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Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Insecurity has worsened in Northwest Nigeria, due to the threat of armed banditry, necessitating the deployments and operations of the military. While there is increasing academic attention on the origins, causes, and nature of this threat, the conduct, achievements, prospects, and challenges of the military's counter-banditism response in the region remains understudied. Accordingly, foregrounded by the need to close this gap, this qualitative study contributes to the literature through organised empirical research by examining the conduct, achievements, prospects, and challenges of the military's Joint Task Force operation *Hadarin Daji* – its major internal security operation – against armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria. Data is obtained from secondary sources which include academic journal articles, books, official reports, press briefs by the military, reputable local and international news reportage. The study's central argument holds that the nature and character of the military's campaigns against armed banditry – a form of unconventional warfare, poses significant challenges to it as a conventional fighting force, consequentially contributing towards the conflict's protractedness. Recalibrating the military's readiness for and response to unconventional warfare remains critical to degrading and defeating armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria.

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Introduction

Armed banditry has become the greatest threat to security in Northwest Nigeria in recent years. Starting as farmer-herder conflict, it has transformed into a multidimensional crisis that now feature cattle rustling and related crimes, thefts and armed robbery, kidnappings for ransom, ethno-communal clashes, illegal gold mining, assaults, and sexual violence.¹

It has been argued that behind the armed banditry crisis are opportunistic criminal gangs and other organised armed groups. However, it is pertinent to note that what differentiates armed banditry from terrorists is that unlike the latter, who are mostly driven by political ideology, the actions, and activities of the former on the other hand are mostly motivated by economic opportunism. Though Zamfara remains the epicentre of the crisis, the nefarious activities

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of armed bandits across the region, are equally alarming in Kaduna, Katsina and Sokoto states, thereby bearing the hallmarks of an axis of disruption. This development has had devastating effects on lives and livelihoods of tens of millions of people that inhabit the region.²

Both the Nigerian state and the affected subnational entities have responded to the threat of armed banditry in the Northwest with kinetic and non-kinetic measures respectively. Furthermore, the federal government has deployed a combination of military and paramilitary forces against armed bandits in the region. Some state governments in the region have also resorted to political engagements, hostage, or ceasefire negotiation, offers of amnesty, ransom or peace payment, and other concession, and sponsor of extra-state security outfits to address the crisis. In addition, many local governments and community authorities in the affected region have sponsored and engaged in local peacebuilding and crime fighting initiatives, such as inter-communal dialogues and maintenance of vigilante groups. These among others have generated a multidimensional state response against armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria, with little results.³ However, heightened public pressure on the political leadership has promoted an overreliance on kinetic measures, especially by the federal government.⁴

The Nigerian military has deployed thousands of its personnel to join the police and other security agencies in conducting internal security operations against armed bandits in the North-west geopolitical zone of the country.⁵ This includes the deployment of special operations forces as well.⁶ This has been responsible for a series of operations, where many armed bandits have been killed or arrested, their sanctuaries and assets destroyed, and some of their attacks foiled or countered, hostages rescued and the lives and properties of affected population were protected, in manners that arguably minimise their threats in the region. In other instances, these have included responses intended at winning the hearts and minds of the affected local communities by the military.⁷

Accordingly, this article examines the threat of armed banditry in Nigeria's Northwest region, as well as the conduct, achievements, and challenges of the military in internal security operations in the region. Focus is on the military's major operation against armed banditry on the region which is the Joint Task Force Operation *Hadrin Daji*. The study's contribution to the literature addresses the gap in scientific inquiry on the extent and rationales for troop deployment, and the nature, merits, and drawback of the military's operation, while also advancing possible ways forward in this context. Problematised, is the question is the extent of readiness of the military as a conventional force in waging unconventional warfare against armed banditry and how this contributes to its ability to effectively respond to the threat of armed banditry. The study's central argument is that the military's campaigns against armed banditry which takes on the form of unconventional warfare, poses significant challenges to it as a conventional fighting force, consequentially contributing towards the protracted conflict in the troubled region. For this purpose, this article is further divided into eight sections, including methodology, a conceptual framework of analysis, a theoretical anchorage, the threat of armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria, and state responses against armed banditry in the region. The article proceeds to cover the Nigerian military's operations against armed banditry in the Northwest region, the achievements of the operations, their challenges, and the conclusion.

Methodology

This qualitative study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design. It draws on secondary sources of data obtained through academic peer reviewed journal articles, books, official reports, and reputable online news reportage from local and international news

sources, including official press releases by the Nigerian military on its major joint operation against armed banditry, which is the Joint Task Force *Operation Hadarin Daji* (OPHD) in North-west Nigeria. The choice of Northwest Nigeria is informed by the fact that across the entire length and breadth of the Nigerian state, no other region has recorded incidents of attacks by armed bandits, and deaths resulting from armed banditry than the Northwest region. Other sources of data utilised is from the Council on Foreign Relations' Nigerian Security Tracker (NST) dataset. The scope of the research covers the period from 2015 officially marking the start of OPHD, up till the mid-2022. The choice to focus on this military-led internal security operations (ISOs) is informed by the significant number of personnel and resources committed to it by the military, thereby qualifying it as major ISO in the region. In addition, the study utilises other qualitative research techniques relevant to the research's objectives, which include content analysis, and the thematic data analysis method in data analysis. This is given its significance towards helping to identify patterns within the data, and its subsequent reporting.

The military in internal security operations against armed banditry: A conceptual analytical framework

The military

The military can be described as a distinct social organisation within state⁸, which is also empowered by the state to exert force in deterring threats to the sovereignty and survival of the state. The military therefore constitutes a significant part of the state's coercive apparatus and is primarily concerned with protecting the territorial integrity of the state, from external aggression. This has mostly been the conventional role of the military as it relates to security and defence, as enshrined in states' constitutions. However, on certain occasions, the military can and has been deployed internally, to address insurrections particularly where there has been a complete breakdown of law and order. While the military's response to external aggression remains its primary constitutional role, its participation in internal security can be considered as a secondary responsibility. Most state constitutions also make provisions for this exception.

Armed banditry

Banditry as a form of organised crime has existed across the world over time. It is pertinent to also note that the motives of armed bandits vary from context to context, over given periods of time and space.⁹ There are various types of armed banditry ranging from social, rural-urban frontier, and countryside banditry.¹⁰ The divergent forms of armed banditry could be broadly categorised as banditsism. Furthermore, armed banditry is known to be mostly triggered by factors such as social inequalities, relative deprivation and local grievances.¹¹ Armed bandits can be considered as organised criminal gangs with no clear political, and ideological leanings, but rather in search of economic opportunity operating within Nigeria's Northwest region.¹² Contemporary armed banditry in Nigeria however has its origins in Nigeria's farmer-herder crisis.¹³ Its manifestation has taken on several forms over the years such as armed robbery, theft, brigandage, kidnappings for ransom, illegal gold mining, and sexual violence amongst others.¹⁴ They therefore constitute one of many threats that necessitates the military's foray into internal security operations.

The military in internal security operations

With multiple security threats confronting nation-states in today's increasingly complex world, the ability of subnational states in the affected region to ensure adequate internal security within their territories has become a principal variable in measuring the success or failure of the state.¹⁵ Internal security operations (ISOs) have been defined by Momodu as the constitutional responsibilities of the state security agencies to tackle domestic threats to a nation state's corporate survival.¹⁶ By way of definition, this study considers ISOs as the state's deployment and use of its hard power assets and resources towards ensuring the protection of lives and property within its territorial boundaries. Oshita and Ikelegbe contended that

internal security is essentially concerned with guaranteeing the protection and preservation of lives, property, vital institutions, economy and vital interests, enduring a conducive atmosphere for citizen freedom and the pursuit of their livelihoods and legitimate concerns, and secure domestic environment for production, development and national progress.¹⁷

In addition, the way threats are framed could potentially determine the classification of security responsiveness. For instance, the invasion of a state by another state would be considered an act of external aggression. However, threats to national security that emanate from within the nation-state, could be categorised as internal security threats. However, the increasingly complex nature of security threats across the world also implies that some security threats though homegrown, could have external implications, reflecting the involvement of other non-state actors. Therefore, a decisive response to security threats must consider these realities in addition to ensuring that the safety of lives and property is prioritised. As Momodu rightly notes, there is a need to synergise the threat concerns of the state with those of citizens.¹⁸ Doing so often requires calling on the military's professionalism and capabilities.

The military as the state's coercive apparatus: A theoretical anchor

Given that the military, which is a constitutionally recognised component of the state's coercive apparatus and exists within the state itself as part of its functional elements, its role in mitigating security threats could also be understood within the framework of systems theory. This is particularly the case, considering that 'to enable survival and avoid system stress, the political system must have effective strategies for input reception and effective performance output as responses to challenges from the environment', as rightly argued by Oshita and Ikelegbe.¹⁹ This paper therefore adopts systems theory as a theoretical anchor that spotlights the military's involvement in internal security. This is underpinned by an understanding of the military as not only a distinct social organisation within the state, but as part of the state's coercive apparatus which together with other structures and institutions enhances the state's functionality. As propounded by Easton, the boundary of a functional or working state, which in itself represents a political system, is in the actions of various units acting in response to a changing environment.²⁰ The state's deployment of the military towards internal security operations is therefore reflective of the state's role in ensuring the safety and security of its society through the maintenance of law and order, which includes responding to domestic threats, that could potentially affect the territorial integrity of the state.

While 'stress' in this context could be understood as threats to the state's internal security, 'effective strategies' connote the means and resources deployed by the state in response to these threats, such as its internal security management mechanisms. This is significant given

that ‘stress’ could potentially result from society’s demands on the state to deliver on its end of the social contract, which includes ensuring the safety of lives and property, by fostering internal security. Thomas Hobbes’ social contract theory, further reinforces the state’s objective in this regard as given its recognition by society as the provider of collective security for all.²¹ In this regard, Section 14(2b) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states that ‘the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government’.²²

This often-mounted pressure on the state from its citizens and the need to ensure survival has resulted in the state’s utility of the military, in internal security operations despite its known traditional role that confines it to repelling external aggression, against the state. In the case of Nigeria, this responsibility should ideally be for the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), and other law enforcement institutions of the state. However, due to a lack of adequate financing, resulting in the NPF’s degradation thereby limiting its abilities to respond to internal security threats such as insurgencies over the years, has also necessitated the military’s involvement in internal security operations directed towards law enforcement. Other reasons include its lack of professionalism, inadequate manpower, insufficient state-of-the-art equipment, and corruption, to mention a few. A responsibility it is ill prepared for, given that it is a conventional force called upon to respond to unconventional threats.

It is however pertinent to note that the Nigerian military is empowered to participate in internal security as recognised by constitutional provisions. Section 217 (2) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) specifically states that the Nigerian Armed Forces shall have the responsibility of ‘suppressing insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so by the President’.²³ As of 2018, the Nigerian military had been deployed to 32 out of Nigeria’s 36 states, including in the country’s Federal Capital Territory.²⁴ Some of the ISOs conducted by the Nigerian military include counterterrorism and counterinsurgency; participation in complex humanitarian emergencies, and ensuring law and order during elections, to mention a few.²⁵ While armed banditry is a form of insurgency, the activities of armed banditry reflect acts of insurrection against the peace and security of the Nigerian state. Furthermore, the recent proscription of armed bandits as terrorists by the Nigerian state, qualifies the latter’s response against the former as counterterrorism.²⁶

While there has been inadequate scholarly work on the Nigerian military’s counter terrorism and counterinsurgency (CT-COIN) doctrine towards addressing terrorism and insurgency, understanding the increasing role of Nigeria’s military in ISOs requires an interrogation of the theory and practice of its COIN doctrine, upon which most of its ISOs is focused on. As Omeni rightly notes, the Nigerian military failed to develop a CT-COIN culture early enough for decades.²⁷ Especially one that is more consistent with its environment given new and emerging threats. This initial miscalculation is partly responsible for why it appears to continually struggle in its quest to degrade, dismantle, and defeat internal insurgency threats that have plagued the country, such as armed banditry. The military has since reviewed its approach to CT-COIN in more recent times and launched a new Armed Forces of Nigeria National Military Strategy, as at May 2022.²⁸

The threat of armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria

The scourge of banditism as a threat to peace and security in Northwest Nigeria has increased in recent years. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED),

armed bandits operating in several parts of Nigeria were responsible for the deaths of over 2,600 civilians in 2021 alone.²⁹ Dating as far back as 2011, where it originated in Zamfara state following the commissioning of a tribe of nomadic militants to defend herding communities over land-based conflicts with Hausa farmers.³⁰ Armed banditry has since gained considerable media reportage, given the import of its threat to Nigeria's national security.³¹ The consequences of armed banditry have been devastating for those who have had to bear its brunt in the troubled region.

As Figure 1 shows, attacks, and fatalities from armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria have been on the increase with the region recording significant increases between 2018 and 2021. Numbering in their thousands, the numeric strength of armed bandits appears to be on the increase. In Zamfara state, which is the epicentre of the conflict, as well as across five other states are over 30,000 as of April 2021.³² Each of these states has over 100 bandit camps with no fewer than 300 armed bandits in each camp.³³ This alarming figure paints a dire picture of the existential and enduring threat of armed banditry to Nigeria's national security. The porous nature of the sub-nation entities, as argued by Ojewale,³⁴ and the proliferation of small and light arms, also contribute towards the escalation of the crisis in the region.³⁵

The root causes of the armed banditry induced conflict in the region could be attributed to several interconnected factors. These include the issue of ethnicity, which has resulted in the 'Fulanization' of the conflict in the region, the land-related disputes, protracted years of under-development and socio-economic grievances, poor governance, fragility, weak sub-national institutions, and environmental degradation. Other factors include the failure of the judicial system, the rise of vigilantism and militia-based local security outfits and the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms within the region.³⁶ As Ojo et al rightly note, armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria transcends pastoralist insurgency given the multiplicity of complex connected factors, actors, manifestations, and dimensions that underpins its.³⁷ Armed bandits in Northwest Nigeria have been responsible for kidnappings for ransom, including the abduction of over 1,100 school pupils between 2020 and 2021 alone.³⁸

As Figure 2 shows attacks and fatalities from across the affected subnational states in Northwest Nigeria with Jigawa state recording the lowest figures and Zamafara state,

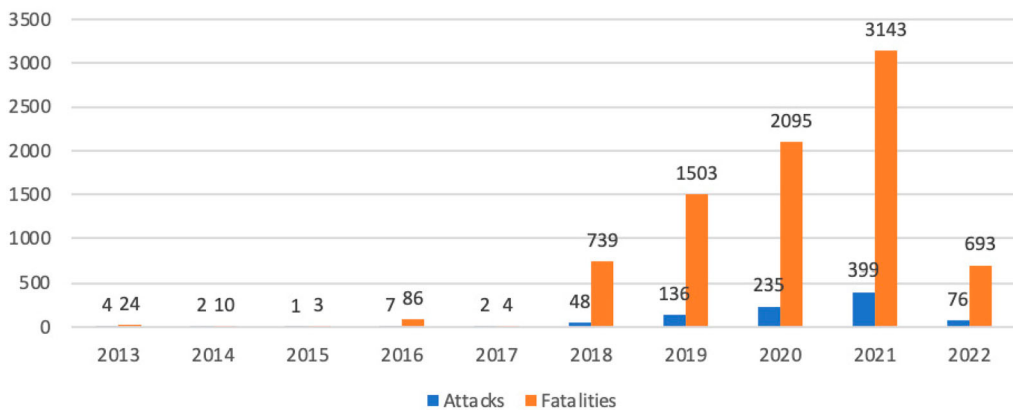


Figure 1. Trend of armed bandit attacks and fatalities in Northwest Nigeria (2013–2022). Source: Designed by authors with data extracted from the Nigerian Security Tracker (NST) dataset. Data used is available up to July 2022.

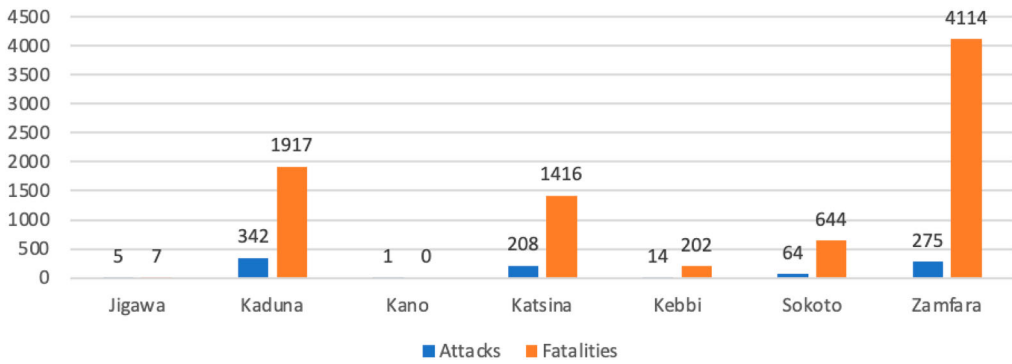


Figure 2. Distribution of armed bandit attacks and fatalities in Northwest Nigeria (2013–2022). Source: Designed by authors with data extracted from the Nigerian Security Tracker (NST) dataset. Data used is available up to July 2022.

which is the epicentre of the crisis, recording the highest figures. Furthermore, the threat posed by armed banditry is evident in the potential for collaboration with jihadi groups operating in the region, such as Ansaru, the first breakaway faction of the Boko Haram terrorist group, going by the instances where this has occurred.³⁹ It is however pertinent to note that the likelihood of a sustained relationship between armed bandits and jihadists in Northwest Nigeria remains limited, given the ideological differences that exists between both groups. While armed bandits are primarily driven by economic opportunism, the actions of jihadists are mostly informed by a political ideology,⁴⁰ as earlier noted. This is also in addition to the disarray amongst armed bandits in the region which are also known to fight amongst themselves in a quest for superiority.⁴¹ There have also been cases of repeated clashes between armed bandits and jihadist groups in the region.⁴²

Evidence, however, points to armed bandits mobilising popular support, by exploiting political grievances in local communities within Northwest Nigeria.⁴³ Whether these inroads could be consolidated towards adopting a clear political ideology by armed bandits, would be determined over time.

State responses against armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria

Both the federal government and the sub-national state governments in Nigeria's Northwest region have responded to the threat of armed banditry in different ways. Given that the Nigerian constitution, under the exclusive list, guarantees that the provision of security shall be the exclusive preserve of the federal government, its response to armed banditry as an internal security threat, has mostly been reflected in its use of kinetic measures, given its sole monopoly over the use of force. This section however focuses on some of the non-kinetic measures adopted by both the Nigerian state and the affected sub-national entities aimed at addressing armed banditry.

The federal government's interventions in this regard have included social interventions such as N-Power Graduate Programme, the Government Enterprise Empowerment Programme (GEEP). Another one of such interventions managed by the federal government is

the Anchor Borrowers Programme (ABP), which makes loans available to smallholder farmers with the aim of boosting agricultural productivity, given that agriculture remains the dominant commercial activity in the region. In a bid to also curtail illiteracy and encourage school enrolment, thereby addressing the problem of the increasing number of out-of-school children who are vulnerable to joining armed bandit groups, another intervention initiated by the federal government has been the School Feeding Programme. It is pertinent to note that while these interventions were not specifically emplaced to address armed banditry, they have contributed towards mitigating some of the socio-economic underlying factors that creates the prospects of vulnerability towards joining and sympathising with armed banditry.

Recognising the constitutional limitations on the ability of sub-national entities in Nigeria to control and use kinetic measures, such as military force, the affected sub-national states have mostly resorted to the use of non-kinetic measures as well. Of particular importance has been the recent attempts by some sub-national states, such as Zamfara and Katsina, to enter negotiations with armed bandits, with the promise of amnesty.⁴⁴ This is with the hope that this would result in the laying down of their arms. In other instances, this has included issuing ultimatums to armed bandits requesting that they lay down their arms.⁴⁵ The problem with these approaches have been the lack of coordination amongst the sub-national states across the region.⁴⁶

Added to this is the absence of a region-wide deradicalization and reintegration programme for repentant armed bandits in Nigeria's Northwest, as has been the case with Operation Safe Corridor (OSC), a deradicalization and reintegration programme targeted at ex-Boko Haram fighters.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the recent decision to shut down telecommunication services, in some areas in the Northwest region, has also impacted negatively on the everyday lives of locals, rather than curtailing armed banditry.⁴⁸ The ineffectiveness of these measures has also informed the ill-thought out calls in recent times by the Zamfara state government on its citizens to take up arms as a form of self defence against armed banditry.⁴⁹

The Nigerian military's internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria

Internal security management is the primary responsibility of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) and the internal intelligence agencies such as the Nigerian Financial Intelligence Unit (NFIU), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), and the Department of State Security (DSS). Other relevant agencies are the Nigerian Customs Service (NCS), the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS), the Nigerian Prisons Service (NPS) and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCD). Ideally, they should adopt innovative and creative solutions in addressing the unconventional threat posed by armed banditry in Nigeria. However, the inability of these law enforcement institutions to adequately address the insecurity impasse occasioned by armed banditry in the Northwest region has led to the active deployment and participation of the Nigerian military in ISOs towards restoring peace and security.⁵⁰ More importantly, the weaknesses of the NPF in law enforcement and protection of lives and properties are already well detailed.⁵¹

Table 1 shows, the Nigerian military's counter-banditism thrust, through its involvement in several ISOs against armed banditry across the Northwest region. Embedded in these ISOs are other sub-operations and exercises that only last a few days and in some instances a few months. However, while this study focuses on the military's ongoing Joint Task Force

Table 1. Military-led internal security operations against armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria.

S/ No	Name of ISO	Commencement Year of ISO	Area(s) of Responsibility (AOR)	Status of ISO	Military Components of ISO
1	Operation Sharan Daji	2015	Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto	Ended (2019)	Tri-service
2	Operation Harbin Kunama	2015	Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto	Ended (2019)	Tri-service
3	Operation Thunder Strike	2018	Kaduna Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto	Active	Tri-service
4	Operation Sahel Sanity	2019	Katsina, Kebbi, Zamfara, Sokoto	Active	NA, NAF
5	Operation Hadarin Daji	2019	Kano Kebbi, Kaduna, Katsina, Niger, Zamfara, Sokoto	Active	NA, NAF

Source: Compiled by authors.

Operation *Hadarin Daji*, (OPHD) another significant military-led ISO is Operation Thunder Strike (OPTS). OPTS, like OPHD, is one of several ISOs embarked upon by the Nigerian military in the region, involving personnel from the tri-service, assets, and resources. OPTS, along with other military operations such as Operation Safe Haven, included targeting armed bandits operating within Nigeria's North central region, but has since extended its Area of Responsibility (AOR) to include parts of the Northwest region.⁵² Other military-led ISOs against armed banditry in the past have included Operation Sharan Daji, Operation Shirn Harbi, and Operation Harbin Kunama to mention a few.

Some of the major assets and resources used by the military in the region include medical personnel, engineers and technicians, Special Operations Forces (SOFs), tanks, light armour vehicles, fighter jets, Mi-171E utility helicopters, attack helicopter gunships, Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs), and modified combat motorcycles. Some of the military's bases of deployment, mobilisation and stations for its ISOs in the Northwest include the 213 Forward Operating Base (213 FBO), and the Quick Response Wing in Daura, Katsina state, the 207 Quick Response Group (207 QRG) in Gusau, Zamfara state, the Nigerian Airforce (NAF) Detachment stationed in Birnin Gwari, and the Force Protection Group 404 in Kaduna, the Nigerian Army Super Camp 4 in Faskari, Katsina state. Others include the Forward Operation Base (FOB) at Burkusuma, Sokoto state, as well as the following FOBs in Zamfara state, FOB at Dansadau, FOB at Kekuue, FOB at Burukusuma, FOB at Magami, FOB at Kango, FOB at Bagega, FOB at Kwatarkwashi, FOB at Shinkafi, FOB at Mutumji, to mention a few. In addition, the military's ISOs in the region have been complimented by other state security institutions and non-state groups such as the NPF, DSS, Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, and local vigilante groups.

Operation Hadarin Daji

Operation Hadarin Dajin (OPHD), which loosely translates to 'disruption' in the Hausa language, is an ISO of the Joint Task Force in Nigeria's Northwest region (JTF-NW). It formally commenced on May 10, 2019, as a direct result of the military's quest to disrupt the threat of armed banditry in parts of Northwest Nigeria. OPHD was established to subsume other operations with similar objectives such as Operation Kunama III, Operation Diran Mikiya, Operation Kashe Mugu, and Operation Puff Adar, by the Nigerian Army, the Nigerian Air Force, and the Nigerian Police Force, respectively.

OPHD has its roots in an initial operation, called Shadaran Daji, which was originally launched in 2018 to tackle the menace of armed banditry, kidnapping, cattle rustling and other related criminal activities in the region. OPHD was therefore established to bring other independent operations by various components of Nigeria's security services in the region, under a unified front. Though primarily intelligence driven, OPHD's operational concepts have included information operations, kinetic operations, and humanitarian activities.

From its inception, JTF-NW OPHD's Area of Responsibility (AOR) included Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto and Kebbi states, and is broadly divided into 12 sectors to ensure effective command and control. The AOR would eventually be expanded over time. For instance, while the air component of OPHD initially included missions in several parts of the Northwest region, such as in Moriki, Madada, and Dumburum, in Zamfara state, other places have included parts of Kaduna, Katsina and Sokoto states. On February 6, 2021, the Nigerian Army's Operation Sahel Sanity (OPSS), another military-led ISO against armed banditry, was subsumed by JTF-NW OPHD.

Achievements of the military in internal security operations against armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria

The Joint Task Force of OPHD through its counter-banditsim offensive has recorded significant successes aimed at denying armed bandits the freedom of action, in addition to degrading them in the Northwest region. Some of which has included dismantling their camps and neutralising their sanctuaries and assets, as well as repelling attacks by armed bandits against local communities across the region. Other successes of the military's ISO against armed banditry in the region include eliminating high value targets (HVTs) belonging to various armed banditry groups, intercepting, and arresting their informants, recovering stolen livestock, weapons, and other logistics equipment, executing intelligence-driven missions, rescuing kidnapped hostages, evacuating civilians from danger zones, and providing medical support to internally displaced persons (IDPs) affected by the activities of armed bandits.

Within 3 weeks of its launch, OPHD had recorded the killing of 31 armed bandits, the arrest of 20 others and the rescue of 49 kidnapped victims, in addition to the recovery of livestock (cows), weapons and logistics equipment belonging to armed bandits.⁵³ Some of the achievements of the military's ISOs in the Northwest region have also included disrupting attacks by armed bandits. From May 10 to July 10, 2019, the troops of OPHD successfully neutralised about 78 armed bandits taking refuge in fortified enclaves in Zamfara state and other nearby states. During this period, a total of 50 kidnapped victims were rescued, and several weapons recovered.⁵⁴

Intensifying their kinetic counter-banditism efforts, between October and December 2019, some of the successful operations conducted by troops of OPHD across the Northwest region included eliminating several armed bandits and arresting a total of 389 others. During the same period 1,048 kidnapped victims were rescued, while 48 perpetrators were also arrested.⁵⁵ On June 23, 2020, the Air Component of OPHD acting on a series of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions executed successful air interdiction missions which destroyed 2 camps and a cave sheltering armed bandits in Doumborou Forest, Zamfara state. During the air strike several key armed bandits' leaders as well as several other fighters were neutralised.⁵⁶ On September 17, 2020, the Air Component of OPTS successfully conducted air strikes through its fighter jets and helicopter gunships, neutralising

several armed bandits at their meeting venue in Kwaimbana Forest area of Kaduna state.⁵⁷ Another significant success recorded by troops of OPHD on December 17, 2020 was the rescue of all 344 kidnapped schoolboys of Government Science Secondary School, Kankara in Katsina state.⁵⁸

On March 1, 2022, troops of OPHD successfully neutralised 90 armed bandits and rescued 8 civilians in parts of Katsina and Zamfara states.⁵⁹ Between May 20, 2021, and January 6, 2022, the sustained offensive operations of troops of OPHD across the Northwest region, resulted in the elimination of 537 armed bandits. During this same period, 374 criminals including armed bandits, as well as their collaborators were arrested, while a total of 452 kidnapped civilians were rescued.⁶⁰ Similarly, between May 19 and June 2, 2022, troops of OPHD recorded significant success against armed bandits in Maidabino, Mahuta, Yantamaki, Mahuta Makal village, in Katsina, as well as along KauraNamoda-Shinkafi road, Naka Market, and Kaikaza village in Sokoto state. 18 armed bandits were neutralised while 25 were apprehended. A total of 152 civilians were also rescued.⁶¹

Given the contributions of the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) to armed banditry, troops of OPHD on June 6, 2022, handed over a total of 706 assorted arms and ammunitions to the Zonal Coordinator North West Zone of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons. These were successfully recovered from Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara states.⁶²

Challenges to military-led internal security operations against armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria

In its effort to rid the Northwest of the threat of armed banditry, the Nigerian military, through its involvement in ISOs has encountered several challenges. Some of these challenges include inadequate funding, limited manpower, the insufficiency of state-of-the-art weaponry, equipment, and technology, such as night vision goggles, and tactical gears. Other challenges include allegations of corruption,⁶³ human rights abuses,⁶⁴ and the negative effects of the military's operations on some affected local communities,⁶⁵ all of which have affected its legitimacy in waging unconventional warfare against armed bandits in the region.

The fallout of some of this has been an affront on the state's monopoly over the use of force, which has further emboldened armed bandits in Nigeria's Northwest. This has become evident in the atrocious activities of these groups across local communities. As of October 2021, over 12,000 people have been killed, with over 1,000,000 displaced as a result.⁶⁶ Some troops assigned to these ISOs have also had to pay the ultimate price. An example of this was when 4 troops lost their lives during a fierce battle with armed bandits in April 2020, at Zurmi, in Zamfara state.⁶⁷ Another challenge is the unregulated activities of local vigilante groups including revenge killings which has tended to exacerbate, rather than ameliorate tensions in parts of the region.

Other issues that stand in the way of the military's ability to effectively prosecute the war against armed bandits has been the decision of some sub-national entities in the region to negotiate with armed bandits and their handlers. This has led in some cases to concessions including offers of amnesty by Zamfara and Katsina states. Given that this approach is not properly coordinated, with some sub-national entities such as Kaduna state adopting a no-negotiation/no-amnesty policy, armed bandits could potentially exploit these gaps by moving into other areas to perpetuate their crimes, having initially benefitted from these concessions in their previous areas of operation.⁶⁸

Other challenges are manifested in the form of political interference by both the federal government as well as the sub-national state governments. Pressured by citizens who are concerned about their safety, politicians are often keen to show that they are performing, thereby transferring pressure on the military to produce results, sometimes within the shortest possible time. Often, this is done without necessarily considering or having a good understanding of the operational dynamics of prosecuting unconventional warfare.

There have also been concerns about the degree of collateral damage associated with military-led ISOs against armed bandits, particularly related to airstrikes. Such interdiction missions raise concerns over damages to properties, as indicated by the Defence Headquarters Nigeria⁶⁹ and in some instances civilian casualties, which the air components have attempted to avert in its missions. This has proven to be quite difficult, considering the factor of manoeuvrability associated with the use of motorcycles for mobility by armed bandits across the region. Given the rugged terrain that characterises the region, rather than the overreliance on airstrikes, ground troops are better suited to securing liberated spaces from armed bandits, however issues associated with limited manpower pose a severe challenge in this regard as well. Another challenge faced by the military is attacks on its bases such as the one staged by armed bandits on Forward Operating Base in Mutumji, Dansadua LGA of Zamfara which resulted in the death of 9 Air Force personnel, two police officers and one army personnel.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The emergence of armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria poses a real and existential threat to Nigeria's national security in the region and the entire country, reflected in its consequences on lives lost, properties destroyed and the severity of the humanitarian crisis that has emanated. This has necessitated the Nigerian state's response through military action. The military's prospects and challenges in the troubled region have been mostly ignored or underestimated in the literature. This paper therefore contributes to the body of knowledge by examining the conduct, achievements, and challenges of the military in internal security operations against armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria.

The Nigerian state's deployment of the military to quell this threat through its involvement in several internal military operations has resulted in some recorded successes. Yet, its involvement in ISOs have also been plagued with some challenges thereby impeding its counter-banditism offensive efficiently and effectively in the Northwest. This essentially has to do with its readiness as a conventional fighting force, against an unconventional threat. Other associated challenges include inadequate funding, limited manpower, the insufficiency of state-of-the-art weaponry, equipment, and technology, the region's porous borders, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and the unregulated activities of local vigilantes operating across the region to mention a few. Waging a more effective war against armed banditry would require a recalibration of the military's readiness. Doing so requires a prioritisation of the human security and people-centric dimensions to its approach. This is crucial to advancing the operational successes of its counter-banditism responses in the troubled region.

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