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Lakurawa: a hybrid jihadi-criminal group on Nigeria's fragile borderlands

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This report examines the rise of Lakurawa in northwestern Nigeria, near Niger and Benin. Originating from Mali and Niger with roots in jihad and self-defence, Lakurawa has evolved into a hybrid cross-border group blending jihadism and organised crime. Exploiting weak governance, poverty and insecurity, it uses religion to justify predation, including cattle rustling, crop seizures and oil sabotage. Its recent interactions with a Boko Haram faction heighten the threat. A coordinated, multidimensional cross-border response is urgently needed to address this challenge.

Key findings

- Composed of Sahelian jihadists, armed herders and local actors, Lakurawa initially emerged as a protective force for the communities of Sokoto in response to a significant security vacuum and widespread banditry. However, over time, the group shifted towards economic predation and the imposition of its extreme rule on communities.
- The emergence of Lakurawa is symptomatic of Nigeria and the subregion's deep structural vulnerabilities, principally the quasi-absence of the state in rural border communities and socio-economic vulnerabilities.
- Lakurawa now cooperates with Boko Haram and operates as a hybrid actor, blurring the line between religious extremism and organised crime.
- Lakurawa's activities are concentrated in Tangaza, Gudu, Illela, Binji and Silame local government areas (LGAs) in Sokoto State and have spread to Augie, Argungu, Arewa, Bagudo, Bunza and Birnin Kebbi LGAs in Kebbi State, Alibori in Benin and the Dosso and Tahoua regions of Niger.
- The tense bilateral relations between Nigeria and Niger, following the coup d'état in Niger in July 2023, hamper cooperation on security issues and thus block a vital joint initiative.

Recommendations

- **Expand and localise preventing and countering violent extremism efforts:** Extend Nigeria's non-kinetic counter-extremism programmes beyond the northeast to the northwest and north-central, addressing the deep socio-economic, political and governance gaps that allow groups like Lakurawa to thrive and win community support.
- **Strengthen regional security cooperation:** Reopen and institutionalise intelligence-sharing and joint operations with Niger, leverage the Economic Community of West African States and Alliance of Sahel States platforms more effectively and coordinate sustained cross-border patrols to prevent Lakurawa from exploiting porous borders and safe havens across Nigeria, Benin and Niger.
- **Combine targeted military action with exit options:** Launch a dedicated, intelligence-driven operation to dismantle Lakurawa's leadership, networks and logistics while offering safe surrender, rehabilitation, psychosocial support and reintegration pathways to rank-and-file fighters to prevent future re-engagement.
- **Centre communities in response efforts:** Invest in livelihoods, justice and reconciliation initiatives; regulate vigilantes to prevent abuse; and empower traditional, religious and youth leaders to promote tolerance, share intelligence safely, counter extremist narratives and rebuild trust in state protection.

Introduction

The northwestern region[1] of Nigeria is witnessing an escalation of armed conflicts driven by weak governance, climate-linked fragility, extremist infiltration, ethnically-charged resource competition and multidimensional poverty.[2] The emergence of the Lakurawa armed group, which Nigeria has designated a terrorist organisation,[3] along the Niger and Benin borders adds a new layer of complexity, intensifying community victimisation and straining state security forces. Lakurawa's cooperation with a Boko Haram faction of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) further elevates the threat.[4]

Meanwhile, diplomatic tensions between the Economic Community of West African States and the Alliance of Sahel States, particularly between Abuja and Niamey, may have hindered coordinated, cross-border responses.

The Lakurawa group finances itself through kidnappings for ransom and by seizing farm harvests and livestock

Despite its growing presence and violent activities, researchers have largely overlooked Lakurawa. Little systematic analysis exists on its origin, evolution, operational patterns, ideological leanings and relationship with other armed groups. This report seeks to fill that gap by examining Lakurawa's emergence, methods and enabling factors. The group originated in the central Sahel as a self-defence rural militia in Nigeria and gradually evolved into a cross-border organisation blending jihadism with organised criminality.

Initially, it gained local support through campaigns against banditry[5] in Sokoto State, but it soon turned coercive, expanding violence into Kebbi State and across the border into Dosso and Tahoua in Niger, before extending into Benin. The group funds its operations through kidnappings for ransom and by seizing farm harvests and livestock, justifying these actions using religious doctrine.

The persistence of Lakurawa reflects the near-total absence of state authority in rural border communities, a pattern observed in the spread of other extremist groups across northern Nigeria. Policy attention has often been reactive rather than preventive or coordinated.

This report identifies the gap in understanding hybrid armed actors that blur the line between religious extremism and organised crime, illustrating how jihadist ideologies exploit local vulnerabilities and ungoverned borderlands. Finally, it assesses Lakurawa's evolution, examines the structural and governance failures that allowed it to thrive and draws strategic lessons for addressing similar armed groups in the region.

Methodology

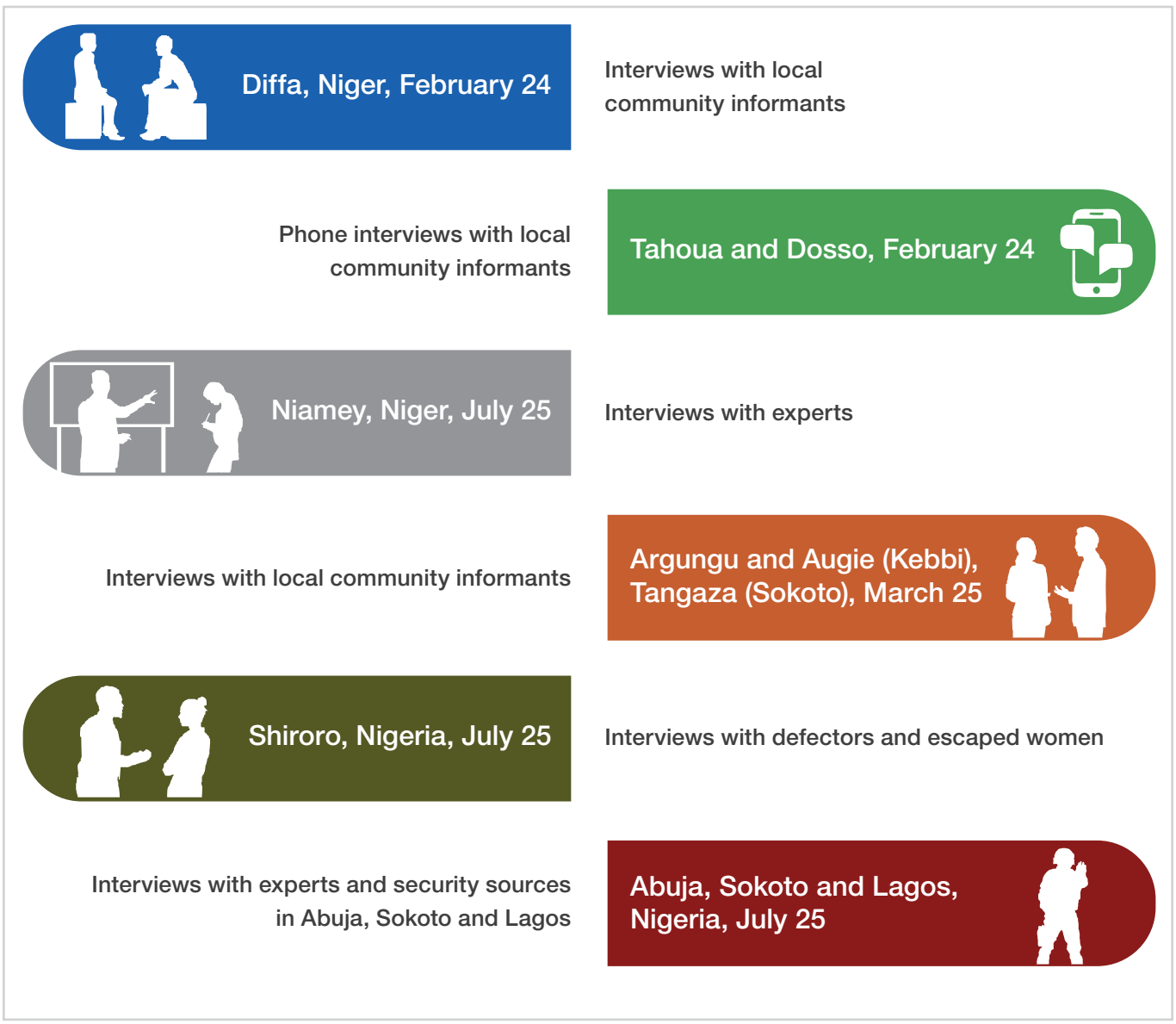
This report draws on primary field data, the Institute for Security Studies' (ISS) continuous monitoring of security dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin countries and desk research. Researchers conducted fieldwork in Nigeria and Niger in 2024 and 2025. Data collection started in February 2024 through in-person interviews in Diffa and phone interviews with community members from Tahoua and Dosso.

In March 2025, interviews were held in Sokoto State and Kebbi State, with informants from Argungu (Kebbi), Augie (Kebbi) and Tangaza (Sokoto). Defectors and women who escaped from a Boko Haram cell in Shiroro, Nigeria[6] were interviewed in July and August 2025. Those interviews were complemented by interviews with experts and security sources working on the region's conflicts in Abuja, Sokoto and Lagos and Niamey in Niger.

The ISS has deployed a timely conflict-monitoring and analysis mechanism in the Lake Chad Basin for years. This mechanism relies on a network of local agents in the four countries for continuous data feedback to the ISS. This is complemented by ongoing media monitoring.

Although still limited, most of the existing sources on Lakurawa have been considered. As an emerging phenomenon, Lakurawa has received little in-depth analysis. Existing analyses largely summarise the group's actions without examining its surge, implications, responses or interactions with other armed groups and regional insecurity.

Chart 1: Informant interviews



Origin and emergence of Lakurawa

The socio-political and economic context of northern Nigeria, particularly Sokoto State and Kebbi State, provides fertile ground for armed groups like Lakurawa. The same applies to the neighbouring regions of Dosso and Tahoua in Niger and Alibori, north-east Benin. These regions suffer from chronic underdevelopment, climate change impacts and worsening insecurity. In such settings, where state presence is minimal, particularly in rural areas, non-state armed groups fill the void, organising the system of justice and local economy, including the control of mines and extraction of illegal taxes. In this context, Malian jihadist elements, Nigerien self-defence militias and Nigerian locals, came together to form Lakurawa, which later evolved into a more cohesive armed threat.

According to Nigerian security sources and based on a collection of intelligence reports, Lakurawa emerged from the fusion of two main armed networks. The first is the Malian contingent, which is largely Fulani and tied to the Ahmadou Koufa-led Macina Liberation Front (now part of Jama't Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin, JNIM).[7] The second is the Nigerien faction with roots in the herders' community self-defence. A defector from the Shiroro cell of Boko Haram, which Lakurawa fighters have visited annually since 2023, confirmed this account through their

disclosures.[8] The defector specifically said that pressure from the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), now known as the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), forced them to leave Mali. Some sources also associated people of Chadian origin with the groups.[9]

According to the defector, forces in Mali overpowered some members who stayed behind, prompting them to join the ISSP and possibly fuelling speculation that Lakurawa aligns with the Islamic State (IS). In Niger, July 2025, interviews indicated Lakurawa's founders came from Mali, likely Tuareg and Arab, merging with Nigerien Fulani and Zabarmawa[10] self-defence militias. Nigerian security sources also noted that 'inter-factional' jihadi clashes between JNIM and ISGS caused the Malian contingent to move to the Nigeria–Niger border area, where they merged with and dominated the Nigerien faction. The local communities, familiar with the Nigerien faction, started referring to them all as Lakurawa. The name comes from the Hausa adaptation of the French *les recrues* (the recruits), evolving into Lakurawa.

Across the Sahel, groups have emerged as 'protectors' in contexts where state capacity is weak or absent

Villagers first reported sighting Lakurawa around Marake Forest in Gudu Local Government Area (LGA) and in Wassaniya, Tunigara and Jina-Jincti villages in Tangaza LGA, Sokoto State, near the Niger border, in November 2018.[11] This sparked fear among locals as it occurred amid simmering ethnic tensions between Hausa farmers and Fulani herders over land in neighbouring Zamfara. Despite villagers' concerns, Nigerian police dismissed the people the villagers had reported as harmless seasonal migrant herders from Niger. Other sources, including researcher Murtala Rufa'i[12] and local informants, suggest the group has been in Sokoto since 2017, following the 2015–2016 ISGS–JNIM clashes in Mali.

Banditry in Sokoto created both the demand and opportunity for Lakurawa to find an entry into local dynamics. Present as a protector, it eventually received invitations from community leaders to confront bandits before it turned insurgent. The group's jihadist past explains its initial arsenal and ability to fight bandits, as well as its *dawah* (Islamic proselytising) activities and religious fundamentalism.

Taking advantage of weak state presence and shortcomings in security governance

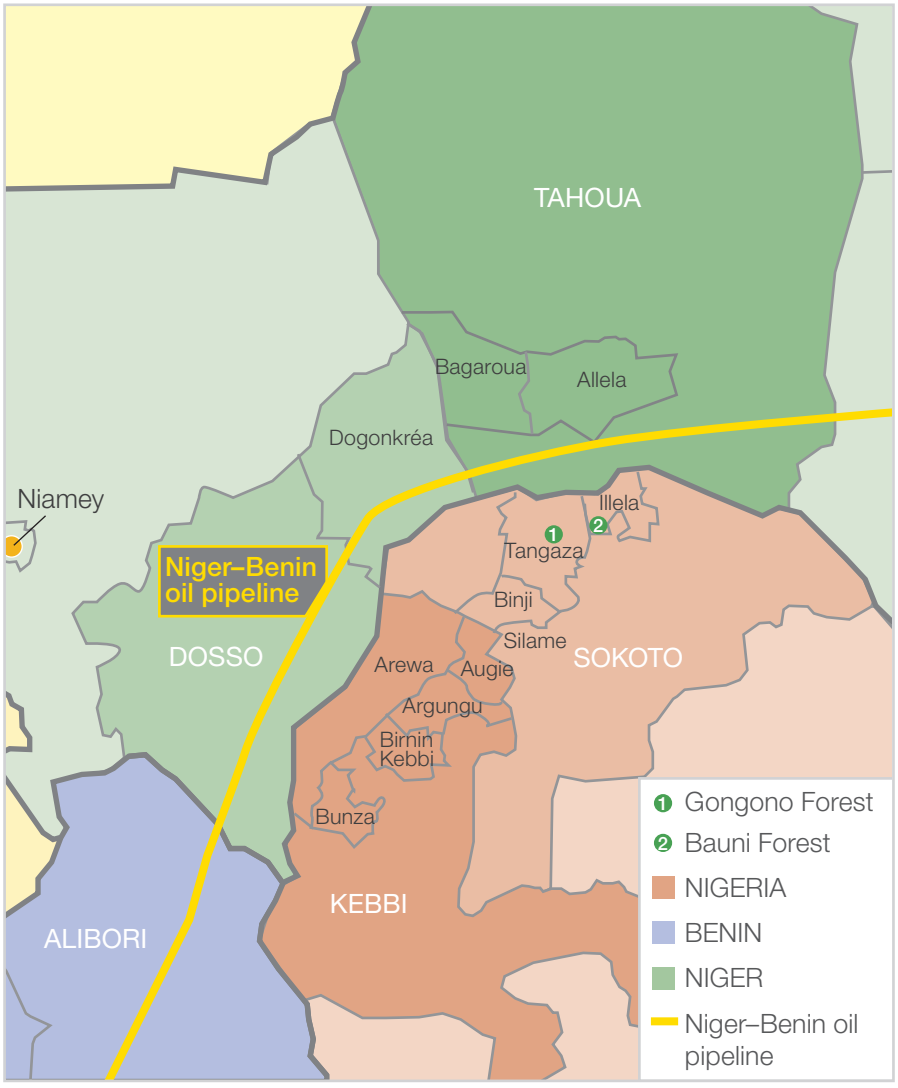
As banditry started spreading from Zamfara to Sokoto, Nigerian security forces remained stretched on multiple internal and cross-border conflict fronts. According to a review of media reports dating back to 2018 and an account[13] of a local informant, the only part of Sokoto that received some military attention against banditry was the Eastern Senatorial District, which borders Zamfara. However, the Sokoto North Senatorial District, which includes Tangaza and Gudu, where Lakurawa was then emerging, was without similar attention. An informant, now in Gusau, said: 'While the government's attention was on our side, the eastern part of the state, especially Sabon Birni and Isa, with more than 17 bandit groups, the north did not receive attention, which helped Lakurawa move and grow fearlessly.'[14]

According to a local informant from Tangaza,[15] Lakurawa confronted and overpowered the bandits, notably the Kachalla Charanbe group in Bauni Forest, Tangaza. Apparently, on account of the group's success against the Charanbe group, Gudu and Tangaza community stakeholders – including the district chiefs of Balle and Gongono, with support from the Nigerian Cattle Breeders Association or 'Miyetti Allah' – invited Lakurawa to help combat other banditry threats.[16]

Thanks to their effectiveness in repelling bandits, Lakurawa earned legitimacy among the locals, who had directly sought the group's help for protection. The source from Tangaza said: 'That was all while the government was not present and had failed to protect the people.'

This illustrated a worrying pattern of normalising security outsourcing to non-state actors. This dynamic is not unique to the Lakurawa case or Nigeria. Across the Sahel, similar groups have emerged as 'protectors' in contexts where state capacity is weak or absent.[17] In Nigeria's Kaduna State, a Boko Haram splinter group, Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan, also 'protected' communities in the Birnin Gwari area of the state against bandits, while controlling local governance with extremist violence.

Chart 2: Lakurawa tri-border expansion in Nigeria, Niger and Benin



Source: Authors

Lakurawa gradually entrenched itself in forested areas, particularly the Gongono forest, establishing logistical and arms supply chains along traditional cross-border transhumance routes. In Nigeria, its abuses span Sokoto State[18] and Kebbi State – mainly Tangaza, Gudu, Illela, Binji and Silame (Sokoto), and Augie, Argungu, Bunza, Birnin Kebbi, Arewa and Bagudo (Kebbi). In Niger, the group operates in the transboundary areas of Dosso and Tahoua, especially around Dogonkréa, Bagaroua and Allela.[19] By August 2025, evidence showed that Lakurawa had expanded from Kebbi into Benin's Alibori Department, and the group became a tri-border threat. Like affected areas in Nigeria and Niger, Alibori faces severe socio-economic hardship and minimal state oversight.[20]

Clearly, the vacuum left by the state enabled Lakurawa to set up parallel governance structures, appoint local imams, levy taxes and enforce extreme religious prescriptions on villages. When the group launched its first public attention-grabbing deadly attack that killed 17 people in the Mera village of

LAKURAWA'S FIRST DEADLY ATTACK KILLED

17

PEOPLE IN THE MERA VILLAGE OF AUGIE LGA

Augie LGA in Kebbi State on 8 November 2024, it had already entrenched itself.

A hybrid actor: economic predation masked by religious doctrine

Currently, Lakurawa enforces a rigid social order, appointing imams, punishing youth for shaving or listening to music and imposing a strict dress code. More ominously, it extorts farmers and herders under the pretext of *zakat* (a mandatory form of almsgiving in Islam intended to support the needy), masking economic predation with religious justification. Amid spreading Sahelian jihadist violence, Lakurawa uses radical Islam to justify social control and brutal punishment of dissent.

Ideological affiliation

Lakurawa's ideological positioning has been a subject of much debate. Its ideological roots lie in its dominant Malian contingent, which had links with Katiba Macina, a component of JNIM. This early influence, in addition to its roots in community self-defence, may help explain Lakurawa's adoption of *dawah* activities, extreme religious doctrine and its initial arsenal that enabled it to take on armed bandits. Although the group reportedly maintains contact with jihadists in Mali, it is independent of JNIM and not a wing.

Some analysts have speculated that the group affiliates with the IS, either through the ISSP or Islamic State West Africa Province,[21] but there is no evidence for this. There are no traces of traditional *bay'a* ceremonies or allegiance pledge, through which groups assert their association with larger entities, such as al-Qaeda or the IS. Furthermore, these global terror networks communicate intensely about their achievements and those of their affiliates, whereas IS propaganda channels have never broadcast Lakurawa's attacks.

However, while Lakurawa's ideological roots lie in its connections with Malian jihadist groups, its operational strategy demonstrates a clear alignment with criminal activities, particularly when it comes to the extortion of local populations. This pragmatic shift towards economic predation, masked by religious rhetoric, has enabled Lakurawa to establish a foothold in areas that were previously under the control of non-ideological bandit groups.

A growing relationship with JAS only reinforces this strategy. Interviews with a Boko Haram defector and women, previously married to fighters in the JAS cell in Shiroro[22] in Nigeria's central Niger State, near the capital Abuja, said Lakurawa fighters had visited the cell annually since 2023. Each time, Lakurawa returned to the Nigeria–Benin (Kebbi–Alibori) border area with three to four JAS fighters, reinforcing their positions there, according to the defectors.

In August 2025, another source well-briefed on JAS activities said that Lakurawa fighters had pledged *bay'a* to JAS's overall commander, Bakura Doro, based on the Lake Chad Basin islands. The source shared a video showing armed fighters travelling by boat on the River Niger from Shiroro in Nigeria's Niger State, heading towards Lakurawa's stronghold around the Alibori–Kebbi border area. While this video has not been independently verified, it suggests Lakurawa's expanded alliance with JAS and could mark a significant shift in the group's operational outreach.

Lakurawa's operational strategy shows an alignment with criminal activities, including extortion of local populations

There are two distinguishing, albeit overlapping, aspects of JAS's ideology and operations. The first concept is *takfir*, which involves labelling any Muslim not ideologically aligned with the group as an apostate. The second concept is *feyhoo*, which refers to spoils taken from civilians through raids, robbery or ransom operations (distinct from *ghanimah*, which refers to spoils, such as guns, from military battles). For JAS, it is considered legitimate to conduct *feyhoo* operations and even deadly violence against civilians, including 'apostates'. This explains why JAS's terror targets civilian communities and thrives on economic predation.

This ideological openness to predation likely led JAS and Lakurawa to form an alliance, blending jihadism with economic crime and sustaining themselves through cattle raids, crop seizures and extortion disguised as *zakat*. JAS's tolerance for such practices has entrenched it in Shiroro, enabling

pragmatic integration with non-ideological bandits to share resources and co-produce violence.[23] With Lakurawa in the mix, there is now a heightened risk of consolidating armed groups that fuse jihadism and organised crime across northern Nigeria and the Benin–Niger corridor.

Nigeria's banditry crisis and a scenario of Lakurawa collaboration

Armed bandit groups have terrorised northwestern Nigeria, particularly Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina States as well as Niger State in the central region for over a decade, killing thousands, displacing rural communities and creating an economy of ransom, cattle rustling and illicit mining. The problem is deeply rooted in resource competition and ethnic tensions. Desertification and shrinking grazing lands heightened conflict between predominantly Fulani pastoralists and mostly Hausa farming communities.[24] In Zamfara, what later became known as 'banditry' began as Fulani ethnic militias armed themselves to resist Hausa-dominated vigilantes (*yan sakai*), who were accused of injustice, extorting, harassing and killing Fulani pastoralists in the name of community protection.[25]

Over time, Fulani self-defence groups evolved into heavily armed gangs that moved beyond their original grievances, turning to cattle rustling, kidnapping, illegal mining and mass killings. While the cycle of violence has persisted, with vigilantes continuing to target and profile Fulani communities indiscriminately as criminals, many young Fulani men are pushed towards bandit groups, both for revenge and as a means of survival.

As earlier noted, it was against this backdrop that Lakurawa found its entry point into Nigeria's (and its neighbours') insecurity dynamics. Communities desperate for relief from bandits' raids invited and initially tolerated Lakurawa as a counterweight to the bandits. This early involvement as 'protector' helped Lakurawa gain legitimacy and establish a foothold in Sokoto, gradually fostering its extreme rule over communities.

Today, the situation is far more complex. Banditry has blossomed into a massive network of profit-driven armed groups, but the underlying ethnic and resource grievances remain unresolved. Unlike Lakurawa, bandit groups are non-ideological and driven by economic motives rather than religious conviction. Their focus is on extraction – illicit mineral mining, extortion and ransom operations – and revenge killings. Yet this shared interest in criminal economies creates a natural convergence point with Lakurawa, especially now that the group has reportedly formalised ties with JAS, which already operates fluidly with bandit networks in Niger State.

Lakurawa could replicate the JAS Niger State model in the northwest, with a wide pool of potential collaborators, including opportunistic gang leaders, disgruntled low-scale gangsters and smuggling networks. Already, there are signs of outreach. In 2024, Lakurawa sent a letter to notorious bandit leader Bello Turji, reportedly urging him to stop criminal activities.[26]

The early involvement as 'protector' helped Lakurawa gain legitimacy and establish a foothold in Sokoto

Such overtures hint at a strategy of co-option rather than confrontation. If successful, Lakurawa (and JAS) could quickly transform northwestern Nigeria into a new sphere of extremist influence and worsen insecurity in the Niger–Benin border corridor, where JNIM and ISSP already operate. In another scenario, with a larger force, Lakurawa (and JAS) could put these areas into indirect control, with bandits acting as subcontractors of violence and extraction under the ideological and organisational umbrella of the jihadists.

For Nigerian and regional authorities, the scenarios pose a serious challenge: the potential merging of the region's two most destabilising forces – jihadists and bandits – into a mutually reinforcing network. This would not only expand Lakurawa's reach but also complicate counterinsurgency efforts, as the distinction between ideological fighters and money-driven criminals blurs. It would also increase the likelihood that state forces and community vigilantes indiscriminately target innocent civilians, particularly in an environment where ethnic profiling is already common.

Recruitment, mode of operation and targets

Recruitment

Lakurawa recruits from the populations it targets. The group proceeds by offering financial and material incentives, i.e., a million naira,[27] agricultural inputs, water-pumping machines and other items, to recruit members. It also uses kinship, friendship and acquaintance connections and networks to recruit from within the communities, knowing that its members know most of the languages spoken in these communities: Fulfulde, Arabic, Hausa, Azbinanci, Zabarmanci and Barbanci. This approach strengthens its community roots. Interviews conducted in Kebbi and Sokoto with local contacts suggest that Lakurawa forces could number up to 2 000 fighters.

Mode of operation and targets

Lakurawa maintains strong operational mobility. After each attack, its fighters retreat, making them harder to track and confront. Its operations centre on preaching and violent raids on villages, especially during harvest seasons, during which they seize crops and livestock under the guise of *zakat* collection. Resistance often leads to killings.

Lakurawa fighters also employ tactical ambushes. During March 2025 interviews, vigilante members in Argungu recounted how Lakurawa fighters split their force: some conducted the raid, while others lay in wait to ambush pursuing villagers. An example occurred on 6 April 2025 in Morai, Augie LGA, where 16 vigilantes were killed in such an ambush while trying to recover stolen cattle.[28] Lakurawa appears to have the capability to make or acquire improvised explosive devices, likely a gain of its interactions with JAS. Locals blamed Lakurawa for a bomb explosion in Gwabro village in Tangaza, on 8 June, which killed six people.[29]

Although Lakurawa had defended communities against bandits and cattle rustlers, armed raids targeting cattle have become the hallmark of its operations in villages across Sokoto State and Kebbi State. As a Sahelian-Fulani-rooted group, cattle are central to Lakurawa's cultural identity, but the group's interest goes beyond that. It has a strategic stake in cattle, tied not only to its survival but also to its operational funding. 'They are after cows. They hardly go away without cows. They also preach to people, but they will insist they are taking cows away in the name of *zakat*, and attacks happen when they are resisted,' said a community vigilante leader in Argungu LGA, Kebbi in March 2025.

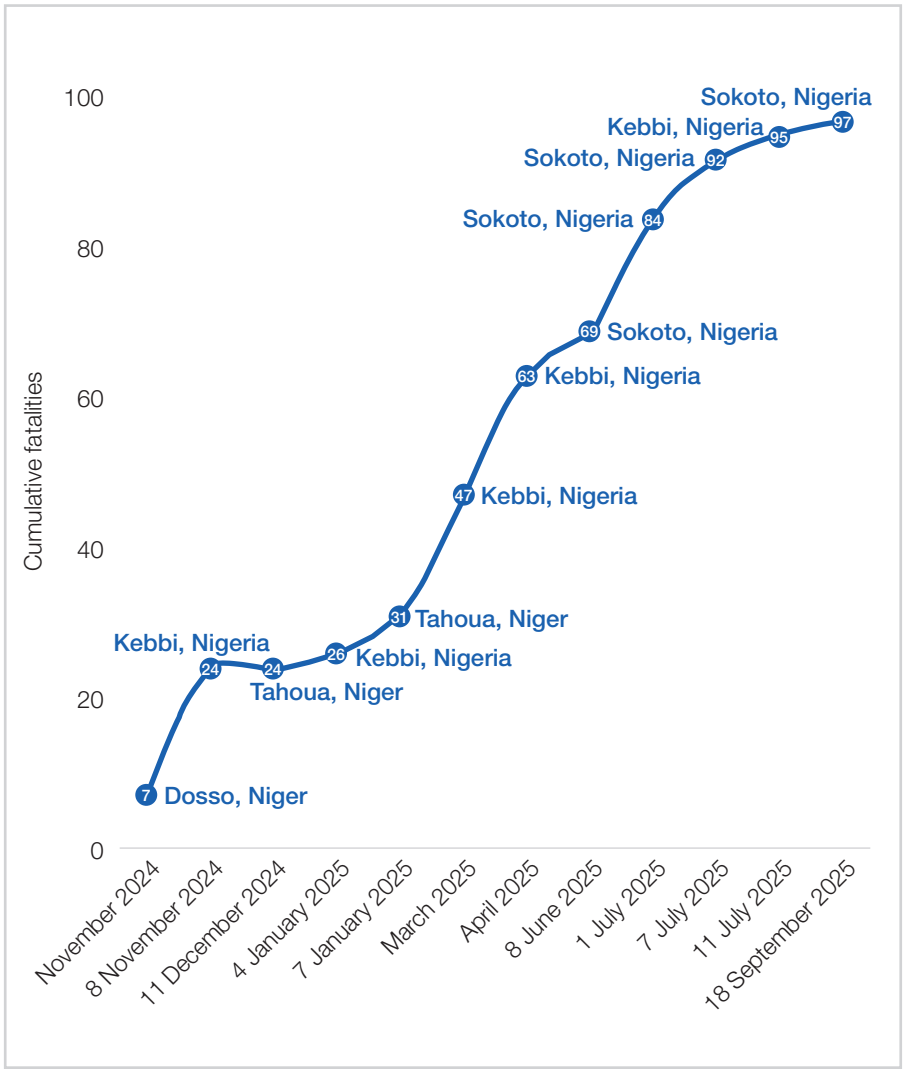
Agriculture, including cropping and pastoralism, is the mainstay of the local economy in the areas where Lakurawa operates, which highlights the immense damage the group is causing to livelihoods. Its targets include not only sedentary Hausa farming communities but also Fulani pastoralists, showing that its violence is not strictly ethnically motivated. Fulani victims are often extorted or required to pay to retrieve their stolen herds. In Niger, the group concentrates its operations on the Niger–Benin oil pipeline and regularly sabotages it using improvised explosive devices.

LAKURAWA FORCES COULD NUMBER UP TO

2 000

FIGHTERS

Chart 3: Lakurawa-related fatalities by area (November 2024 – September 2025)



Source: Author

Limited response and risks of outsourcing community defences to vigilantes

The Nigerian government, particularly, should have learnt from creating a vacuum that led communities to outsource their security to Lakurawa, before it eventually turned against them. However, the government and state security forces remain far removed from the affected communities, leaving civilians to rely on local vigilantes, without adequate control and accountability, to defend against Lakurawa. Meanwhile, the security forces only engage the armed group occasionally.

After years of state absence, Nigerian security forces vowed to dismantle the group's threat following the November attack in Kebbi and subsequent media attention. Efforts to respond to the group have since been sporadic, with few sustained and coordinated operations in affected LGAs. A Special Operations Brigade of the military reportedly killed six Lakurawa fighters in Gudu, Sokoto,

IN DECEMBER 2024, NIGER ACCUSED NIGERIA OF COMPLICITY IN LAKURAWA TERRORISM, A CLAIM NIGERIA IMMEDIATELY REJECTED

in January 2025,[30] but this sort of targeted offensive mission is infrequent.

With operations across the country, the military clearly lacks the capacity to support a dedicated counter-response to Lakurawa. Two military sources interviewed in June 2025 said that the Lakurawa threat falls under Operation Fansan Yamma, which primarily targets bandits and kidnappers in the northwest region. That is a strategic lapse, given that Lakurawa poses a different kind of threat, and bandits are more widely spread throughout the region, requiring disproportionately greater resources that detract from the response to Lakurawa.

Allowing vigilantes to take charge of community defences without accountability poses significant risks

As communities are largely left to their fate, there is fear that those on the Sokoto side are already forced to tolerate Lakurawa, enduring a life under brutal criminal sovereigns, while those in Kebbi are organising local vigilantes in self-help. In one case that the ISS monitored, vigilantes in Arewa LGA of Kebbi killed a Lakurawa kingpin, Maigemu, in a gun duel in March 2025. The operation came days after Lakurawa had killed six people in two villages (Bagiza and Rausa Kade) of Arewa LGA.

Yet, allowing vigilantes to take charge of community defences without an accountability framework poses significant risks and can lead to an endless cycle of conflict, especially amid the growing tension between the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups in the region. The Lakurawa group is often perceived as Fulani, which means that Hausa-controlled vigilantes might target innocent Fulani settlements in misguided acts of retaliation. This occurred after Lakurawa's first deadly attack in Mera, Kebbi, in November 2025, when survivors mobilised against local Fulani settlements.[31] This mirrors issues that have previously escalated crises in neighbouring Zamfara and Katsina.

In Niger, security measures around the pipeline have been strengthened, leading to a lull in attacks thanks to Opération Damissa (an operation by the Nigerien Armed Forces against non-state armed groups in the Dosso region), which aimed to protect the pipeline. However, sporadic attacks still occur.

Diplomatic constraints and absence of cross-border strategy

Although the Nigerian side is the main location of Lakurawa's violence, it also operates across the border in Niger's Dosso and Tahoua regions. It is now on the border with Benin too. Their cross-border reach is sustained by unmonitored migrations and trade routes. However, bilateral relations between Nigeria and Niger have remained poor following the July 2023 military coup in Niger and Abuja's strong stance against the junta.

Though without any piece of evidence, in December 2024, Niamey accused Abuja of complicity in Lakurawa terrorism, a claim the Nigerian authorities immediately rejected.[32] This diplomatic deadlock limits cross-border cooperation, making intelligence sharing and joint counterterrorism operations nearly impossible, which in turn, allows groups like Lakurawa to operate with relative impunity across porous borders.

While Lakurawa's leadership structure and ideological affiliations remain opaque, its Sahelian root is established, and it maintains connections to Sahelian jihadist and arms smuggling networks. Without a coordinated cross-border strategy, efforts to dismantle Lakurawa's presence on one side of the border only push the group further into the other.

Conclusion and recommendations

Lakurawa's emergence is less of a surprise than a symptom of deep structural vulnerabilities. It capitalised on insecurity and state failure, while drawing from a broader Sahelian jihadist and criminal repertoire. Unless the Nigerian government – and its regional partners – crafts a coordinated, multidimensional and context-fit response, Lakurawa may become another enduring node in West Africa's violent extremist landscape. A credible response must combine governance restoration, security pressure and community participation, recognising that purely militarised operations will not resolve the conditions that sustain Lakurawa. The following recommendations are targeted at key actors:

Nigerian government and regional partners

Expand preventing and countering violent extremism operations to northwestern and central Nigeria: In particular, the non-kinetic aspects of Nigeria's preventing and countering violent extremism efforts are still largely focused on the Lake Chad and northeastern region. This must change by recognising the growing threats in the north-central and northwestern regions and coordinating civilian and military responses that address the drivers and opportunities for extremist violence.

Reopen security cooperation with Niger and strengthen regional counterterrorism response: Ease post-2023 diplomatic tensions to allow intelligence-sharing, joint patrols and synchronised border operations, particularly along the Kebbi–Dosso–Alibori axis, but also on the Sokoto side. Nigeria should leverage its regional influence to strengthen the Economic Community of West African States–Alliance of Sahel States security cooperation and revamp platforms such as the Multinational Joint Task Force and Accra Initiative to combat cross-border terrorism and organised crime.

Providing human capital enhancement services, security, development and livelihood programmes will counter opportunities for armed groups

Strengthen government presence and invest in livelihoods and infrastructure: Authorities should prioritise state presence through the provision of human capital enhancement services, security, development and livelihood programmes in affected areas to counter opportunities for Lakurawa and other armed groups. It is important to invest in sustainable water and grazing access and crop production services, such as irrigation, to address the resource pressures.

Strengthen justice and accountability: Address vigilante abuses and ethnic profiling that alienate Fulani communities and push their youths toward banditry, thereby cutting the opportunity for Lakurawa to blend with existing local insecurity. Both federal and state governments in Nigeria should create an accountability framework for the community self-defence and vigilante groups to check abuses and indiscriminate reprisals.

INVESTMENT IN SUSTAINABLE WATER, GRAZING ACCESS AND CROP PRODUCTION SERVICES WILL REDUCE RESOURCE PRESSURES

Military and security forces

Enhance physical security deployments and launch a targeted operation: Increase force deployments in affected areas and launch targeted operations to dismantle Lakurawa leadership and safe havens, coordinating with Benin and Niger to prevent regrouping.

Integrate exit options for fighters: Combine military pressure with safe surrender and demobilisation programmes, offering pathways back to civilian life. The Operation Safe Corridor and Borno Model for the reintegration

of Boko Haram members can serve as a model, but challenges such as poor post-release tracking, insufficient livelihood support and blanket amnesty fuelling (in the case of the Borno Model) community grievances should be avoided.

Improve intelligence and community trust: Build partnerships with communities for early warning and safe reporting systems, while enhancing coordination between aerial and ground forces for quick and effective response to threats. It is important to integrate civilian insights into operational planning to reduce civilian harm and avoid alienating communities.

Secure humanitarian and economic lifelines: In line with enhanced security deployments, the military should protect roads and markets and aid convoys to prevent further attacks that deepen civilian vulnerability and delegitimise state presence.

Communities and local leadership

Strengthen local security networks under state oversight: To complement state security, communities should strengthen community protection groups but embed them within formal accountability structures to prevent ethnic profiling, indiscriminate violence and vigilante abuses.

Promote dialogue and reconciliation: Facilitate forums between farmers and pastoralists to resolve land-use disputes to address the problems at the roots of banditry, which is an opportunity for Lakurawa. If the state implements an exit and reintegration programme for fighters, support it in a way that is transparent and restorative.

Document and share intelligence safely: Work with state forces to create confidential channels to report threats.

A multi-actor, multi-scale and multi-pronged context-fit strategy is the only viable path forward

Promote local anti-violent extremism measures: Organise measures through religious leaders and local influencers to promote tenets of Islam that encourage tolerance, respect for constituted authorities, moderation and shunning of crimes among community members.

A multi-actor, multi-scale and multi-pronged context-fit strategy is the only viable path forward. By combining enhanced military action, cross-border cooperation and community-centred development, Nigeria and its partners can dismantle Lakurawa's networks and prevent it from becoming yet another entrenched armed actor in the region.

Notes

1 Nigeria's 36 states are grouped into six geopolitical zones based on geographical proximity, as well as historical, cultural, economic and political connections. The zones are North West, North Central, North East, South West, South East and South. The North West, covering an area of 216 065 km2 (25.75% of the country's total landmass), nearly the size of the United Kingdom, is predominantly Muslim with Hausa and Fulani populations, and consists of Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara.

2 See, for example, International Crisis Group, *Violence in Nigeria's North West: rolling back the mayhem*, Africa Report No. 288, 2020, www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem.

3 Nigeria officially designated the group a terrorist organisation on 23 January 2025 after its violence escalated and grabbed media attention in the previous month, see *Ripples Nigeria*, Court declares Lakurawa sect a terrorist group, bans its activities nationwide, 23 January 2025, www.ripplesnigeria.com/court-declares-lakurawa-sect-a-terrorist-group-bans-its-activities-nationwide/.

4 ISS research finding based on interviews with defectors and women previously married to fighters.

5 This is a loose term used for the armed gangs conducting kidnapping for ransom, revenge killings and illicit mining and extortion in Nigeria's northwest and Niger State, with roots in the Fulani ethnic-pastoralist militias fighting Hausa communities and vigilante groups over access to resources in Zamfara.

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2025

Managing Armed Group Defections

Lessons from the Borno Model

Policy Brief by Taiwo Adebayo (ISS), Abi Watson (GPPi)

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Links between violent extremism and illicit activities in Côte d'Ivoire

William Assanvo

Along with attacks in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire since 2020, violent extremist groups have infiltrated the livestock and illegal artisanal gold mining economies to generate funds, mobilise human resources and obtain means of subsistence. Responses to the threat must integrate this dimension and strive to deprive these groups of the resources they need to function.

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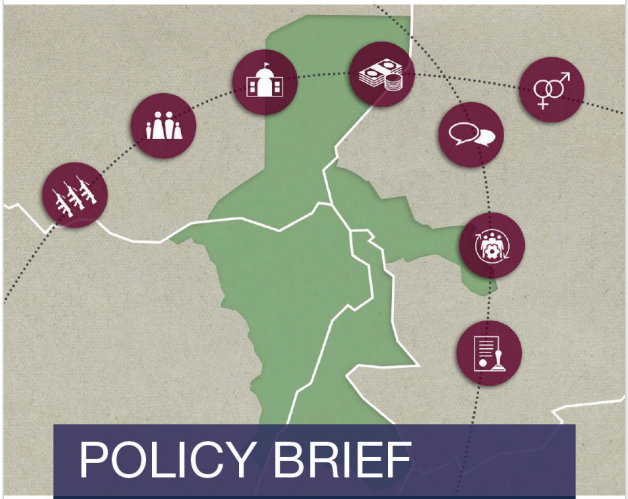

POLICY BRIEF

Managing exits from violent extremist groups: lessons from the Lake Chad Basin

Remadji Hoinathy, Malik Samuel and Akinola Olojo

Some Lake Chad Basin countries (Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria) have been dealing with violent extremism for over a decade. Disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement processes in these countries may offer useful lessons for other West African contexts, including Mali and Burkina Faso, or more recently affected countries such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo. Such lessons include incentivising defections, coordinating at national and regional levels, gender sensitivity, appropriate legal frameworks and community engagement.

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