

State Fragility, Ungoverned Spaces, and the Rise of Banditry in Nigeria: Focus on the Middle-belt

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Abstract

This study examines the interrelationship between state fragility, ungoverned spaces, and the rise of banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt. Drawing on a qualitative research design and secondary data sources, the paper argues that the persistence of banditry is deeply rooted in governance deficits that undermine the state's capacity to effectively control territory, provide security, and deliver essential services. The study reveals that weak institutional presence, corruption, and poor conflict management have contributed to the emergence of ungoverned spaces across rural and forested areas in states such as Benue, Niger, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Kogi. These spaces function as operational bases where bandit groups organize, recruit, and execute attacks with relative impunity. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the role of socio-economic factors including poverty, unemployment, livelihood disruption, and resource-based conflicts in sustaining banditry and facilitating local compliance or vulnerability. The study finds that a cyclical relationship exists in which state fragility produces ungoverned spaces, these spaces enable banditry, and banditry in turn deepens state fragility. It concludes that military responses alone are insufficient and emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach that integrates governance reforms, socio-economic development, and community-based security strategies. The study contributes to existing literature by providing a localized and integrated analysis of insecurity in the Middle Belt and offers policy-relevant insights for addressing the structural drivers of banditry.

Keywords: State Fragility; Ungoverned Spaces; Banditry; Rural Insecurity; Governance Deficits

Introduction

Across the globe, the persistence of violent non-state actors has increasingly been linked to the phenomenon of state fragility and the proliferation of ungoverned or poorly governed spaces. From the Sahel region of Africa to parts of the Middle East and South Asia, areas characterized by weak institutional capacity, limited state presence, and socio-economic marginalization have become fertile grounds for organized violence, insurgency, and transnational criminal networks. These environments often enable armed groups to operate with relative autonomy, establish alternative systems of authority, and exploit local grievances for recruitment and survival. As such, the nexus between state fragility, ungoverned spaces, and insecurity has become a central concern in contemporary security and development discourse.

Within this global context, Nigeria presents a compelling case of how governance deficits intersect with local dynamics to produce complex security challenges. The increasing complexity of Nigeria's security landscape has drawn significant scholarly and policy attention to the linkages between state fragility, ungoverned spaces, and the proliferation of violent non-state actors. In recent years, banditry has emerged as a dominant form of organized violence, particularly across the Middle Belt region, where persistent insecurity has reshaped local

economies, disrupted livelihoods, and undermined state authority. States such as Benue, Niger, Plateau, Nasarawa, and parts of Kaduna have witnessed recurrent attacks involving kidnapping, village raids, cattle rustling, and mass displacement. These developments underscore deeper structural deficiencies within the Nigerian state, especially in its capacity to effectively govern peripheral and rural territories.

State fragility in Nigeria is reflected in the inability of government institutions to provide basic public goods, including security, justice, and economic opportunities. In many parts of the Middle Belt, the presence of the state is either weak or inconsistent, creating conditions in which alternative actors often armed groups fill the governance vacuum. This phenomenon has contributed to the emergence of ungoverned spaces, defined as areas where state authority is limited or absent, and where formal rules are supplanted by informal or coercive systems of control. Forest reserves, border communities, and remote rural settlements across the region have increasingly become sanctuaries for bandit groups, enabling them to organize, recruit, and execute attacks with minimal resistance.

The Middle Belt occupies a unique socio-political and geographical position in Nigeria, serving as a transitional zone between the predominantly Muslim North and predominantly Christian South. While this diversity has historically enriched the region, it has also contributed to recurring tensions over land, identity, and political representation. Environmental pressures such as desertification in northern Nigeria have intensified migration patterns, particularly among pastoralist groups, thereby increasing competition over scarce resources in the Middle Belt. In the absence of effective conflict management mechanisms and inclusive governance structures, these tensions have frequently escalated into violent confrontations, which bandit groups exploit for both economic and strategic gains.

Furthermore, the rise of banditry in the region cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader context of governance deficits and socio-economic marginalization. High levels of youth unemployment, poverty, and limited access to education have created a pool of vulnerable individuals susceptible to recruitment into criminal networks. Simultaneously, weak law enforcement capacity, inadequate intelligence systems, and poor inter-agency coordination have constrained the state's response to these threats. Consequently, bandit groups continue to operate with relative impunity, leveraging difficult terrains and local grievances to sustain and expand their activities.

Despite numerous military operations and policy interventions, the persistence of banditry suggests that existing strategies have largely addressed immediate symptoms rather than the underlying structural drivers of insecurity. This raises critical concerns about the effectiveness of current governance frameworks and underscores the need for a more holistic approach that integrates security responses with institutional reforms and socio-economic development. Understanding how state fragility contributes to the creation of ungoverned spaces and how these spaces, in turn, facilitate the rise and persistence of banditry is essential for designing sustainable and long-term solutions. This study, therefore, examines the interconnections between state fragility, ungoverned spaces, and banditry in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the Middle Belt region.

Conceptual Clarifications

State Fragility

The concept of *state fragility* has become central to contemporary discussions on governance, security, and development, particularly in relation to conflict-prone and developing societies.

Although widely used, the term does not have a single universally accepted definition, as scholars approach it from different analytical perspectives. Broadly, state fragility refers to the condition in which a state lacks the capacity, legitimacy, or political will to effectively perform its core functions, including the provision of security, enforcement of laws, and delivery of public services.

Early scholarly efforts to conceptualize state fragility focused on the failure of states to maintain order and authority within their territories. Rotberg (2003) defines fragile states as those that are unable to provide political goods such as security, justice, and economic opportunities to their citizens. In such contexts, the erosion of state authority often results in the breakdown of law and order, creating conditions for violence and instability. This perspective emphasizes the centrality of security provision as a fundamental responsibility of the state.

Building on this foundation, subsequent studies expanded the concept to include institutional and governance dimensions. Fukuyama (2004) argues that state fragility is closely linked to weak institutional capacity, particularly the inability of governments to design and implement effective policies. According to this view, fragility is not only about the absence of authority but also about the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of state institutions in managing public affairs. This highlights the importance of administrative competence and governance structures in determining state strength.

Further contributions introduced a multidimensional understanding of state fragility, incorporating issues of legitimacy, authority, and capacity. In this regard, state fragility is seen as a condition where the state struggles to maintain a monopoly over the legitimate use of force, experiences declining public trust, and faces challenges in extending its authority across all parts of its territory (Risse, 2011). This perspective underscores the importance of both internal legitimacy and territorial control in assessing the strength or weakness of a state.

State fragility has been closely associated with the proliferation of violent non-state actors and the persistence of insecurity. Weak state presence in rural and peripheral regions often creates environments where armed groups can operate with relative freedom. Such conditions are particularly evident in countries facing challenges related to poverty, unemployment, environmental stress, and ethno-religious tensions. These factors not only undermine state capacity but also exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, making it difficult for governments to maintain control and ensure stability.

In Nigeria, state fragility manifests in several interconnected ways, including weak institutional capacity, inadequate security infrastructure, corruption, and uneven development across regions. While the Nigerian state maintains formal sovereignty, its ability to effectively govern certain areas particularly rural and conflict-prone regions such as the Middle Belt remains limited. In these areas, the state often struggles to enforce laws, protect lives and property, and provide essential services, leading to diminished public trust and legitimacy.

The implications of state fragility are particularly evident in the emergence of ungoverned spaces and the rise of banditry. Where the state is unable to establish effective control, gaps in governance are created, allowing non-state actors to exploit these vulnerabilities. Bandit groups, for instance, take advantage of weak security presence and institutional failures to establish operational bases, recruit members, and sustain violent activities. Thus, state fragility serves as a foundational driver of both ungoverned spaces and organized criminality. For the purpose of this study, state fragility is conceptualized as the condition in which the Nigerian state exhibits limited capacity, weakened institutional effectiveness, and reduced legitimacy in

governing certain territories particularly in the Middle Belt thereby creating governance gaps that facilitate the emergence of ungoverned spaces and the proliferation of banditry.

Ungoverned Spaces

The concept of *ungoverned spaces* has generated considerable debate within academic and policy circles, particularly in the fields of security studies and international relations. While the term is widely used, scholars differ in their interpretations, with some even questioning whether truly “ungoverned” spaces exist at all (Igboin, 2021). This skepticism reflects the broader understanding that most territories are governed in some form, even if not by formal state institutions. Consequently, ungoverned spaces are better understood not as complete vacuums of authority but as areas characterized by weak, ineffective, or contested governance.

Early scholarly engagements with the concept were largely situated within counterterrorism discourse, where ungoverned spaces were seen as potential safe havens for terrorist activities (Korteweg, 2008). This perspective was further expanded by scholars who argued that such spaces are not limited to remote or inaccessible regions but may also exist within urban slums, border areas, and migrant communities where state control is limited (Cronin, 2009). Similarly, ungoverned spaces have been conceptualized as areas where states fail to exercise effective authority, thereby creating opportunities for non-state actors to operate (Forest, 2010).

Building on this foundation, the notion of “restricted statehood” was introduced to describe territories where governments lack the capacity to enforce laws or maintain a monopoly over the legitimate use of force (Risse, 2011). This shifted the discourse from absolute absence of governance to varying degrees of state weakness. Subsequent studies further emphasized that ungoverned spaces often serve as environments for organized violence and illicit activities due to limited oversight and enforcement mechanisms (Oakley & Proctor, 2012).

Further refinement of the concept highlighted that ungoverned spaces represent areas where the state encounters significant challenges in establishing control, often due to institutional weaknesses, lack of resources, or political constraints (Rabasa et al., 2007). These spaces are frequently associated with broader patterns of fragile governance and are seen as breeding grounds for insecurity and criminality. In a similar vein, Raleigh and Dowd (2013) argue that such spaces reflect the absence of effective state sovereignty, which in turn contributes to the proliferation of conflict and violence.

More recent scholarship has expanded the understanding of ungoverned spaces beyond terrorism to include organized crime, banditry, and other contemporary security threats. Arsenault and Bacon (2015) emphasize that these spaces are often embedded within weak governance structures and are sustained by socio-political and economic vulnerabilities. Likewise, Olaniyan and Akindele (2017) note that many so-called ungoverned spaces are in reality partially or poorly governed areas where state authority coexists with alternative forms of control.

In addition, the concept has been broadened to include both physical and non-physical dimensions. Whelan (2006) describes ungoverned spaces as areas whether territorial or functional where there is an absence of state capacity or political will to exercise control. These may include physical environments such as forests and borderlands, as well as non-physical domains like financial systems where regulatory oversight is weak. This multidimensional understanding underscores the complexity of governance deficits in contemporary security environments.

Banditry

The concept of *banditry* has evolved significantly within academic discourse, reflecting changes in the nature, organization, and motivations of violent criminal groups. Traditionally, banditry was associated with small-scale criminal activities such as robbery, cattle rustling, and highway attacks, often carried out by loosely organized groups operating in rural or frontier regions. Early interpretations viewed bandits largely as opportunistic criminals driven by economic motives rather than political or ideological objectives (Hobsbawm, 1969).

Subsequent scholarship expanded this understanding by situating banditry within broader socio-economic and political contexts. Banditry began to be seen not merely as criminality but as a phenomenon linked to weak governance, social inequality, and rural marginalization. In this regard, bandits were sometimes described as products of systemic neglect, operating in environments where state presence is minimal and survival strategies are shaped by economic deprivation and limited opportunities (Blok, 1972).

In more contemporary analyses, banditry has been redefined to capture its increasing complexity and organization, particularly in developing regions. Scholars argue that modern banditry often involves structured networks engaged in a range of illicit activities, including kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, armed robbery, and violent raids on communities (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014). These activities are not only economically motivated but are also sustained by access to arms, local support systems, and weak law enforcement mechanisms.

Banditry has increasingly been linked to broader issues of state fragility and security governance. It is often conceptualized as a form of organized violence that thrives in environments characterized by limited state control, porous borders, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. In such contexts, bandit groups exploit governance gaps to establish operational bases, recruit members, and sustain their activities over time (Ugwueze & Onuoha, 2020).

In Nigeria, the concept of banditry has taken on a more specific and urgent meaning, particularly in relation to rural insecurity in the North-West and North-Central regions. Contemporary studies describe banditry as a form of armed criminality involving organized groups that engage in systematic violence against civilians for economic gain (Okoli & Lenshie, 2018). These groups are often heavily armed and operate from remote or forested areas, launching attacks on villages, abducting individuals for ransom, and engaging in cattle rustling and other illicit activities.

Adedeji (2021) emphasizes the transformation of banditry in Nigeria from isolated acts of crime to a more entrenched and networked security threat. Bandit groups increasingly demonstrate features of organized armed actors, including hierarchical structures, coordinated operations, and links to transnational criminal networks. Some studies also highlight emerging intersections between banditry and other forms of violent conflict, such as farmer-herder clashes and insurgency, thereby complicating the security landscape. Moreover, banditry in Nigeria is closely associated with underlying structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, environmental stress, and weak governance. These conditions not only facilitate recruitment into bandit groups but also sustain cycles of violence by limiting alternative livelihood options. In many affected communities, the inability of the state to provide adequate security has further entrenched the activities of bandits, allowing them to operate with relative impunity.

For the purpose of this study, banditry is conceptualized as a form of organized armed criminal activity carried out by non-state actors, characterized by violence, coercion, and economic predation including kidnapping, cattle rustling, and village raids primarily sustained by weak state presence and socio-economic vulnerabilities in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: State Fragility Theory

This study is anchored on the State Fragility Theory, which provides a robust analytical lens for understanding the relationship between governance deficits, ungoverned spaces, and the rise of banditry. The theory is rooted in the broader discourse on state capacity and the ability of governments to perform core functions necessary for maintaining order, legitimacy, and development. State Fragility Theory emerged prominently in the early 2000s within development and security studies, particularly in response to growing concerns about the link between weak states and global insecurity. Early contributions emphasized that fragile states are those that lack the institutional capacity and political will to provide basic public goods such as security, justice, and welfare (Rotberg, 2003). In such contexts, the erosion of state authority creates conditions conducive to violence, criminality, and social disorder.

Subsequent scholarship expanded this perspective by highlighting the multidimensional nature of state fragility. According to Robert I. Rotberg, fragile states are characterized not only by weak institutions but also by declining legitimacy, inability to control territory, and failure to maintain a monopoly over the use of force. Similarly, Francis Fukuyama argues that state strength is fundamentally tied to institutional capacity, particularly the ability to design and implement policies effectively. Where such capacity is lacking, governance becomes ineffective, and state authority is undermined.

Building on these foundational ideas, later studies introduced the concept of “areas of limited statehood,” which refers to territories within otherwise functioning states where government control is weak or absent (Risse, 2011). These areas often overlap with what are described as ungoverned spaces, where state institutions fail to enforce laws, regulate activities, or provide security. In such environments, alternative actors including armed groups and criminal networks emerge to fill the governance vacuum.

In applying State Fragility Theory to the Nigerian context, particularly the Middle Belt, the relevance of the framework becomes evident. Nigeria exhibits several features of a fragile state in specific regions, despite maintaining overall sovereignty at the national level. These features include weak institutional capacity, inadequate security infrastructure, corruption, and uneven development. In the Middle Belt, the inability of the state to effectively govern rural and forested areas has led to the emergence of ungoverned spaces, which serve as operational bases for bandit groups.

The theory further explains how governance deficits translate into security challenges. Where the state fails to provide adequate protection, citizens may lose confidence in formal institutions, leading to the rise of alternative systems of authority. Bandit groups exploit these conditions by establishing control over territories, imposing informal rules, and engaging in violent economic activities such as kidnapping and cattle rustling. Thus, ungoverned spaces become both a symptom and a consequence of state fragility, reinforcing cycles of insecurity.

Moreover, State Fragility Theory highlights the role of socio-economic factors in shaping security outcomes. High levels of poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion weaken the social contract between the state and its citizens, making individuals more susceptible to recruitment into criminal networks. In the Middle Belt, these conditions are further compounded by environmental pressures, resource competition, and communal tensions, all of which contribute to the persistence of banditry.

However, while State Fragility Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the structural drivers of insecurity, it is not without limitations. Critics argue that the theory tends to generalize diverse contexts and may overlook local dynamics, agency, and informal

governance systems that shape security outcomes. Additionally, not all areas with weak state presence necessarily experience high levels of violence, suggesting that other intervening variables such as community resilience and local institutions also play important roles.

Despite these limitations, the theory remains highly relevant to this study as it effectively captures the interplay between governance deficits, territorial control, and organized violence. It provides a coherent framework for analyzing how state fragility leads to the emergence of ungoverned spaces and how these spaces, in turn, facilitate the rise and persistence of banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt. In line with this framework, the study posits that state fragility (independent variable) contributes to the emergence of ungoverned spaces (intervening variable), which in turn drive the incidence and persistence of banditry (dependent variable). This theoretical linkage forms the basis for the study's analysis and guides its investigation into the structural drivers of insecurity in the region.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design to examine the interconnections between state fragility, ungoverned spaces, and the rise of banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt, given the complex, context-dependent, and non-quantifiable nature of the phenomenon under investigation. The Middle Belt comprising states such as Benue, Plateau, Niger, Nasarawa, and Kogi serves as the focal study area due to its strategic socio-political position, ethno-religious diversity, agrarian economy, and persistent exposure to banditry and related forms of violent conflict. The research relies exclusively on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, government publications, policy documents, reports from international organizations such as the World Bank and International Crisis Group, as well as credible media accounts, all of which provide comprehensive insights into the structural and contextual drivers of insecurity in the region. Data generated from these sources are analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which enables the systematic identification, interpretation, and synthesis of key themes, patterns, and relationships relevant to the study's core variables state fragility, ungoverned spaces, and banditry while being guided by the assumptions of State Fragility Theory.

This methodological approach is justified by the need to capture the depth and complexity of governance deficits, institutional weaknesses, and socio-economic conditions that underpin insecurity, as well as the practical and ethical constraints associated with conducting primary fieldwork in conflict-affected areas. Nonetheless, the study acknowledges certain limitations, particularly its reliance on secondary data, which may be subject to issues of bias, inconsistency, or incomplete reporting; however, these limitations are mitigated through the use of diverse, credible, and cross-validated sources to enhance the reliability and robustness of the analysis.

Analysis of Findings

State Fragility and Governance Deficits in the Middle Belt

State fragility in Nigeria's Middle Belt is most evident in the persistent governance deficits that undermine the capacity of the state to effectively secure lives and property, enforce laws, and deliver essential public services. Despite the formal presence of government institutions, many parts of the region particularly rural communities across Benue, Plateau, Niger, Nasarawa, Kogi, and Southern Kaduna experience weak or inconsistent state authority. This fragility is reflected in limited security infrastructure, inadequate policing, and the inability

of state agencies to maintain a sustained presence in vulnerable areas (Rotberg, 2003). As a result, large segments of the population remain exposed to violence, with delayed or ineffective responses to security threats reinforcing perceptions of state weakness and abandonment.

A major dimension of this fragility lies in institutional weakness and poor governance capacity. Security agencies in the region are often overstretched, under-resourced, and constrained by logistical challenges, making it difficult to effectively patrol vast rural and forested terrains. In many instances, the ratio of security personnel to population is grossly inadequate, while intelligence-gathering mechanisms remain weak and poorly coordinated (Fukuyama, 2004). This institutional gap not only limits the state's ability to prevent attacks but also hampers its capacity to respond decisively when violence occurs. Consequently, armed groups are able to operate with relative freedom, exploiting the absence of a credible deterrent.

Corruption and lack of accountability further exacerbate governance deficits in the Middle Belt. The diversion of public resources, mismanagement of security funds, and weak oversight mechanisms undermine the effectiveness of state institutions. In some cases, allegations of collusion between local actors and criminal groups have deepened public distrust in government agencies. This erosion of trust weakens the legitimacy of the state and reduces community willingness to cooperate with security forces, thereby creating an enabling environment for banditry and other forms of organized violence (Risse, 2011).

In addition, uneven development and socio-economic exclusion contribute significantly to state fragility in the region. Many rural communities in the Middle Belt suffer from inadequate infrastructure, limited access to education and healthcare, and high levels of poverty and unemployment. These conditions not only reflect the state's inability to provide basic services but also fuel grievances that can be exploited by armed groups. Youths in particular, faced with limited economic opportunities, become vulnerable to recruitment into bandit networks, thereby reinforcing cycles of insecurity (Okoli & Lenshie, 2018).

The complexity of the Middle Belt's socio-political environment further compounds governance challenges. The region's ethnic and religious diversity, while a source of cultural richness, has also been associated with recurring tensions over land ownership, political representation, and resource control. The inability of the state to effectively manage these conflicts through inclusive and impartial mechanisms has often led to their escalation into violence. In such contexts, the failure of governance is not only administrative but also political, as state institutions struggle to maintain neutrality and legitimacy among diverse groups (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Moreover, the limited reach of formal justice systems in many parts of the Middle Belt has contributed to the normalization of impunity. Perpetrators of violence are often not apprehended or prosecuted, which emboldens criminal actors and undermines the rule of law. Communities, in response, may resort to self-help mechanisms, including vigilante groups, which, while filling immediate security gaps, can further complicate the security landscape and weaken centralized authority (OECD, 2018).

Emergence of Ungoverned Spaces in the Middle Belt

The emergence of ungoverned spaces in Nigeria's Middle Belt is a direct outcome of persistent state fragility and entrenched governance deficits that have progressively weakened the state's capacity to exercise effective territorial control. These spaces are not created overnight; rather, they evolve through a gradual erosion of state authority, driven by institutional weakness, inadequate security presence, and socio-economic neglect. Over time, this erosion

creates geographical and functional vacuums where the state is either absent or ineffective, allowing non-state actors to establish influence and operate with minimal constraint (Risse, 2011; Raleigh & Dowd, 2013).

One of the most visible manifestations of ungoverned spaces in the Middle Belt is the proliferation of poorly policed rural hinterlands and forest reserves. Areas such as the vast forest belts spanning parts of Niger State (including regions connected to the Kamuku and Kainji Lake forest zones), Southern Kaduna, and border communities between Nasarawa and Benue have increasingly become zones of limited state control. These terrains are often difficult to access, lack basic infrastructure, and are rarely subjected to sustained security surveillance. As a result, they provide ideal conditions for armed groups to establish camps, store weapons, and coordinate attacks. The inability of security forces to maintain a continuous presence in these areas reinforces their status as operational safe havens (International Crisis Group, 2020).

In addition to physical remoteness, the emergence of ungoverned spaces is closely linked to administrative neglect and weak local governance structures. Many rural communities in the Middle Belt experience minimal government presence beyond periodic interventions, with local institutions often underfunded and ineffective. In such contexts, governance becomes fragmented, and communities are left to rely on informal systems of authority, including traditional leaders or vigilante groups. While these structures may provide some level of order, they lack the capacity to counter heavily armed bandit groups, thereby creating a governance gap that is easily exploited (Olaniyan & Akindele, 2017).

Border dynamics further contribute to the expansion of ungoverned spaces in the region. The Middle Belt serves as a transitional zone connecting northern and southern Nigeria, with several internal and interstate boundaries that are loosely monitored. These porous boundaries facilitate the movement of armed groups, illicit arms, and stolen livestock across states such as Niger, Kogi, Nasarawa, and Benue. Bandit groups often exploit these fluid boundaries to evade security operations, retreating into less governed areas when under pressure. This mobility not only complicates law enforcement efforts but also enables the diffusion of insecurity across wider geographical areas (Small Arms Survey, 2019).

Another critical factor in the emergence of ungoverned spaces is the interaction between environmental pressures and resource-based conflicts. Desertification and declining agricultural productivity in northern Nigeria have intensified migration patterns, particularly among pastoralist groups moving southward into the Middle Belt. This has increased competition over land and water resources, often leading to violent clashes between farmers and herders. In many cases, the state has been unable to effectively mediate these conflicts or enforce land-use regulations, resulting in prolonged instability. Over time, these conflict-prone areas become weakly governed spaces where armed actors operate freely under the cover of communal tensions (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Furthermore, the collapse or absence of effective justice systems in many parts of the Middle Belt has reinforced the growth of ungoverned spaces. In communities where crimes are rarely investigated or prosecuted, a culture of impunity emerges, emboldening criminal actors. Victims of violence often have little or no access to formal legal redress, leading to the normalization of self-help mechanisms and retaliatory violence. This breakdown of the rule of law further diminishes state authority and strengthens the position of non-state actors as alternative enforcers of order (OECD, 2018).

Importantly, ungoverned spaces in the Middle Belt are not entirely devoid of governance; rather, they are characterized by the presence of *alternative or competing systems of control*. In

some instances, bandit groups impose informal rules, collect levies, and regulate movement within territories under their influence. This form of parallel governance reflects a shift from mere criminality to structured control, where armed groups effectively replace the state in certain localities. Such dynamics illustrate how ungoverned spaces can transform into zones of contested authority, further entrenching insecurity (Forest, 2010; Sackflame & Omitola, 2022).

Ungoverned Spaces as Operational Bases for Banditry

Ungoverned spaces in Nigeria's Middle Belt function as core operational ecosystems that enable the planning, execution, and sustainability of banditry. These spaces provide not just physical concealment but also strategic advantages security cover, recruitment opportunities, financial channels, and mobility corridors that allow bandit groups to thrive despite repeated state interventions. In practical terms, the persistence of banditry across states such as Benue, Niger, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Kogi is closely tied to the existence of territories where state authority is weak, inconsistent, or entirely ineffective (Risse, 2011; Forest, 2010).

One of the clearest ways this manifests is through the use of forest reserves and remote hinterlands as operational bases. In Niger State, for instance, areas around Shiroro, Rafi, and Munya Local Government Areas have repeatedly been identified as hotspots where bandit groups establish camps deep within forest corridors linked to the Kainji Lake National Park axis. These locations provide dense vegetation and difficult terrain that limit aerial surveillance and ground troop access. From these bases, bandits carry out attacks on nearby communities such as repeated raids on villages in Shiroro LGA before retreating into the forest, making pursuit by security forces extremely difficult. Similarly, in parts of Nasarawa State, forested zones bordering Benue particularly around Awe and Doma serve as fallback locations for armed groups after attacks on farming communities.

In Benue State, ungoverned spaces are evident in rural border communities, especially in Guma, Logo, and Agatu Local Government Areas. These areas have experienced repeated attacks on agrarian settlements, where armed groups invade villages, destroy farmlands, and displace residents. After such attacks, perpetrators often withdraw into nearby bush paths and riverine corridors that lack security monitoring. For example, attacks in Guma LGA have been followed by the disappearance of armed groups into inaccessible areas along the Benue–Nasarawa border, illustrating how weak territorial control enables both execution and escape. These patterns highlight how ungoverned spaces function as launch-and-retreat zones for bandit operations (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Ungoverned spaces also operate as kidnapping and detention hubs, particularly in Niger and Kogi States. Along major transit routes such as the Abuja–Kaduna–Minna and Abuja–Lokoja corridors, victims abducted during road ambushes are often taken into nearby forests where state presence is minimal. In Niger State, communities around Kagara and Teginia have witnessed multiple abductions where victims were held for extended periods in forest camps before ransom payments were negotiated. Similarly, in Kogi State, forested areas around Kabba-Bunu and Yagba East have been used as holding locations for kidnapped individuals taken from highways or rural communities. The absence of surveillance and delayed security response in these areas allows bandits to maintain control over victims without immediate threat of rescue operations.

Another critical function of ungoverned spaces is their role as economic and logistical centres for illicit activities. In Plateau and Benue States, cattle rustling remains a significant component of banditry. Armed groups raid pastoral settlements or farming communities, seize

livestock, and move them through poorly monitored rural routes into informal markets. These transactions often occur in locations where regulatory oversight is weak or nonexistent, allowing bandits to convert stolen assets into cash or exchange them for weapons and supplies. The lack of coordinated tracking systems across states further facilitates this process, enabling bandits to sustain their operations financially (Small Arms Survey, 2019).

Furthermore, ungoverned spaces enable fluid mobility across interconnected territories, which is central to the resilience of bandit networks. The Middle Belt's loosely monitored inter-state boundaries particularly between Niger, Kogi, Nasarawa, and Benue allow armed groups to evade security operations by relocating across jurisdictions. For example, after attacks in communities within Niger State, bandits may retreat toward forested areas stretching into Kogi or Nasarawa, where security presence is weaker or delayed. This pattern of cross-border movement complicates coordinated responses, as security agencies often face jurisdictional limitations and logistical delays. Consequently, bandit groups maintain operational flexibility and avoid sustained confrontation (International Crisis Group, 2020).

In addition to physical operations, ungoverned spaces foster the emergence of coercive local control and informal governance systems. In parts of Niger and Benue States, reports have indicated that farmers are sometimes forced to pay levies to armed groups in order to access their farmlands or avoid attacks. In extreme cases, bandits dictate when and where farming activities can take place, effectively assuming regulatory authority over local economic life. This form of control demonstrates a shift from sporadic violence to structured dominance, where bandit groups embed themselves within local systems and exploit governance gaps for long-term benefit (Olaniyan & Akindele, 2017; Sackflame & Omitola, 2022).

These ungoverned spaces facilitate arms circulation and network expansion, linking local banditry to broader illicit systems. Rural corridors in Niger and Nasarawa States, for instance, are often connected to wider trafficking routes through which small arms and light weapons flow from the Sahel region. The availability of these weapons enhances the sophistication and lethality of bandit operations, as seen in increasingly coordinated attacks on Plateau and Benue communities. This growing level of organization indicates that ungoverned spaces are not isolated zones but are embedded within wider networks of insecurity (Ugwueze & Onuoha, 2020).

Socio-Economic Drivers and Local Dynamics of Banditry

One of the most significant drivers is widespread rural poverty and economic marginalization, particularly in agrarian communities across Benue, Plateau, Niger, Nasarawa, and Kogi States. Many households depend on subsistence farming or pastoralism, yet these livelihoods have been severely disrupted by recurrent violence and displacement. For instance, in Benue State especially in Guma, Logo, and Agatu Local Government Areas frequent attacks on farming communities have led to the abandonment of farmlands and reduced agricultural output. This not only deepens poverty but also creates economic desperation, making some individuals more susceptible to recruitment into bandit groups or participation in illicit activities for survival.

Closely linked to this is the problem of youth unemployment and limited economic opportunities. A large proportion of young people in the Middle Belt lack access to stable income, vocational training, or formal employment. In parts of Niger and Nasarawa States, idle youth populations in rural areas have been identified as vulnerable to recruitment by bandit networks, which often promise financial rewards, protection, or a sense of belonging. In such

contexts, banditry becomes not only a criminal enterprise but also an alternative economic pathway for marginalized individuals, thereby sustaining its growth (Okoli & Lenshie, 2018).

Another critical factor is the collapse of traditional livelihoods, particularly farming and pastoralism, due to insecurity and environmental pressures. In Plateau State, for example, repeated attacks on rural settlements have disrupted both crop production and livestock rearing, leading to food insecurity and loss of income. Similarly, in Niger State, communities around Shiroro and Rafi have experienced cycles of displacement that prevent residents from returning to their farms. As livelihoods collapse, individuals are forced to adopt coping mechanisms that may include migration, informal labor, or engagement with armed groups, further entrenching instability.

The farmer–herder conflict also plays a central role in shaping local dynamics of banditry in the Middle Belt. Competition over land and water resources exacerbated by climate change, desertification, and population growth has intensified tensions between farming and pastoralist communities. In states like Benue and Nasarawa, disputes over grazing routes and farmland have frequently escalated into violent confrontations. In many cases, these conflicts create opportunities for bandit groups to exploit existing divisions, either by aligning with one group, carrying out retaliatory attacks, or using the chaos to expand their operations. This blurring of lines between communal conflict and banditry complicates both understanding and response to insecurity (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Local dynamics of fear, coercion, and survival strategies further sustain banditry. In several rural communities, residents are often compelled to cooperate with bandit groups out of fear of reprisal. For example, in parts of Niger and Kogi States, farmers have reportedly paid levies or “protection fees” to armed groups in order to access their farmlands or avoid attacks. In such situations, communities are not necessarily supportive of banditry but are forced into compliance as a survival strategy. This dynamic weakens resistance against bandit groups and allows them to entrench their influence within local populations (Olaniyan & Akindele, 2017).

Additionally, internal displacement and social dislocation contribute to the reproduction of insecurity. Large numbers of people displaced by violence in Benue and Plateau States often settle in camps or host communities with limited resources and support. These conditions can lead to frustration, loss of social cohesion, and increased vulnerability, particularly among youth. Displacement also disrupts traditional authority structures and community networks that might otherwise help regulate behavior and prevent criminal activity.

Environmental pressures further exacerbate these challenges. The effects of climate change particularly desertification in northern Nigeria have intensified migration into the Middle Belt, increasing pressure on land and natural resources. This has not only fueled conflict but also weakened traditional systems of land management and dispute resolution. In the absence of effective state intervention, these pressures contribute to the emergence of conflict-prone environments where banditry can flourish.

Conclusion

This study has examined the intricate relationship between state fragility, ungoverned spaces, and the rise of banditry in Nigeria’s Middle Belt, demonstrating that the persistence of insecurity in the region is not merely a function of criminal activity but a reflection of deeper structural and governance failures. The analysis revealed that state fragility manifested through weak institutional capacity, poor service delivery, corruption, and ineffective conflict management has

significantly undermined the ability of the state to maintain authority and provide security across rural and peripheral areas.

These governance deficits have contributed to the emergence and expansion of ungoverned spaces, particularly in forested regions, border communities, and remote rural settlements across states such as Benue, Niger, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Kogi. Far from being passive voids, these spaces function as active operational environments that enable bandit groups to organize, recruit, finance, and execute violent activities with relative impunity. The study further established that banditry in the Middle Belt is sustained by a combination of socio-economic factors, including poverty, unemployment, livelihood disruption, and resource-based conflicts, as well as local dynamics of coercion, fear, and survival. Importantly, the findings highlight a self-reinforcing cycle in which state fragility leads to the creation of ungoverned spaces, these spaces facilitate banditry, and the activities of bandits further weaken state authority and deepen fragility. This cyclical relationship explains why military interventions alone have yielded limited and often temporary results, as they fail to address the underlying drivers of insecurity.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i.** The government should prioritize the expansion of administrative and security presence in rural and conflict-prone areas of the Middle Belt. This includes establishing well-equipped local security outposts, improving the deployment of personnel, and strengthening local government institutions to ensure effective governance and service delivery at the grassroots level.
- ii.** Targeted efforts should be made to reclaim forested and remote areas currently used as operational bases by bandit groups. This requires sustained, intelligence-driven security operations supported by modern surveillance technologies such as drones and satellite monitoring. Importantly, such efforts must be followed by the establishment of permanent state presence to prevent the re-emergence of ungoverned spaces.
- iii.** Given the mobility of bandit groups across state boundaries, there is a need for improved coordination among security agencies and state governments in the Middle Belt. Joint operations, intelligence sharing, and unified command structures will enhance the effectiveness of responses and reduce the ability of bandits to exploit jurisdictional gaps.
- iv.** Addressing the socio-economic roots of banditry requires sustained investment in job creation, vocational training, and rural development programs. Targeted interventions should focus on youth in vulnerable communities, providing alternative livelihood opportunities and reducing the appeal of banditry as an economic option.
- v.** The government should develop and support inclusive and community-based conflict resolution frameworks to address farmer–herder disputes and other local tensions. Traditional institutions, civil society organizations, and local stakeholders should be integrated into these mechanisms to ensure legitimacy and effectiveness.
- vi.** Efforts must be made to strengthen the rule of law by ensuring that perpetrators of violence are apprehended and prosecuted. This includes enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies, improving judicial processes, and addressing corruption within the security sector to restore public trust in state institutions.
- vii.** The provision of basic infrastructure such as roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and communication networks is essential for extending state presence and improving living

conditions in rural communities. Such investments will not only reduce marginalization but also enhance the ability of security forces to operate effectively.

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