

Time to Make ‘Peace’ with the Bandits

Banditry in northern Nigeria continues unchecked. Interventions should prioritize the protection of civilians and combine dialogue, economic infrastructure, and enforcement.

By Claudia Wiehler and Medinat Malefakis

Nigeria has functioned as an anchor of stability in West Africa, a region that has been shaken by seven coups in three years. Yet, Nigeria is also grappling with several internal security crises including a violent-extremist insurgency and large-scale banditry, putting into question Nigeria’s ability to maintain this role. Reports about collaborations between bandit groups and Boko Haram extremists create fear about an unholy alliance across the country’s Northern region, potentially linking violent extremist groups in Mali and Niger with those in the Lake Chad region. It is against this backdrop of severe civilian suffering and potential transnational ripple effects that we argue for a pragmatic and rapid intervention in the banditry crisis. At this point, it is time to make ‘peace’ with the bandits.

No region of Nigeria has been spared of violent armed conflict. The South, which has been grappling with a secessionist movement in support of an independent state of Biafra since 1967, is also the site of conflict over Nigeria’s vast oil reserves. Disputes between farmers and herders as well as ethno-religious tensions are a long-standing issue throughout the North and other parts of the country. The Boko Haram insurgency, along with its Islamic State and al-Qaida affiliates, has raged in the North-east for more than 13 years, resulting in over

43,000 deaths and the displacement of more than 2.2 million people.¹ For over a decade, Boko Haram represented the greatest threat to Nigeria’s stability and wellbeing. In the past three years, however, banditry violence has become deadlier and more widespread than insurgent activities.²

Bandit groups are highly fragmented and diverse in both their capabilities and level of institutionalization. Some approximate organized crime groups mainly striving for economic gain, though others resemble ethnic militias who thrive on kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and

Key Points

- ▮ The operational logic of banditry is different from communal conflicts or insurgency.
- ▮ Previous interventions like airstrikes and the arming of vigilantes have aggravated insecurity in the region, increasing the killing of civilians.
- ▮ A comprehensive response to reduce banditry will require a combination of dialogue, economic initiatives, and enforcement measures accompanied by a reform of the security sector.
- ▮ International and civil society actors should prioritize economic responses and dialogue at the local level based on sound and inclusive analysis.

the raiding of villages as their mode of violence. Being able to operate almost undisturbed in some areas, many groups professionalized their activities and reinvested their profits into a sophisticated weapons arsenal, including rocket-propelled grenades and anti-aircraft guns. Banditry targets range from school children, commuters, and farmers to religious leaders, traditional rulers, and government officials. A recent example of a kidnapping at an educational institution is the abduction of 287 pupils in Kuriga village, Kaduna state, in March 2024. The discovery of gold reserves in some of the states in the North-west adds a further 'resource curse' dimension to the banditry crisis.

Banditry is closely intertwined with farmer-herder conflicts, yet it is distinct in its origin and current dynamics. While farmer-herder conflicts are livelihood conflicts between the nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary communities with Hausa or ethnic minority background, banditry initially was largely economically motivated. Banditry began as intra-Fulani cattle rustling and then expanded to kidnapping, increasingly targeting sedentary communities. These attacks led to the formation of vigilante groups by the sedentary communities, some of whom brutally prosecuted any Fulani pastoralist, irrespective of their involvement in banditry.

As a result, the ethnic dimension of the banditry crisis was reinforced. Aside from simple opportunism, targeting of the sedentary communities by bandit groups was driven by a desire for revenge for atrocities committed against Fulani communities as well as by grievances over their impoverishment and their perceived unfair treatment during disputes with farmers. Much as they do not support banditry and its perpetrators, some representatives of the Fulani ethnic group such as Miyetti Allah have explained that acts of banditry are the result of resource scarcity due to changing climate conditions and the lack of public service provision to Fulani *rugas* (settlements). The ethnic tensions persist even though banditry morphed into a full-blown criminal enterprise, which is no longer restricted to Fulani herders. The increasing anti-Fulani sentiments, including the spread of conspiracy theories, raise concerns about the risk of systematic violence against the Fulanis.

Previous Attempts to Curb Banditry

The Nigerian conflicts are complex due to the multitude of actors and affected regions, as well as the federal structure of the Nigerian political system. Previous attempts to end banditry have been spearheaded by federal, state, and local governments as well as by civil society actors, often resulting in contradictory initiatives. The federal government, for



A demonstrator holds a sign during a protest to urge authorities to rescue abducted schoolboys in northwestern state of Katsina, Nigeria, 17 December 2020. *Afolabi Sotunde / Reuters*

example, tends to prioritize militarized approaches. After failing to intervene decisively in the North-west for many years, the military engaged in airstrikes from 2016 onwards. Yet, the airstrikes against bandit camps were not matched by ground force support and thus did not meaningfully weaken the criminal groups. On the contrary, the airstrikes contributed to further deterioration of the situation, as the bandits moved into new territories and retaliated against communities, government targets, and public infrastructure. In some instances, the military has mistakenly targeted and killed civilians rather than bandits.³

Since all security agencies are under the control of the federal government, states and local governments are incapable of utilizing them unilaterally to manage an emerging crisis. Frustrated by the response of the federal government, the state governments developed and implemented their own strategies. Some began to support vigilantes in their fight against bandits by providing vehicles, fuel, and small stipends. While some state governors followed a 'No Negotiation' policy, others sought to negotiate deals with the bandits by banning the more aggressive vigilantes and offering bandits amnesty. The failure of many of these amnesty programs, however, became glaringly obvious. Because the banditry groups are numerous and scattered in various states, only a fraction of them participated in amnesty deals. In many cases, bandits purposefully forfeited less sophisticated weapons, collected peace offerings, and then moved to other states to continue their activities.

Apart from the renowned Islamic Sheikh Ahmad Gumi, we know of no other peacebuilding actor that has engaged directly with the bandits. The reason for this may be the recent branding of bandits as terrorists and criminals. However, NGOs have brokered agreements in farm-

er-herder conflicts, which are intertwined with banditry. While the reduction of tensions between communities is valuable, these agreements do not scale up and cannot be extended to bandits. Most bandit groups in Nigeria are much more militarized than the rural communities they attack and not interested in resource-sharing agreements.

The federal and state governments also tried to lower the incentives and increase the costs of banditry with several policies like the interruption of mobile networks, the closure of cattle markets, and the exchange of Nigerian banknotes. While many of the measures had detrimental effects on the civilian population, the bandits were able to adapt; for example, they began demanding ransom in foreign currency. This adaptability illustrates the inefficacy of certain non-military responses so far.

Alternative Strategies

Coordinated and pragmatic dialogue is a critical, albeit controversial, element of any future strategies to deal with banditry. Considering the heated public discourse, the declaration of bandits as terrorists by the Nigerian government, and the bandits' continuing atrocities, the time might not seem ripe for full-scale dialogue alone. Yet, a purely military approach will not be able to end this crisis. The highly fragmented structure of bandit groups, their military capacity, and their sheer number – according to some estimations, up to 30,000 – make a military victory elusive.⁴ In fact, the military response so far has led to further violence. We therefore argue in favor of pragmatic 'peace', prioritizing a reduction in violence rather than striving for a complete cessation of all unlawful activities or pursuing a comprehensive peace agreement.

Most bandit groups do not have a clear political agenda or leadership, making the negotiation of a comprehensive agreement virtually impossible. Turning to other contexts with similar challenges can provide viable lessons. For instance, the 'Total Peace' approach by Colombian President Gustavo Petro could be a promising avenue to address the challenges in Nigeria. While Colombia and Nigeria are very different contexts, the situation in both countries displays notable similarities, such as the loss of governmental territorial control and the large number of highly fragmented armed groups following a mostly criminal agenda.

After the peace agreement with the rebel group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), many small groups continued to operate and harass the civilian population. For this reason, Petro stated his intention to negotiate small-scale, humanitarian agreements with any armed group willing to

talk to the government – be it political groups or drug cartels, like the Clan del Golfo. In turn for reducing violence against civilians, the groups would receive incentives like a reduction in prison sentences or the right to administer a national park. That said, the Colombian 'Total Peace' policy is an experiment and has not yielded the desired results thus far. Its future progress needs to be monitored to understand which elements of this policy could be relevant to the Nigerian case.

To contain the banditry crisis, initiatives countering polarization and hate speech are required. Narratives around the 'Fulanization' of the country should be debunked and inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogues need to be strengthened. Civil society actors in Nigeria have already begun to work in this direction, but these initiatives need to be scaled up. One positive example is the Peace and Unity Convention of the 'One Ummah' organization; the group has been able to leverage the goodwill and followership enjoyed by respected clerics, like Mufti Ismail Menk, to reach a wide audience of Muslims across ethnic groups in Nigeria, and influence peace conversations. Another example is the social media peace agreement brokered by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Plateau state, which sought to reduce hate speech and misinformation.

Furthermore, the economic and governance dimension of banditry needs to be taken seriously, rather than depoliticizing it to mere organized crime. Bandits proliferate in part due to poor governance and a lack of lawful economic opportunities available to people. Tackling these issues is even more important as violent extremists try to take root in insecure areas where the population is already

Further Reading

James Barnett / Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i / Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, "**North-western Nigeria. A Jihadization of Banditry, or a 'Banditization' of Jihad?**," *CTC Sentinel* 15:1 (2022), pp.46–67.

The article provides a detailed analysis of the relationship between bandit groups and violent extremists.

Idayat Hassan / James Barnett, **Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem. Explaining the Conflict Drivers**, cddwestafrica.org, 2022.

The report explains the emergence of banditry and the dynamics that sustain it.

Promise Frank Ejiofor, "**'Fulanis Are Foreign Terrorists': The Social Construction of a Suspect Community in the Sahel**," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15:2 (2022), pp.333–355.

The article describes how the Fulani ethnic group is constructed as dangerous and uncivilized in public discourse, contributing to their victimization.

frustrated or suffering due to ineffective governance. Possible measures include investment in public infrastructure and scaling up micro-loan schemes, like the Government Enterprise Empowerment Program. When designing such initiatives, the particularities of the pastoralist lifestyle must be considered and preserved.

No matter which non-military approaches are chosen, some involvement of the security agencies will be required to stabilize the situation. To improve their effectiveness, the federal government should urgently consider a security sector reform. Specifically, the police force needs to be strengthened and must be able to take over community policing tasks from the military. Authority over police forces should be further devolved to Nigerian state governments to enable them to swiftly react to incidents. Finally, the fight against corruption in the security sector needs to be intensified, not only by scrutinizing the political elites but also the leadership of the security agencies, and the procurement sector. A considerable portion of the defense ministry's budget disappears into private pockets.

Options for International Actors

Banditry and farmer-herder conflicts are often conflated. There is thus a clear need for extensive and improved analysis of the banditry crisis by any intervening actor, including international government agencies and NGOs. The analyses should consult with and include inputs from affected communities. Innovative survey and risk assessment methods like conjoint survey experiments can help to gather as full a picture as possible about their preferences.

It is critical that international actors build and maintain good relations with the Nigerian government and advocate a multi-faceted approach to countering banditry. For instance, any security sector reform requires the endorsement and commitment of the Nigerian government but would profit from the experience of international actors. Moreover, without buy-in from the Nigerian government, most of the strategies discussed so far would prove insufficient or even counterproductive. For example, co-opting the armed groups in a 'Total Peace' model will require an enforcement mechanism should the groups violate the agreements.

Though it is clearly preferable to work in concert, international policymakers and practitioners can still achieve some progress through local initiatives, even if the Nigerian government does not take part. One strategy could be to focus on the reduction of incentives to join or collaborate with the armed groups. Here, economic programs may prove salient, which can include micro-loans, skills acquisition programs, and start-up capital. In addition, trauma is not only a consequence of the alarmingly common abductions, extra-judicial prosecution, and constant insecurity, but also motivates support for or engagement with armed groups.⁵ International actors could thus provide psychosocial support to affected communities, including through counseling.

In addition, international actors could attempt to engage bandit groups in dialogue formats at the local level or support Nigerian civil society actors in doing so. This will require flexibility on the side of the donors and practitioners, as they would have to approve the engagement with groups labeled as criminals and terrorists. Indeed, making peace with the bandits might not seem a satisfactory option but it needs to be one part of the solution to stabilize the situation and protect civilians.

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3. Reuters, *Bombing of herders highlights pattern of deadly aerial assaults by the Nigerian military*, reuters.com, 2023.
4. Idayat Hassan / James Barnett, *Northwest Nigeria's Bandit Problem. Explaining the Conflict Drivers*, cddwestafrica.org, 2022.
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