abia, and Ebonyi, with pockets in Rivers and Delta. Continued ungoverned spaces and enforcement cycles are likely in 2026 unless political dialogue addresses underlying separatist grievances and historical marginalization claims.

3.5 Emerging and Hybrid Threats: Emerging threats include the Salafi-jihadist group Lakurawa (Sokoto/Kebbi), which attracted US airstrikes in December 2025; re-emerging Ansaru remnants (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb-linked) in the Northwest; shared forest bases, arms trading, and loose coordination between bandit commanders and jihadist cells; and persistent cult and gang violence in the South-South (Rivers, Bayelsa) and urban centres nationwide.

Table 1 Conflict Fatalities and Kidnappings by Category – 2025 (Nextier & ACLED)

Category	Incidents	Deaths (2025)	Kidnappings	Primary Regions
Banditry	599	2,724	~2,000+	Northwest + emerging North-Central
Jihadist Insurgency (ISWAP/JAS)	~250+	~1,500+	Hundreds	Northeast (Borno, Yobe, Adamawa)
Farmer-Herder Violence	87+	322+	Low	Middle Belt (Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa)
Separatist / “Unknown Gunmen” / ESN	High	300+	Variable	Southeast (Imo, Anambra, Abia)
National Total	—	11,968	3,141	Nationwide

Table 2 Year-on-Year Banditry Fatalities and Incidents Trend (Nextier)

Year	Incidents	Deaths	% Change (Deaths)
2023	148	1,192	—
2024	256	1,585	+33%
2025	599	2,724	+72%

4. Key Trends and Mutations (2020–Early 2026): The evolution of Nigeria's internal security crisis from 2020 to early 2026 exhibits several clear trends. First, violence has undergone a pronounced geographic shift, moving from Northeast-dominant jihadism in the 2010s to a nationwide, multi-theatre emergency in which banditry has become the deadliest single category. Second, tactical evolution is evident in the increasing use of commercial drones (primarily by ISWAP), night-vision raids, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, and mass abductions for ransom. Third, hybridization has accelerated, with criminal groups adopting jihadist rhetoric and loose alliances while jihadist formations utilize criminal financing mechanisms (ransoms, mining taxation). Fourth, economic criminalization has deepened, with ransom payments exceeding defence budgets in several states and cumulative payments surpassing ₦ 2.3 trillion between 2020 and 2025. Fifth, 2025 recorded the highest national fatality level (11,968) since the Boko Haram peak in 2014. Early indicators for 2026 point to accelerated North-Central bandit spillover and heightened election-related violence risk.

5. Multi-Dimensional Impacts

5.1 Human and Humanitarian Consequences: The human cost is profound. More than 40,000 fatalities have been attributed to jihadist violence alone since 2009, with 11,968 recorded in 2025. Millions remain internally displaced, with UNHCR estimating 3.3 million IDPs in 2025. Gender-based violence—including widespread rape, forced marriage, and trafficking—is pervasive in conflict zones, while both jihadist and bandit groups systematically recruit child soldiers and adolescents.

5.2 Economic and Developmental Consequences: Direct economic losses exceed US\$15 billion annually (SBM Intelligence, 2026). Agricultural production has collapsed in the Northwest and Middle Belt, contributing to national food inflation. Ransom payments totaling more than ₦ 2.3 trillion between 2020 and 2025 have deepened household poverty, while foreign direct investment in mining, agriculture, and infrastructure has been severely curtailed.

5.3 Food Security and Nutrition The FAO and Cadre Harmonisé project that 33.1 million Nigerians will be acutely food-insecure during the 2025–2026 lean season. Malnutrition indicators, including stunting rates exceeding 50% in conflict-affected zones, remain alarmingly high.

5.4 Governance and Social Cohesion: State legitimacy continues to erode as armed actors establish parallel taxation systems in rural Northwest areas. Repeated overruns of military forward operating bases have damaged military morale and public confidence. Inter-communal distrust has deepened through ethnic-religious framing of farmer-herder clashes, while a significant brain drain of skilled professionals has occurred due to pervasive insecurity.

6. Policy Implications and Resolution Strategy: Addressing Nigeria's internal security crisis requires simultaneous, high-intensity action across five interconnected pillars, sequenced in short-term (0–12 months), medium-term (1–3 years), and long-term (3–10 years) phases.

Pillar 1: Security Sector Reform and Intelligence-Led Operations: Short-term priorities include surging intelligence-led operations targeting high-value bandit and jihadist commanders, deploying drone countermeasures, and improving night-vision, communication, and mobility equipment. Medium-term measures encompass purging corruption in security procurement, enhancing morale through improved welfare and rotation policies, and integrating community early-warning networks. Long-term objectives involve professionalizing the armed forces, establishing independent civilian oversight boards, and reforming recruitment and promotion processes to reduce politicization.

Pillar 2: Governance Restoration and Elite Accountability: Short-term actions include deploying mobile courts in hotspot local government areas and freezing assets of known sponsors and protectors. Medium-term priorities encompass enforcing federal character principles in security appointments and criminalizing elite complicity in banditry, illicit mining, and ransom taxation. Long-term reforms should include constitutional review to strengthen local governance, resource control, and devolution of security powers.

Pillar 3: Socio-Economic and Climate-Smart Interventions: Short-term responses involve emergency food assistance and unconditional cash transfers in displaced communities. Medium-term initiatives include massive rural infrastructure rollout (roads, schools, clinics, solar mini-grids) in the Northwest and Middle Belt, climate-smart agriculture packages, and establishment of grazing reserves and transhumance corridors with community buy-in. Long-term efforts should focus on large-scale youth employment schemes (agri-preneurship, vocational training, digital skills) and deradicalization/rehabilitation centres with strict vetting and accountability mechanisms.

Pillar 4: Legal and Institutional Strengthening: Short-term enforcement of existing anti-kidnapping laws and implementation of asset forfeiture for ransom payers and recipients are essential. Medium-term priorities include regulating artisanal mining, tightening small-arms import and control mechanisms, and establishing a national ransom-payment registry and tracing unit. Long-term objectives encompass reform of the Police Act, creation of specialized counter-hybrid-threat units, and strengthening judicial independence in conflict zones.

Pillar 5: Regional and International Cooperation: Short-term revitalization of Multinational Joint Task Force operations in the Lake Chad Basin is required. Medium-term measures include formal intelligence-sharing protocols with Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin, alongside joint border patrols. Long-term strategies should establish a donor-supported stabilization fund tied to verifiable governance benchmarks and incorporate comparative lessons from Colombia's FARC peace process and rural development initiatives, Sri Lanka's post-LTTE reconciliation efforts, and partial successes of the Multinational Joint Task Force.

7. Conclusion

The 11,968 conflict-related fatalities recorded in 2025 represent a national emergency of existential proportions, surpassing multiple global war zones and underscoring the severity of Nigeria's internal security crisis. The principal armed actors are not discrete threats but interconnected manifestations of deep state fragility, environmental stress, rational economic incentives, hybrid tactical adaptation, and elite instrumentalization. Reliance on military operations alone has consistently failed to produce strategic outcomes. Only a bold, simultaneous, high-intensity, multi-decade strategy across security, governance, socio-economic, legal-institutional, and regional-international domains can reverse the current trajectory. Nigeria's political leadership, security services, civil society, traditional institutions, and international partners must act decisively in 2026–2027—before the 2027 electoral cycle precipitates further escalation, territorial fragmentation, and regional contagion. Failure risks permanent ungoverned spaces and state collapse. Success, however, can transform Nigeria's diversity, demographic energy, and resource wealth into a model of resilience for the Sahel and beyond.

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