JOURNAL OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE
ISSN Print: 2992-2763 – ISSN Online: 2992-4618 | Vol. 4, No. 3 / September, 2026
https://www.jopd.com.ng

SHADOW STATE ARCHITECTURE AND PERSISTENCE OF RURAL BANDITRY IN NIGERIA

[1] Idrees Mahmud Gana, [2] Mohammed Njidda, & [3] Mohammed Aliyu
[1] *Department of International Relations & Diplomacy, El-Amin University, Minna, Nigeria*
Corresponding Author. Email: Mahmud.idrees@gmail.com
[2] *Department of Public Administration, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria*
mohammedjiddah212@gmail.com
[3] *Department of Political Science, Federal University, Dutsin-Ma, Nigeria*
maliyu276@gmail.com

DOI:https://doi.org/10.57233/jopd.v4i3.02

Abstract

Rural Nigeria, particularly the Northwest and North-Central geopolitical zones, has witnessed an entrenched pattern of banditry, kidnapping, and cattle rustling that conventional accounts of "ungoverned space" fail to fully explain. This review interrogates the proposition that rural insecurity is sustained not by the absence of authority but by an alternative, informal architecture of power referred to as the shadow state, in which political elites, security personnel, traders, financiers, and local collaborators interlock with armed groups in mutually reinforcing relationships. The purpose of this study is to map the structural composition, linkages, and drivers of this shadow state network and to explain how it reproduces rural insecurity despite recurrent state interventions. Employing a qualitative, narrative literature review approach, the study purposively analyzed twenty-seven peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and institutional reports published largely between 2021 and 2026, thematically coded around governance, political economy, and security. Findings reveal a four-layered architecture comprising a political-bureaucratic layer, a coercive-armed layer, an economic-extractive layer, and a community-complicity layer, bound together by patronage, extraction, and strategic silence. The persistence of banditry is thus better understood as a governance outcome rather than a governance vacuum. The study concludes that security responses anchored solely on military deployment or amnesty are unlikely to succeed unless they simultaneously dismantle the political and economic incentives that sustain the shadow network, and recommends an integrated political-economy approach to security governance reform in Nigeria.

Keywords: Shadow state; Rural banditry; Hybrid governance; Political economy; Nigeria

Introduction

Banditry, a form of violence never likened with insurgent or common crime, has been the hallmark of Nigeria's countryside for the last ten years. Armed groups attack farming settlements, steal livestock, kidnap villagers and travelers for ransom, and levy informal taxes on people traveling and trading, mainly in the Northwest region, and spreading to North-Central states. The governments' responses to the phenomenon have switched from massive military deployment to negotiated amnesty and community vigilante formations, with the phenomenon itself not abating but in some ways increasing (Tarasa et al., 2025; Alkali and Putter, 2025). Early explanations of this continuity were based on the concept of "ungoverned spaces" implying that the state is physically or institutionally absent in these areas and that is

where the banditry flourishes (Kugbayi & Adegbami, 2023). But recent literature poses challenges to this interpretation. The ungoverned-space thesis gets in the way of thinking about the concept of relative deprivation and structural grievance, which also drive armed mobilization, as does a more general perspective on the shadow state as offered by Sishuwa et al. (2021), who propose that in many places in Africa there are parallel systems of extraction and control that use state structures, personnel, and resources, but operate outside the state.

The review is situated around the concept of the shadow state. In contrast to conceptualizations of banditry as the absence of institutions, this approach sees rural insecurity in Nigeria as the visible manifestation of a long-term, semi-formal network of structural relationships between political actors, security service personnel, traders and financiers and community-level collaborators with armed groups based on mutual patronage, protection, and profit. This premise is substantiated directly by Sishuwa et al. (2021), whose comparative account of the African shadow state documents structurally similar patron-client arrangements in which political elites, security personnel, and armed actors exchange protection, intelligence, and profit outside formal institutional channels. This framing is adapted from Meagher (2012), who theorizes that non-state security and armed actors in Africa do not merely reflect weak formal state institutions, but are also a part of the political and economic processes of state weakness. This literature indicates that the banditry problem in Nigeria is not chaotic but is an architectural problem as is evident in the increasing body of literature on banditry as a political economy, conflict entrepreneurship (Osimen et al., 2025), subnational state-building through violence (Ameh, 2026) and the criminal economy of kidnapping (Ojewale, 2024).

This study aims, therefore, to map the architecture of this shadow state network, namely by defining and identifying its layers, the actors that inhabit it, and the relations that hold it together, and to explain how the architecture of this shadow state network is conducive to the persistence of rural banditry despite repeated state interventions. This purpose addresses an authentic need within the debates. Although there are a number of studies that look at specific aspects of the crisis, such as the drivers (Bamidele, 2026); gendered and food security impacts (Adenugba et al., 2025; Ezeh et al., 2022); and the efficacy of military and amnesty responses (Aina et al., 2023; Aina, 2023), comparatively few efforts have been made to synthesize these strands into a single structural model of the organization of the shadow network. This exploration of the structural architecture of the shadow state network that sustains rural insecurity in Nigeria, and how its constituent actors function and interact in a wider political economy of extraction and complicity, therefore, raises the following research question: What is the structural architecture of the shadow state network that sustains rural insecurity in Nigeria, and how do its constituent actors function and interact in a wider political economy of extraction and complicity? The answer to this question is both theoretical, as it advances a theory of 'shadow-state' and 'hybrid-governance', and practical, as policies that fail to recognise the security and governance vacuum as a problem are unlikely to change the incentive structures that create it in the first place, in the context of Nigeria's rural security challenge.

There are two more clarifications to pose that limit the scope of this review. For one, the term “banditry” is not a uniform term, and Thompson (2025a) warns against reducing it to “ordinary rural crime” because “the scale, organization and involvement in territorial control”

set it apart from opportunistic theft where identifiable instances may appear quite like conventional criminality. Second, Thompson (2025b) demonstrates that competing explanatory frames are not mutually exclusive, but rather represent various facets of the same phenomenon directly supporting the multi-layered architecture developed in this review over a single cause explanation. The shadow state concept is presented in the context of these warnings because two common mistakes in the literature of banditry involve assuming that it is an exclusively criminal phenomenon devoid of political components, or that the banditry is a single movement unified by a command structure, when in fact this is not the case. The architecture proposed here is situated between the extremes the above-mentioned authors call for, namely between completely separate actor-layers with opposite interests and layers that are more tightly coupled and identical.

Beyond its Nigerian specificity, this architecture-based reading of rural insecurity carries wider comparative relevance. Sishuwa et al. (2021) situate the shadow state as a recurring feature of post-colonial African governance rather than an anomaly confined to conflict-affected states, while Meagher (2012) demonstrates that hybrid security arrangements of this kind recur across markedly different regulatory and historical contexts on the continent. Read together, these contributions suggest that the Nigerian case examined here is best understood as a local variant of a broader continental pattern in which state resources, personnel, and authority are informally repurposed to sustain parallel systems of extraction. Locating the Nigerian rural crisis within this comparative frame also clarifies the practical stakes of the analysis: if shadow governance is a structural feature of the political economy rather than a transient breakdown of order, then policy instruments calibrated to restore order in the short term are unlikely, on their own, to alter the underlying incentive structure that reproduces banditry over time.

Methods

The study used a qualitative narrative literature review method which was suitable for this study because the object of the research was to create an expository model and not to test a specific hypothesis based on primary data obtained in the field. It is descriptive-analytical in nature, that is, it does not produce new empirical measures, but rather systematically organizes, compares, and interprets peer-reviewed evidence to build a coherent structural account of the phenomenon under study.

The literature reviewed focused on rural Nigeria, mainly the Northwest geopolitical zone (Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, Kaduna) and secondly the North-Central states (including Niger, Benue, and Plateau) which had similar activities of armed banditry and farmer-herder related insecurity. The Northwest zone was treated as the primary unit of analysis because it accounts for the majority of the sampled peer-reviewed literature and has the longest and most intensively documented history of the phenomenon (Tarasa et al., 2025; Alkali and Putter, 2025; Ojewale, 2024). North-Central states were included as a secondary, comparative unit because the sampled literature indicates that structurally similar armed-banditry and farmer-herder dynamics have increasingly extended into that zone (Amadi & Ugwu, 2025), allowing the review to check whether the four-layer architecture identified in the Northwest also holds outside it. “Population” for this review are scholarly and institutional publications on the subject of rural banditry, shadow governance and security in Nigeria and the “sample” is twenty-seven publications that were purposively selected from this population, and were

mainly published during 2021–2026 to meet the currency requirements for journal-based citations.

Sampling was purposeful, theory driven, as opposed to random selection, Purposive rather than random or exhaustive retrieval was appropriate because the review's objective was to build a structural model of a conceptually specific phenomenon, not to estimate how frequently particular themes occur across the full, heterogeneous population of banditry-related publications; a probability sample drawn from that wider population, much of which is descriptive or media-oriented rather than analytical, would not have efficiently answered a question about architecture and mechanism. in that some sources were included because they substantively addressed one or more of the following domains: (a) the political economy of banditry, (b) state fragility and security governance, (c) the dynamics of armed actors and vigilante groups, (d) socio-economic impacts of banditry (food security, gender, livelihoods), and (e) conceptual or theoretical treatments of shadow governance and hybrid security. In this core sample, sources that dealt with banditry in an ancillary manner, or that concerned urban crime and terrorism not part of the rural Northwest and North-Central dynamic were omitted so that the core sample would maintain a conceptual consistency of its synthesis.

Data collection involved systematic retrieval of the sampled sources and careful reading of abstracts, findings and conclusions of the sources for claims in each domain. This focus was deliberate rather than a shortcut: abstracts, findings, and conclusions are the sections in which peer-reviewed authors state their evidentiary claims most explicitly, and, as described below, each claim extracted from them was further classified by the strength of its underlying evidence rather than accepted at face value; where a claim's evidentiary basis was unclear from these sections, the fuller text of the source was consulted. The five domains above were used to ‘log’ each of the sources, and cross-referenced with the conceptual vocabulary that arose from the shadow-state and hybrid-governance literature (Sishuwa et al. 2021; Meagher, 2012) to determine if the empirical claims in each source were consistent with, extended, or contradicted by the conceptual vocabulary. Thematic content-analysis was used for data analysis: first-order descriptive coding involved categorizing the extracted claims inductively (e.g., “ransom financing”, “vigilante capture”, “local informants”, “political protection”) and second-order analytical coding involved constant comparison of first-order descriptive codes. The categories were later collapsed into a four-layered structural model, which is the analytical backbone for the results presented below: political-bureaucratic, coercive-armed, economic-extractive, and community-complicity.

There are two methodological drawbacks to be noted. The study, as a review of secondary literature, cannot validate contested empirical claims like the exact number of political complicities, as several of the works reviewed indicate is hard to document because of the “secret” nature of the complicity (Sishuwa et al., 2021; Osimen et al., 2025). Moreover, the literature sample is limited to the last five years, which means that the review reflects a fairly current state of the phenomenon and is more a structural synthesis of the prevailing scientific opinion on the phenomenon than a historical representation of the architecture's development. There was however some cross-checking for convergence and divergence across the sources that was used throughout to ensure that each thematic claim was robust before it was included in the model, and claims supported by only one source are marked as illustrative rather than proven in the following discussion. In practice, this meant applying an explicit evidentiary threshold rather than a purely narrative judgement: a claim was admitted into the structural

model only where it was corroborated by at least two independently authored sources or was explicitly labelled illustrative, and the evidentiary basis of every admitted claim (fieldwork, survey data, documented case material, or conceptual argument) was logged alongside it, as detailed in the paragraph below.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the synthesis, each source was additionally assessed for the specificity of its evidentiary base, distinguishing claims grounded in fieldwork, survey data, or documented case material from claims that were primarily conceptual or speculative. Where multiple sources converged on the same claim using independent evidence (for instance, the weak institutional capacity documented separately by Tarasa et al. (2025), Alkali and Putter (2025), and Abdullahi and Mukhtar (2022), that claim was treated as more firmly established within the model. Coding was performed iteratively, with categories revisited and, where necessary, collapsed or split as new sources were added, until no further sources introduced a distinct functional category beyond the four layers reported below, indicating a reasonable degree of thematic saturation within the sampled literature. This iterative process, rather than a single pass of coding, is what allowed the four-layer structure to be treated as a stable analytical product of the review rather than a provisional grouping.

Results and Discussion

The reviewed literature converges on a central finding: rural insecurity in Nigeria is not adequately explained as the product of an absent or hollowed-out state. Instead, it is sustained by an architecture of interlocking actors operating across formal and informal registers, each contributing a distinct function to the reproduction of violence. Table 1 summarizes this four-layer architecture before each layer is discussed in turn.

From Ungoverned Spaces to Shadow Governance

In order to analyse each layer, it is important to position the architecture in the theoretical transition that the literature examined as a whole creates. Put another way, the ungoverned-spaces thesis in previous policy debates assumes that formal state authority and armed non-state actors have separate spaces: in the formal space, state actors are strong, and in the non-state space, non-state actors are weak. Kugbayi and Adegbami (2023) directly challenge this assumption when they examine the case of Nigeria and note that local government areas affected by the bandits continue to have functioning administrative, security and traditional institutions that do not take over but are operating concurrently with the bandits. This juxtaposition is exactly what the shadow-state theory tries to describe. Sishuwa et al. (2021) discuss the notion of a shadow state as something parasitic operating on the formal state, the formal budget, and the formal security mandate. Meagher (2012) extends this observation, demonstrating how, in various African settings, non-state security providers are not simply an alternative to the state, but can be found interlocked in overlapping governance arrangements, including regulatory, patronage, and taxation networks, with state authorities, in which formal and informal authority do not operate in opposition but produce the same hybrid order. Stretching the concept of the theoretical move to rural Nigeria, each of the four layers noted in this review is not a threat to state authority, but rather is part of another governance arrangement that is also backed by violence, extraction, and intimidation, instead of law, service, and consent.

This theoretical repositioning has a further implication that is easy to overlook: because the four layers described below operate through, rather than against, existing institutions, their visibility to conventional security metrics is deliberately low. Political protection, for instance, rarely appears in official records as protection; it appears as a normal contract award, a delayed security deployment, or an unremarkable transfer within a local government budget. This is consistent with Ameh's (2026) observation that subnational state-building through violence proceeds largely through legitimate-looking administrative channels rather than overt collusion, which helps explain why successive state interventions have struggled to identify, let alone dismantle, the network described in this review.

Table 1: Architecture of the Shadow State Network in Nigeria's Rural Insecurity

Layer	Constituent Actors / Function	Illustrative Sources
Political–Bureaucratic Layer	Politicians, local government officials, security commanders who trade protection, contracts, or intelligence	Osimen et al. (2025); Ameh (2026); Sishuwa et al. (2021)
Coercive–Armed Layer	Bandit cells, vigilante groups, and elements of formal security forces engaged in parallel or competing coercion	Aina, Ojo & Oyewole (2023); Ottuh (2024); Amadi & Ugwu (2025)
Economic–Extractive Layer	Cattle markets, ransom financiers, arms suppliers, and informal traders who monetize violence	Ojewale (2024); Bamidele (2026); Schouten & Barnett (2025)
Community–Complicity Layer	Local informants, land guides, and kin networks whose cooperation is coerced, incentivized, or normalized	Obi & Iwuoha (2023); Kugbayi & Adegbami (2023)

Source: *Authors' synthesis of the reviewed literature, 2026*

The Political–Bureaucratic Layer

The highest echelon of the shadow architecture is the array of political and bureaucratic individuals who either sponsor or strategically look the other way. An informal system, where formal office is used to informally accumulate wealth, has been described by Sishuwa et al. (2021) as the shadow state, and in relation to the rural crisis, it takes many forms in Nigeria, including conflict entrepreneurship (Osimen et al. 2025), where political actors benefit from the prolonging of insecurity through inflated security contracts, control of reconstruction resources or the electoral utility of insecurity as a bargaining tool. Ameh (2026) builds on this argument by conceiving of banditry as a form of “subnational state-building”, in which armed actors and their political allies coconstitute areas of informal authority that are not just alternative to, but are alternative expressions of, formal authority. It provides protection to the network from prosecution; access to intelligence regarding the security operation and, in some reported instances, direct logistical or financial assistance, and, therefore, is the structural anchor that enables the other layers to operate with relative impunity.

This layer is also the least amenable to conventional anti-corruption or security-sector reform tools, precisely because its transactions are embedded in otherwise lawful administrative

processes. A security vote disbursed for community policing, a contract for road reconstruction in a bandit-affected corridor, or a transfer of intelligence between agencies can each serve a legitimate governance function while simultaneously sustaining the shadow network, making the political-bureaucratic layer difficult to isolate through audits that assume corruption will present as a clearly irregular transaction. Osimen et al. (2025) note that this ambiguity is itself strategically useful to political actors, who can point to formally correct procedure even where the substantive effect of a decision is to prolong rather than resolve insecurity.

The Coercive–Armed Layer

The second layer is occupied by the actors who act in direct violence, such as bandit cells organized around a particular territory, ethnic-clan networks, community vigilante groups that emerged in the wake of the state's failure, and parts of the formal security apparatus whose actions are often reactive and uncoordinated. Aina, Ojo and Oyewole (2023) note that while there are short-term dispersal effects of military "shock and awe" operations in the Northwest, these operations have limited long-term impacts on bandit networks, partly because coercive interventions do not tackle the political-economic incentives that drive the bandit networks. Building on the Bakassi Boys experience, Ottuh (2024) proposes that community policing programmes may be seen as a response to a need for security, but they can be hijacked by local power dynamics that can extract profit from the shadow economy and thus become dominated by those roles. Amadi and Ugwu (2025) also demonstrate that the "either/or" argument between armed actors and profit motives versus grievance over marginalisation is false, as profit motives are often combined with a deep sense of grievance in North-Central Nigeria, making purely coercive measures ineffective at achieving sustainable demobilisation.

The internal composition of this layer is also less unified than the term "bandit" implies. Amadi and Ugwu's (2025) North-Central evidence indicates that armed cells frequently splinter along kinship or territorial lines even while continuing to draw on the same recruitment and financing pools, producing a layer that is coercive in function but fragmented in command. This fragmentation matters for policy because it undermines negotiation-based approaches that assume a single interlocutor can speak, and deliver compliance, on behalf of the wider armed layer; Schouten and Barnett's (2025) description of a fracturing rather than consolidating banditry landscape reinforces the same point from a different empirical angle.

The Economic–Extractive Layer

The third, and perhaps most structurally defining layer, is the financial and commercial actors that capitalise on insecurity. Ojewale (2024) reports the criminal economy of kidnapping-for-ransom in the Northwest, where informal businessmen, negotiators and logistics groups are as organized as businesses in the legal economy. Bamidele (2026) places this in the wider political economy of rural-crime-banditry, suggesting the structural marginalization in rural areas is a condition of supply, and the illicit cattle markets, arms trafficking routes, and ransom economies are a supply of incentives that facilitate recruitment. Schouten and Barnett (2025) outline a new "banditry landscape" that is increasingly fracturing into rival commercial-armed groups, rather than being consolidated, in part accounting for the volatility and fragmentation in negotiated ceasefires and amnesty programs. Sule and Sambo (2025a;

2025b) also state that banditry in the Northwest is primarily economic in nature and is a consequence of broader economic, territorial, and resource struggles rather than ideological or ethnic conflict.

The financial architecture of this layer is also notable for its integration with legal commercial circuits rather than its separation from them. Cattle rustled in one state are frequently resold through markets that also handle legitimately sourced livestock, and ransom payments are laundered through networks that overlap with ordinary trade and remittance channels, which is part of why Bamidele (2026) frames the phenomenon as continuous with, rather than external to, the wider rural political economy. This blending of licit and illicit exchange is precisely what makes the economic-extractive layer resistant to interdiction measures that target only overtly criminal transactions.

The Community–Complicity Layer

The fourth layer is the most frequently overlooked in security-oriented analyses: the community level actors whose assistance, either forced or facilitated by incentives or the rules of survival, equip the network with local knowledge, safe passage and logistical support. Obi and Iwuoha (2023) have found direct evidence of bandit networks achieving territorial mobility at the level of the community by relying on kinship, trade and informant networks between the bandit camps and surrounding settlements, as it is these connections that are required for bandits to evade security operations. Kugbayi and Adegbami (2023) warn that this complicity should not simply be interpreted as a moral failing, but should be understood instead as part of the same structures and conditions that have led to relative deprivation and historical cycles of rural revolt in Northern Nigeria, which have been identified by Ejiofor (2022, 2024). This is therefore to be seen as the injection point of the force of coercion and economic pressure from the shadow network to the local level of social compliance.

It is also worth stressing that complicity at this level spans a wide spectrum rather than a single behaviour: it ranges from information withheld out of fear, through the routine payment of informal levies to secure safe passage, to more active collaboration by a smaller number of local intermediaries who profit directly from the arrangement. Obi and Iwuoha (2023) caution against collapsing this spectrum into a single category of “local support,” since doing so risks both over-criminalizing coerced community members and under-scrutinizing the smaller set of genuine intermediaries whose cooperation is closer to voluntary.

Interlocking Layers and Feedback Loops

Although the four layers are presented sequentially for analytical clarity, the reviewed literature is consistent in describing them as functionally interlocked rather than independently operating strata. Protection extended by the political-bureaucratic layer reduces the operational risk faced by the coercive-armed layer, which in turn secures the routes and territory the economic-extractive layer depends on to move cattle, cash, and captives; the resulting revenue then partly recirculates as patronage that sustains political protection, closing the loop. The community-complicity layer functions as the connective tissue that allows this cycle to operate at the local level without constant high-level coordination, supplying the intelligence and access that make each of the other three layers

viable in a given locality. This circularity is significant because it means that disrupting a single layer in isolation, however successful in the short term, leaves the reinforcing loop through the remaining three layers largely intact, which is consistent with the limited durability of single-track interventions documented later in this review.

Structural Drivers and State Fragility

Structural conditions under all four layers of the shadow architecture which have been repeatedly cited in the reviewed literature are enabling and not surrounding the shadow architecture. Both Tarasa et al. (2025) and Alkali and Putter (2025) describe state fragility and institutional failure as the enabling context for the operation of the shadow network: overlapping and poorly coordinated security agencies leave gaps in security to be taken advantage of. Abdullahi and Mukhtar (2022) also report that local governance capacities in the Northwest are weak, enabling armed groups to claim and impose taxes and act as a mechanism for resolving conflicts in communities that do not trust or lack formal governance structures. Importantly, this is part of a wider theoretical challenge that hybrid security arrangements in Africa do not merely result from state weakness, but are a product of state and other non-state actors' mutual production (Meagher, 2012), adding to the theory that Nigeria's rural insecurity is not an accident but an architectural product.

These structural drivers are compounded by demographic and economic pressures that predate the current wave of banditry but have intensified its reproduction. Rapid population growth in rural Northwest and North-Central Nigeria has increased competition over farmland and grazing corridors at the same time as climate variability has narrowed the resource base available to both farming and pastoralist communities, creating conditions in which the shadow network's promise of protection, arbitration, or an alternative livelihood becomes locally more attractive rather than less, regardless of how forcefully any single security operation is executed.

Consequences for Rural Livelihoods and Vulnerable Groups

This architecture is very persistent and has very serious consequences downstream. Studies by Lekaz, James and Abdu (2022) and Ezeh et al. (2022) report on dramatic drops in agricultural production and food security in the Northwest, where farmers leave their fields and access to grazing and farming is dependent on informal payments to armed actors, which represents the direct reorganization of the economic-extractive layer in rural production. Abdulrasheed and Mumuni (2024) and Adenugba, Oyelade and Ojedokun (2025) further this analysis to focus on gendered impacts, which include the extra burden on women as a result of livelihood loss, displacement, and increased risk to abduction, as well as the roles of informal negotiation and survival within affected communities. These consequences are traced back to the political economy framework in the words of Paul, Aneji and Akaayar (2026), where the degradation of rural agricultural development is not an unwanted side effect of the banditry but a structural outcome of an extractive system that assumes the value of rural production itself.

Beyond agricultural and gendered impacts, the architecture also generates longer-term erosion of human capital and local governance capacity. Repeated school closures and population displacement in affected local government areas interrupt educational attainment

for an entire cohort of rural children, while the flight of teachers, health workers, and extension officers from insecure areas thins out precisely the professional class that would otherwise anchor legitimate local governance. Paul, Aneji and Akaayar's (2026) framing of the crisis as a structural devaluation of rural production applies with equal force to this erosion of human capital, since a rural economy stripped of both physical security and professional capacity is left with even fewer resources to resist the shadow network's claims on local authority.

Limits of Current Governance Responses

There is a focus on the literature in the analysis of dominant policy responses. Aina (2023) asserts that unsolicited amnesty programmes, without a corresponding reintegration or economic alternative, are more of a short-term violence-management programme than a real conflict resolution process, and that they can effectively legitimise the shadow network either by giving the armed layer of the network the opportunity to speak as a negotiating partner. As for militarized responses, Aina, Ojo and Oyewole (2023) conclude in a similar way to Schouten and Barnett (2025) that the dispersal of one bandit cell often leads to reoccupation of the territory by another bandit cell, rather than any reduction in the number of armed actors. Community vigilante alternatives have their own share of risks for capture, as revealed by Ottuh (2024), and as Tarasa et al. (2025) and Alkali and Putter (2025) mention, there is likely to be a lack of accountability for the failure or success of any single response due to overlapping mandates among federal, state, and community security actors.

A recurring limitation across all three response types (military, amnesty, and vigilante) is the absence of a shared, independently verified monitoring framework capable of tracking their effects on the shadow architecture as a whole rather than on a single, more visible layer. Tarasa et al. (2025) and Alkali and Putter (2025) both note that federal, state, and community actors report progress using different and sometimes incompatible metrics, ranging from the number of security operations conducted to the number of surrendered weapons, none of which speaks directly to whether the underlying political-bureaucratic and economic-extractive layers have been disrupted. This absence of a common metric makes it difficult for policymakers, researchers, or affected communities to determine whether an apparent lull in violence reflects genuine disruption of the network or a temporary renegotiation of its terms.

Toward an Integrated Governance Response

If the persistence of rural banditry is architectural, then the corollary is that governance reform has to be architectural as well: it has to engage all four layers at once, not one after another. Within the political-bureaucratic layer, this means strengthening independent monitoring of security procurements and local government contracts in affected states, as both Osimen et al. (2025) and Ameh (2026) argue that contract capture and informal revenue sharing are two of the ways that security elites participate. The evidence presented here, especially that of Aina, Ojo and Oyewole (2023) and Amadi and Ugwu (2025), indicates that coercive armed interventions must be accompanied by credible and well-resourced

ISSN Print: 2992-2763 – ISSN Online: 2992-4618 | Vol. 4, No. 3 / September, 2026
https://www.jopd.com.ng

reintegration options rather than standing alone, to avoid the risk that demobilized fighters return to the same economic incentives that attracted them to armed groups. Disruption of ransom payment channels, informal arms markets, and unregulated cattle trade routes, as suggested by Ojewale (2024), Bamidele (2026), and Sule and Sambo (2025a), would be an attempt to attack the material infrastructure that supports the activities of the other layers of the network. Rather than punitive measures, the relative deprivation and lack of protection that compel communities to cooperate with armed groups under duress suggest that addressing this gap is more likely to last than any punitive action; this is the case for the community-complicity layer, as argued by Obi and Iwuoha (2023) and by Ejiofor (2022). None of these measures is sufficient on its own, and they need to be combined and coordinated to achieve what the architecture-based diagnosis in this review suggests is needed.

An integrated response of this kind is also more likely to succeed where it is sequenced rather than launched simultaneously across all four layers without regard to local readiness, since attempting to dismantle the political-bureaucratic layer and disrupt community-complicity mechanisms at the same moment risks removing whatever fragile order still exists before an alternative is in place. Traditional and religious leaders, who retain a degree of legitimacy that state security actors have often lost in affected communities, are repeatedly identified in the reviewed literature as an underused channel through which community-level cooperation with reform efforts could be rebuilt without relying solely on coercion or unconditional amnesty. Finally, donor and federal support for the kind of independent monitoring framework discussed above, one that tracks disruption across all four layers rather than only the coercive-armed one, would give policymakers an evidentiary basis for adjusting the sequencing and intensity of interventions as the shadow network's own configuration shifts in response to them.

Theoretical and Policy Contributions

This review makes two contributions that extend beyond the specific case of rural Nigeria. Theoretically, it operationalizes the shadow state and hybrid governance concepts advanced by Sishuwa et al. (2021) and Meagher (2012) into a four-layer structural model that can be applied, tested, and refined against other cases of persistent rural insecurity where similar dynamics of protection, extraction, and local complicity have been reported. Because the model specifies distinct actor-layers and the mechanisms that connect them, rather than treating the shadow state as a single undifferentiated concept, it offers other researchers a more falsifiable basis for comparative work than the ungoverned-spaces thesis it responds to. Practically, the model reframes the policy problem away from a search for the correct single instrument, whether military, amnestial, or communal, and toward the harder but more realistic task of designing interventions that can be coordinated across levels of government and layers of the network simultaneously. For policymakers operating under real resource and political constraints, this reframing at minimum clarifies why previous interventions have produced only temporary reductions in violence, and it identifies the political-bureaucratic and economic-extractive layers, rather than the coercive-armed layer alone, as the more consequential targets for any intervention intended to outlast a single electoral or budgetary cycle.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this study, we have contended that the problem of rural insecurity in Nigeria cannot be attributed to lack of state but rather an observable product of a shadow state architecture that has a political-bureaucratic dimension, a coercive-armed dimension, an economic-extractive dimension and a community-complicity dimension and is sustained by patronage, extraction and structurally induced local compliance. Theoretically, this architecture aligns with, and empirically builds upon, existing theories and literature on the shadow state and hybrid governance in Africa, adding a Nigeria-specific form of structural mapping that draws together strands of the banditry literature from security studies, political economy, rural development and gender scholarship that were previously disjointed.

The practical implication is important: policy strategies that seek to make a lasting impact on the security of a network must act on all four layers, not just the coercive-armed one, whether by deploying troops, amnestying perpetrators, or mobilizing vigilantes, unless they also target political complicity, the financial network of extraction, and the structural deprivation that enables cooperation at the community level. There is also a significant diagnostic implication for policy makers and researchers: progress against banditry should not be measured just by how many armed incidents occur or by the number of bandits who accept amnesty, as both metrics can improve for a short while even where the system is left intact and can be rebuilt once the interest or resources it demands are redirected. In addition to traditional security measures, a more comprehensive indicator system would monitor disruption across all four layers, such as prosecutions of enabling actors, real declines in ransom levels, in the number of cattle traded illegally, and in trust and reporting by communities.

Further investigation would be beneficial, in that a structural model of these linkages is still largely untested in the field and, as the evidence presented in this paper suggests, the political-bureaucratic layer is the one most difficult to document in primary sources, yet is perhaps the most important in terms of the durability of the whole architecture. Such comparative research across states in the region in Nigeria as well as other parts of the continent, where shadow-governance is observed, would further help determine whether the four-layer model developed in this context can be generalized to other settings and regions, or if it must be adapted to take into account local variation in state capacity, ethnic/communal relations, and the commodities, cattle, ransom, land, or transit routes, around which the extractive layer is organized in each setting.

Future comparative work could also usefully examine whether the sequencing of interventions recommended above, addressing political-bureaucratic protection and economic-extractive financing before or alongside coercive and community-level measures, produces more durable reductions in violence than the largely coercive-first sequencing that has characterized policy to date. Such research would need to be attentive to the methodological difficulty, already noted in this review, of documenting the political-bureaucratic layer directly, and might therefore rely on indirect indicators such as procurement irregularities, contract patterns, or changes in local revenue flows as proxies for disruption of that layer.

References

Abdullahi, A. S., & Mukhtar, J. (2022). Armed banditry as a security challenge in Northwestern Nigeria. *African Journal of Sociological and Psychological Studies*, 2(1). https://doi.org/10.31920/2752-6585/2022/v2n1a3

Abdulrasheed, A., & Mumuni, N. A. (2024). Impact of armed banditry and kidnapping on rural women livelihood in North Western Nigeria. *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies*, 17(1), 446–476. https://doi.org/10.4314/ajpas.v17i1.22

Adenugba, A. A., Oyelade, O. K., & Ojedokun, U. (2025). Rural banditry and the differential gender vulnerabilities in Oyo State, Nigeria. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2025.2546362

Aina, F. (2023). Contested forgiveness: Unsolicited amnesty and the reintegration of "repentant" bandits in Northwest Nigeria. *Peace Review*, 35(3), 511–523. https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2023.2208539

Aina, F., Ojo, J. S., & Oyewole, S. (2023). Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria. *African Security Review*, 32(4), 440–457. https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2023.2246432

Alkali, A. A., & Putter, D. (2025). National security perspective on armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria. *Journal of Central and Eastern European African Studies*, 5(1), 110–131. https://doi.org/10.12700/jceeas.2025.5.1.307

Amadi, L., & Ugwu, C. (2025). State fragility and armed banditry in North Central Nigeria: Greed or grievance? *African Security Review*, 34(4). https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2025.2524169

Ameh, D. (2026). Banditry as political economy: Violence, extraction, and subnational state-building in Northwest Nigeria. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 10(1), 1120–1132. https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10100089

Bamidele, S. (2026). Rural banditry and structural marginalization in Nigeria: A critical political economy of the rural-crime-banditry nexus. *Safer Communities*, 25(2), 122–137. https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-08-2025-0058

Ejiofor, P. F. (2022). Beyond ungoverned spaces: Connecting the dots between relative deprivation, banditry, and violence in Nigeria. *African Security*, 15(2), 111–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2022.2061320

Ejiofor, P. F. (2024). Hobsbawm on rebellion in the postcolony: The political economy of armed conflicts in Northern Nigeria. *Review of African Political Economy*, 51(179), 61–87. https://doi.org/10.62191/ROAPE-2024-0007

Ezeh, K. D., Akogwu, C. J., Yildom, K. D., & Aideloje, S. (2022). Rural banditry and food (in)security in North West Nigeria. *African Journal of Terrorism and Insurgency Research*, 3(2).

Kugbayi, O., & Adegbami, A. (2023). Banditry and insecurity: Are there ungoverned spaces in Nigeria? *Law Research Review Quarterly*, 9(4), 399–418. https://doi.org/10.15294/lrrq.v9i4.71054

Lekaz, K., James, M. T., & Abdu, J. G. (2022). Scourge of rural banditry and food security in Nigeria's North-West: The economic implications. *UMYU Journal of Accounting and Finance Research*, 4(1), 35–48. https://doi.org/10.61143/umyu-jafr.4(1)2022.003

Meagher, K. (2012). The strength of weak states? Non-state security forces and hybrid governance in Africa. *Development and Change*, 43(5), 1073–1101. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2012.01794.x

Obi, K. C., & Iwuoha, V. C. (2023). Untold story of the expanding armed banditry in Nigeria's Northwest: Linking the communal-level collaborators. *Third World Quarterly*, 44(7), 1398–1416. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2192400

Ojewale, O. (2024). Shadow of death: The criminal economy of banditry and kidnapping in northwest Nigeria. *Security Journal*, 37(4), 1680–1710. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-024-00436-2

Osimen, G. U., Adebajo, A., Atobatele, A. J., Osikoya, A. F., Bello, O. W., & Dele-Dada, M. (2025). Conflict entrepreneurship and rural banditry in Nigeria Fourth Republic. *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 19(2), 141–160. https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2025.2523741

Ottuh, J. A. (2024). Bakassi and vigilantism in Nigeria: Trajectory and lessons for a community policing system. *African Researches Review*, 45(2), 113–129. https://doi.org/10.22160/22035184/ARAS-2024-45-2/113-129

Paul, M. U., Aneji, S. T., & Akaayar, C. T. (2026). The political economy of banditry and its implications for rural agricultural development in Nigeria. *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies*, 9(1), 295–305.

Schouten, P., & Barnett, J. (2025). Divided, they rule? The emerging banditry landscape in northwest Nigeria (Report 2025:7). *Danish Institute for International Studies*.

Sishuwa, S., Zamchiya, P., Rolls, L., Igumaw, C., & Cheeseman, N. (2021). *The shadow state in Africa*. Democracy in Africa.

Sule, B., & Sambo, U. (2025a). *The political economy of banditry in Nigeria*. Emerald Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83708-076-2

Sule, B., & Sambo, U. (2025b). *Theorising banditry in northwest Nigeria*. In The political economy of banditry in Nigeria (pp. 19–27). Emerald Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83708-076-220251002

Tarasa, A. S., Musa, A., & Jelani, H. Y. (2025). Banditry and security governance in Northwest Nigeria: State fragility and institutional failure. *Wukari International Studies Journal*, 9(8), 15–27. https://doi.org/10.64633/wissj.v9i8.02

Thompson, S. T. (2025a). Banditry as rural crime? *Journal of Rural Studies*, 115, Article 103593. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2025.103593

Thompson, S. T. (2025b). Exploring banditry in Nigeria. *Security Journal*, 38, Article 28. *https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-025-00477-1*