

Religious Identity, Terrorism, and Hybrid Insecurity in Northern Nigeria: Boko Haram, Banditry, and Civilian Targeting

Lukuba Machibya¹, Sapto Priyanto², Omary Mahanakah³

^{1,2}University of Indonesia

²Institute of Accountancy Arusha

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Abstract

This paper discusses trends of civilian killing in Northern Nigeria in terms of hybrid insecurity, as understood to be the intersection of ideologically driven jihadist insurgency with economically driven armed banditry under conditions of weak state control. The research targets Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the northeast and armed bandit groups in the northwest, where sectarian reasoning makes violence mainly a religious persecution problem. Based on the results of the qualitative analysis of peer-reviewed sources, datasets on conflict events, human rights reports, and documented incidences in the period between 2009 and 2025, the article proves that the phenomenon of civilian victimization is not incidental but is systematic and strategic. Although religious identity determines symbolic targeting and narrative framing, both Christian and Muslim civilians are disproportionately impacted by the cross-regional distribution. The results indicate that structural violence, institutional weakness, and relative deprivation permit the armed participants to instrumentalize identity via seeking territorial control, extracting resources, and replacing the government. The article makes a contribution to the study of terrorism by developing the concept of hybrid insecurity as an analytical tool capable of describing the crime terror nexus and showing the shortcomings of militarized counterterrorism in defending against civilians. It concludes that human security-minded interventions that focus on governance, accountability, and socioeconomic marginalization are needed to reduce sustained civilian casualties in Northern Nigeria.

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Corresponding Author:

Lukuba Machibya

University of Indonesia

Email Coresspondent: machibyalukuba@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The Northern Nigeria is one of the most intricate modern theatres of terror and armed violence in Africa. Boko Haram has been conducting unremitting assaults on civilians, mass displacement, and undermining of state authority in the region since the beginning of the 2000s and since 2009, when it was in full-scale insurgency. In the most recent past, the armed banditry in the northwest in large scale has escalated the trends of the violence by kidnappings, village raiding's, and mass killings. The resultant developments have raised an emerging controversy in the field of terrorism research as to whether the case of violence in the state of Northern Nigeria should be interpreted as mainly a form of religious persecution, as criminal predation or as a form of hybrid security crisis (UNIDIR, 2025).

This paper resolves such a debate by posing the following questions: how do terrorism and banditry interact to produce patterns of civilian targeting in Northern Nigeria, and what does religious identity contribute to this process? The main point presented is that violence in Northern Nigeria cannot be downgraded to sectarian conflict. Though the jihadist ideology explains the stories of Boko Haram and ISWAP and leads to symbolic victimization of Christian communities, there is a systematic victimization of Christian and Muslim civilians. Armed banditry, which is mostly driven by economic factors, also borders more and more on insurgent networks, pushing the boundary between terrorism and organized crime still further.

The article makes three contributions to the Studies in Conflict & Terrorism. First, it develops the idea of hybrid insecurity through illustrating the convergence of terrorist insurgency and criminal banditry operationally and ideologically. Second, it sharpens the arguments on the use of civilian targets by demonstrating that identity-based violence goes hand in hand with structural and economic factors. Third, it assesses the fifth boundary of militarized counterterrorism in a space of weak governance and divided authority.

Boko Haram is one of the most lethal terror groups in the world that has been extensively studied. The literature finds its origins in the alliance of the Salafi-jihadist thought, social and economic marginalization, and state oppression. Initial stages of the movement focused on resistance against the Western education and authority, but, after the assassination of its leader Mohammed Yusuf in 2009, Boko Haram started using mass-killing techniques against civilians. Studies have shown that Muslim civilians have made up a large percentage of victims often those who were seen to have been collaborators or ideological opponents which makes it difficult to make such simplistic generalizations about the group as being anti-Christian.

The Boko Haram is further splintered and the birth of ISWAP additionally diversified insurgent strategies. The efforts of ISWAP to control the territory and resources changed the patterns of violence, such as the selectivity and forceful taxation. These processes are consistent with the general literature in terrorism studies that puts an emphasis on organizational adaptation and civilian victimization as strategic measures, as opposed to the effects of terrorism being purely ideological (Ilerhunmwuwa, 2025).

Nigeria, northwest Armed banditry has grown tremendously in the mid-2010s. In contrast to Boko Haram, bandit groups do not have well-structured ideological foundations, but their main driving force is profit in the form of cattle stealing, ransom kidnappings, and village raids. There is however some growing convergence between bandits and insurgents in the recent studies because of arms trafficking, recruitment, and even territorial collaboration. This intersection is problematic to analytical differences between terrorism and structured crime and underscores the necessity of combined security systems (Okoli, 2023).

Religion is a mobilizing story of extremist groups and a prism of the meaning of violence in communities. Researchers warn that the religious identity is usually superimposed on the clashes based on land issues, resource rivalry and failure to govern. In Nigeria, Christian minorities are overexposed in the Middle Belt and the northern parts with Muslim majority populations being the victims of violence in other areas. Self-based stories enhance fear and revenge, which leads to recidivism (Bursać, 2021).

The reaction of the Nigerian state has been based on military activities, such as Operation Lafiya Dole, and joint task forces. Although these efforts undermined insurgency capabilities, they were not effective to stop insider mass murders or destroy crime rings. Literature is becoming more and more focused on the necessity to change the state-centric approach of securities to the human security approach of civilian protection, accountability and trust-building (Joshua et al., 2021).

The conceptualization of violence in Northern Nigeria in this research is that of hybrid insecurity, which is the permanent intersection of ideologically-driven terrorism and economically-grounded organized criminal violence within the frameworks of weak state power. Instead of applying the analytical distinction between jihadist insurgency and armed banditry, the article further pursues the thesis that their combination generates particular patterns of civilian targeting, which cannot injuriously be reduced to one-cause explanations of terrorism or crime.

The framework combines four theories that are complementary and each one has a particular causal level to civilian victimization.

To start with, the structural violence theory describes the facilitating environment under which insurgents and criminal actors are operating. The prolonged socioeconomic inequality and political marginalization, as well as disproportionate development in Northern Nigeria creates an environment where violence is naturalized and normalized. Structural violence does not cause attacks but provides enabling environments that reduce the social and institutional bills of attacking civilians (Ejiofor, 2025).

Second, failed state theory explains the spatial aspect and institutional aspect of insecurity. The result of weak control over the territory, broken-up authority, and a lack of the provision of services limits the ability to monopolize the violence or secure civilians by the state. This institutional weakness enables non-state armed actors to impose de facto governance and apply alternative rules and use violence against civilians with a certain degree of impunity. Within this structure, there is no victimization of civilians as an anomaly but a logical result of governance vacuum (Moritz, 2013).

Third, the relative deprivation theory describes the dynamics of mobilization of grievances and recruitment. The perceived differences between expectations and actual realities especially to the marginalized populations in rural areas are instrumentalized by the jihadist groups as well as the bandit networks. Whereas the ideological and moral terms of deprivation are used by insurgents, economic survival terms are used by bandit groups. The deprivation discourses, in all instances, are useful in recruiting and justifying violence as a corrective measure (Kunst & Obaidi, 2020).

Fourth, the social identity theory gives an explanation of the selective and symbolic aspects of civilian targeting. Religious and communal identities are mobilized with a strategic purpose to build in-groups and out-groups, to legitimize violence as well as to strengthen cohesion amongst perpetrators. Notably, identity does not act as a source of violence but a framing effect that will interact with structural and economic motivations. That is the reason why Christian and Muslim civilians are systematically shot in various regions and situations (Seul, 1999).

These theories have collectively created a layered analytical framework whereby structural and institutional failures create space to allow violence; deprivation creates space to allow mobilization and identity frames creates space to allow targeting practices. This synthesis enables the study to go beyond sectarian or criminalization's, and it puts Northern Nigeria into contexts on nexus of crime and terror, as well as hybrid threat environments.

2. METHOD

The study presented in this paper is based on a qualitative comparative case study to discuss the nature of civilian targeting in Northern Nigeria between 2009 and 2025. It is theory-based research that aims at establishing the manner in which interaction of jihadist insurgency and armed banditry give rise to different types of violence against civilians in diverse regional settings.

There are two main subnational cases, which are considered.

- a) The Boko Haram and Islamic state West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency in the northeast states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa.
- b) Insurgency in the Northwest states of Zamfara, Katsina and Kaduna.

This choice is based on a most-different logic of systems. The two areas are different in ideological shading, economic layouts, and historical conflicts, but both have had prolonged victimization of civilians where there is poor state presence. This enables the analytical comparison of the convergence of the practice among the various armed actors with divergent motivations.

Data Sources. The research will be based solely on secondary data, which is triangulated in four categories:

- a) Scholarly sources on the topic of Boko Haram, banditry, and Nigerian security governance;
- b) Descriptive use of established datasets including ACLED and UCDP, which is a conflict event data, to determine trends in civilian targeting;
- c) Testimonies of human rights agency and international institutions of attacks against civilians;
- d) Confirmed media coverage on acts of violence, kidnappings and communal assaults.

The time frame (2009-2025) embraces how Boko Haram has transformed into a regional jihadist movement, originated as a localized insurgency and how the banditry in the northwest has escalated and transformed.

Thematic qualitative content analysis was used in data analysis. A first coding scheme was built deductively on the theoretical model with four categories of analysis patterns of civilian targeting, identity framing, and actor interaction and governance conditions. This was accompanied by inductive coding in order to capture emergent themes especially on operational convergence of insurgents and bandit groups.

The analysis is focused on the identification of patterns, and not on causal measurement. Qualitative findings are corroborated using conflict event data, not to make a statistical inference. This qualitative interpretation mixed with descriptive quantitative trends enhances triangulation in validity of analysis.

There is also the limitation of the reliance on secondary data which is faced by reporting bias, uneven geographic coverage and sources which might have been politicized. These limitations are alleviated by verifying the cross-source and being conservative in interpretation of the disputed claims. Although the research does not imply primary field work, the triangulation and scope of sources offer enough empirical basis to build theories and conduct comparative analysis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are grouped into three analytically distinct yet, interrelated aspects namely, civilian targeting patterns, identity-based victimization differentiation, and the convergence between jihadist insurgents and armed bandits in terms of their operations. Every subsection is directly related to one or several aspects of the theoretical framework.

Patterns of Civilian Targeting. A theory that might better explain the situation is the (Structural Violence and Failed State Theory). The discussion shows that the targeting of civilians in Northern Nigeria is not random but systematic and instrumental. To ensure compliance, penalize perceived collaboration with the state and disrupt social and economic life in the warring areas, Boko Haram and ISWAP always use violence against civilians. The village, market, transport corridors, and places of worship attacks serve to depopulate the strategic space as well as destroy the trust in the state security.

Although the data on conflict events and qualitative reports on the same suggests that Muslim civilians are a huge percentage of the casualties in the northeast, especially

where the insurgents are in control. This trend corresponds to insurgent enforcement policies as opposed to sectarian hatred and highlights the contributions of poor governance and the lack of state in facilitating the mass victimization. Institutional failure and structural violence, therefore, give sanctionable grounds where the harming of civilians is a logical strategy of control (Welsh, 2022).

Differential Exposure and Religious Identity. Social Identity Theory. Although Christian and Muslim civilians are targeted equally, violence is not experienced uniformly in all regions and places. There is increased vulnerability of Christian communities in the Middle Belt and in areas within the north west which are usually minorities in the regions affected by agrarian conflicts. The assaults of churches, priests and religious assemblies enhance the beliefs of sectarian violence, despite the fact that the underlying reasons may be land, cattle rustling or ransom economies.

Conversely, the northeast is characterized by long term victimization of Muslim civilians who rebel against insurgency or live by other religious interpretations. Repeat targets have been the mosques, Islamic scholars and even the villages dominated by Muslims. Such patterns suggest that religious identity is basically a framing and legitimizing instrument, which allows armed actors to establish in-groups and out-groups based on strategic considerations and not unifying doctrine. Targeting based on identity is thus operational and not dictatorial (Tuki, 2025).

The convergence of insurgent and bandit groups takes place when insurrectionary groups adopt a comparable stance and also utilize comparable tactics to achieve their goals.

Insurgent- Bandit Convergence. Insurgency and bandit groups converge as insurgency groups assume a similar position as well as employ a similar strategy to attain their objectives. The concept of relative deprivation and hybrid insecurity is a more concise yet accurate formulation <human>Relative deprivation and hybrid insecurity is a simpler but more precise formulation.

One of the key results is the growing functional convergence between jihadist insurgents and armed bandit groups, especially in the northwest. Despite the fact that, banditry is still mainly driven by economic factors, there are indications of co-operation in the arms trafficking, logistics, intelligence sharing, and recruitment. Such a convergence erases analytical distinctions between terrorism and organized crime and increases the geographical scope of civilian victimization (Ojewale, 2025).

The lethality and durability of the two types of actors are improved through hybridization. Insurgent access to weapons and ideological discipline is an advantage to bandit groups, and local knowledge and criminal economies are the exploitative advantage of insurgents. The ideological or survivalist concepts of relative deprivation are used to recruit more members, as well as existing group members, to the organization. This interaction justifies the applicability of the hybrid insecurity framework in explaining modern trends of violence that resist conventional definitions of threats (Jazeera, 2025).

Those results confirm the claim that Northern Nigeria can be viewed as a hybrid insecurity environment where terrorism, criminal violence, and identity-based conflict overlap. Instead of a binary religious war, violence, as a response of ideological extremism, economic predation, and structural governance failures, is the result of interaction. The selective targeting of Christian and Muslim civilians can be seen as strategic adjustment to the local conditions and does not have a unique sectarian interest.

Theoretically speaking, structural violence and failed state theory aid in the explanation of why civilian population is in high exposure even though there are massive military deployment. The continued existence of inequality, laxity of the rule of law, and a scant state presence facilitates the automatic conducive conditions under which violent non-state actors can act with relative impunity. The relative deprivation theory also throws more

light on how socioeconomic grievances are re-packaged using religious narratives in order to recruit and justify violence. Social identity theory defines how religious labels are used to divide communities and keep the circles of fear and retaliation going (Mayer, 2021).

The intersection of insurgency and banditry has considerable significance to the terrorism studies. It confronts traditional dichotomies between ideologically motivated terrorism and economically motivated crime in favor of the view that modern violent actors are more and more working along a spectrum. This observation is congruent with the new research on nexuses between crime and terror, as well as highlights the weakness of counterterrorism approaches that seek to target kinetic responses to military activities without considering the underlying governance and economic motives.

More importantly, the results also prove the ineffectiveness of the militarized security strategy adopted in Nigeria. Though the insurgent leadership has been interrupted and territory has been reclaimed through military action, it has not stopped the mass loss of civilian lives and destruction of criminal economies. Sometimes, forceful measures and violation of human rights have further destroyed the trust between the communities and the state, which unintentionally strengthens the background under which extremist and criminal recruitment thrives (Eyitayo, 2024).

4. CONCLUSION.

The long-standing violence in Northern Nigeria cannot be sufficiently explained by just one of the religious extremism or criminalists. This paper has shown that civilian killing is within a larger hybrid insecurity context that is informed by jihadist ideology, armed bandits and structural vulnerabilities that have lingered within state governance. Religious identity has a huge role to play in influencing the narratives of violence and patterns of exposure but it does not exist as an independent variable but as a factor that works alongside economic, political and institutional variables.

The article makes a contribution to the study of terrorism by incorporating several theoretical viewpoints, which emphasize the way present insurgencies evolve by integrating with criminal groups and by strategic targeting of civilians. The inability of the mass victimization to cease despite the widespread counterterrorism efforts highlights the shortcomings of militarized response in weak governance environments. Violence in Northern Nigeria needs an intervention then that moves toward more human-security-focused policies, which will focus on civilian protection, accountability, and socioeconomic inclusion as key elements of sustainable counterterrorism and conflict mitigation.

The results are in favor of the hybrid insecurity model. Violence is not criminal or sectarian. Rather, insurgent ideology, economic predation and state weakness are interacting to create a sustained civilian targeting. Theoretical assimilation has shown that identity-based violence becomes stronger in structurally violent settings.

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