

Nigeria's Fragmented Security Crisis

Steven E. Hendrix

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The country's counterterrorism strategy cannot address the range of root causes driving conflict across different regions.

Editor's Note: *Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, is known as a terrorism hotspot. Steven Hendrix, a former senior U.S. diplomat, describes a series of interwoven security challenges that plague different parts of the country and argues that a narrow focus on terrorism misses many of Nigeria's biggest security problems.*

Daniel Byman

For more than a decade, international discussion of Nigeria's security crisis has centered on Boko Haram. The insurgency in the northeast drew global attention and shaped both domestic and international responses to the country's insecurity. But focusing too narrowly on Boko Haram risks obscuring a broader reality. Nigeria's security environment has long included multiple forms of violence across different regions, but these distinct conflicts are creating spillovers that perpetuate one another. The government's counterterrorism strategy cannot address the insurgency, banditry, communal violence, and separatist unrest that varies by region because each is driven by discrete political, economic, and social causes. Understanding this variation is a prerequisite for effective strategy.

A System of Violence

The challenge is not simply that Nigeria faces multiple threats. It is that these threats operate differently. Jihadist insurgency, criminal banditry, communal conflict, and separatist unrest each respond to distinct pressures—ideological, economic, political, and social. Treating them as variations of the same problem obscures the mechanisms that sustain them and limits the effectiveness of policy responses.

In the northeast, jihadist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWAP) continue to operate despite years of sustained military pressure. Their persistence reflects both adaptive operational structures and enduring grievances that allow them to recruit and regenerate, even after years of military pressure significantly reduced Boko Haram's territorial control compared to its peak in the mid-2010s. Violence linked to Boko Haram and ISWAP has still displaced nearly 3 million people across northeastern Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin over the course of the conflict.

In the northwest, insecurity is driven less by ideology than by criminal enterprise. Armed bandit groups engage in mass kidnappings, village raids, and extortion in areas where state presence is limited or episodic. These groups are sustained by localized economies of violence, in which kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and informal taxation provide reliable revenue streams. Participation is often fluid, with individuals moving between roles as economic incentives shift. In some areas, these networks have begun to resemble proto-governance systems, imposing informal rules, extracting resources, and shaping local behavior in the absence of effective state authority. Since 2014, more than 1,400 students have been kidnapped from Nigerian schools, with many of the largest abductions occurring in the northwest and north-central regions. Mass kidnappings of students and civilians in northwestern states have underscored both the scale of insecurity and the limited reach of state protection in some affected areas.

The Middle Belt presents a different dynamic. Long-standing tensions between farmers and herders have evolved into cycles of communal violence that are increasingly organized and lethal. These conflicts are rooted in disputes over land use, migration patterns, and local political authority, but they are also being intensified by environmental and demographic pressures. As desertification advances in northern Nigeria and across the Sahel, pastoralist groups, including many Fulani herders, are moving farther south in search of viable grazing land. At the same time, population growth is placing increased pressure on agricultural communities, pushing cultivation into areas historically used for grazing. These overlapping movements intersect with identity. Nomadic herders are predominantly Muslim and sedentary farming communities are predominantly Christian, and these groups also differ in language, ethnicity, and social organization. In the conflicts in the Middle Belt, environmental stress, economic competition, and identity divisions reinforce one another, making violence more difficult to resolve through traditional mechanisms and increasing the risk of escalation beyond localized disputes. In several Middle Belt states, repeated communal clashes have displaced tens of thousands of civilians and contributed to recurring cycles of reprisal violence between communities.

In the southeast, unrest linked to the Indigenous People of Biafra reflects yet another logic. While not an insurgency in the conventional sense, separatist sentiment has fueled attacks on security forces, enforcement of sit-at-home orders, and periodic disruptions to economic and social activity. These dynamics are driven by political grievance, perceptions of marginalization, and contested state legitimacy rather than by sustained territorial insurgency. The persistence of these tensions suggests that questions of representation and inclusion remain unresolved, even in the absence of large-scale armed confrontation. Periodic sit-at-home orders and attacks linked to separatist unrest have also imposed substantial economic costs on parts of southeastern Nigeria.

Reinforcing Conflicts

The fragmentation of Nigeria's security landscape does not mean these conflicts operate independently. On the contrary, their interaction is part of what makes the current environment more volatile and more difficult to manage.

In some cases, linkages are direct. Access to weapons, financing, and local intelligence can move across these networks, increasing their resilience and reach. In northwestern Nigeria, for example, reporting has documented instances in which bandit groups have provided logistical support, safe haven, or recruits to jihadist factions, illustrating how economically motivated violence can intersect with ideologically driven insurgency in practice. In other cases, the interaction is indirect. As violence spreads in one region, it places additional strain on national security forces, reducing the state's ability to respond effectively elsewhere.

There are also social and political spillovers. Violence in affected regions has already contributed to displacement flows that intensify pressure on land, jobs, and public services elsewhere. Narratives of insecurity—whether tied to jihadist activity, communal conflict, or separatist unrest—also travel across regions, shaping perceptions of threat and influencing local responses even in areas not directly affected by violence.

The Wrong Strategy

For much of the past decade, Nigeria's security strategy—and that of its international partners—has been anchored in counterterrorism. This approach was appropriate when Boko Haram posed the most visible and immediate threat. Military operations, intelligence cooperation, and security assistance played a critical role in reducing Boko Haram's territorial control and limiting its ability to operate as a quasi-conventional force.

However, counterterrorism frameworks are designed to combat hierarchical, ideologically driven organizations. They rely on degrading leadership, disrupting networks, and denying territory. These tools do not translate easily to forms of

violence that are decentralized, economically embedded, or rooted in local political and social dynamics.

In the northwest, banditry persists because armed groups operate within systems of extraction that provide consistent incentives for participation. Military pressure can disrupt these systems temporarily, but without altering the underlying economic conditions they tend to reconstitute quickly. In some cases, heavy-handed operations can even fragment groups into smaller, more dispersed units, complicating efforts to track and disrupt them.

In the Middle Belt, deploying military force into communal conflicts risks addressing symptoms rather than causes. These conflicts are sustained by unresolved land disputes, shifting migration patterns, and local governance failures. Security deployments may suppress violence in the short term, but without mechanisms for dispute resolution and credible local authority, underlying tensions remain. Recurrent cycles of violence reflect the absence of durable institutional solutions.

In the southeast, a predominantly security-based response to separatist sentiment can deepen rather than resolve tensions. Political grievances, perceptions of exclusion, and questions of representation are not susceptible to resolution through enforcement alone. In some instances, security responses may reinforce narratives of marginalization, contributing to further alienation.

State Capacity, Legitimacy, and the Local Foundations of Insecurity

At the center of Nigeria's evolving security environment are questions of state capacity and legitimacy.

In many of the areas most affected by violence, the state's presence is limited, uneven, or contested. Security forces are stretched across multiple fronts, judicial systems lack reach and resources, and local governance structures often struggle to manage disputes effectively or to command public trust. Where institutions are absent or ineffective, alternative systems of authority emerge. In parts of the Middle Belt, for example, communities increasingly rely on self-defense militias because formal institutions have failed to provide security.

Equally important is the question of legitimacy. Where communities perceive the state as distant, biased, or ineffective, they are less likely to rely on formal institutions, and more likely to turn to local militias, vigilante groups, or informal power structures for protection and dispute resolution. This dynamic complicates security responses, as efforts to reassert control may be viewed not as protection but as imposition. These governance and legitimacy deficits complicate not only Nigeria's domestic response but also the effectiveness of external security assistance strategies.

A more effective response would begin with conceptual clarity about the nature of the problem itself. Nigeria is not facing a single security problem, but a system of interconnected and differentiated forms of violence. This recognition does not provide an immediate solution. It does, however, clarify the limitations of existing approaches and the need for more tailored responses that reflect the specific drivers of each type of conflict.

Military force will remain necessary in certain contexts, particularly where organized armed groups pose immediate threats to civilian populations. But it must be complemented by efforts that address the underlying conditions that sustain violence, including strengthening local governance, improving access to justice, and expanding economic opportunity.

Nigeria retains important institutional strengths and significant social resilience, but those capacities remain uneven across regions, and levels of government and resilience alone will not be sufficient. A security environment that has fundamentally changed requires a corresponding shift in how it is understood. Without that shift, policy will continue to lag behind reality—misidentifying the problem, misapplying the tools, and ultimately falling short of the stability it seeks to achieve.



Steven E. Hendrix

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Steven E. Hendrix is a former senior U.S. diplomat and development official who worked in Nigeria on strategy addressing Boko Haram and broader insecurity across the Middle Belt and southeastern regions. He previously served as USAID's senior coordinator for foreign assistance at the U.S. Department of State and is currently an attorney in Wisconsin.