BANDITS, WARLORDS, OR TERRORISTS? ANALYZING CONFLICT ACTORS IN NORTHWESTERN NIGERIA
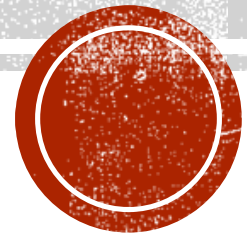
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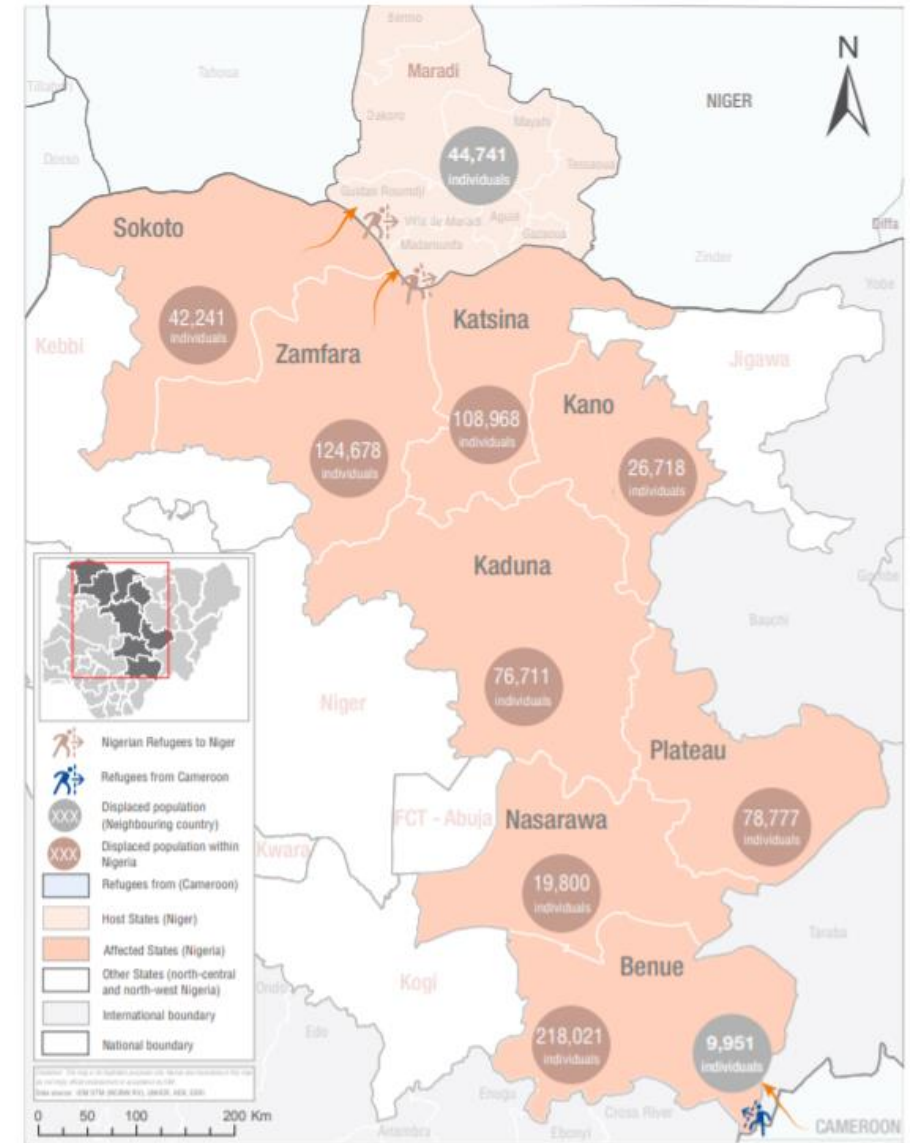
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OVERVIEW & OBJECTIVES

- Develop a framework for analyzing the intersections of criminality, insurgency, and intercommunal conflict that may be used within Nigeria and beyond

- I want to make clear that this conflict is… complex; the "bandits" are not a monolith

- Compare these militants to existing terms and frameworks

- Key question: Are these militants driven by material interests or political objectives?
  - The challenge of discerning motivations
  - Mobilizing around political grievances, but uninterested in politics?

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

- Immense humanitarian impact
  - 8,000+ dead (real toll much higher)
  - Nearly one million displaced
  - 600,000 children out of school

- Most geographically dispersed security challenge in Nigeria today

- Polarizing issue, fuels ethnoregional and ethnoreligious divisions

- Strains Nigeria's limited security resources

Map 1: IDP population by state

CONFLICT HISTORY

- Banditry historically existed on smaller scale
- Grows as a result of farmer-herder conflict
- Political context: Rise of new actors, patronage in Fourth Republic
- Weapons proliferate throughout Sahel after Libya collapses
- Farmer-herder conflict takes on ethnic, sometimes religious dimensions

"SOCIAL BANDITS"

- Bandits exist throughout history; some are revolutionaries, state-builders

- Hobsbawm identifies banditry as political phenomenon, interested in its "social protest function"
  - "Revolutionary traditionalists" defending peasantry from encroachment of bourgeoise

- Theoretical distinction between "social bandit" and "criminal bandit" often breaks down in practice
  - Bandits of NW protect some rural communities, terrorize others

- Do bandits embody social norms of peasantry, or an esoteric subculture?

DOES TERROR EQUAL TERRORISM?

- No consensus definition, but terrorism generally understood as politically oriented violence

- Is terrorism a tactic, or the essence of a movement?

- Uncertainty of bandit political objectives

- "Narcoterrorism" model of criminal groups employing terrorism to create political space for illicit enterprise
  - Debates over law enforcement or military response

- Terrorism label possibly confusing in context of northwest

A BANDIT-JIHADIST NEXUS?

- Boko Haram splinter group Ansaru based in northwest

- Coexistence and cooperation, but not much convergence

- Some Shekau guys, fleeing ISWAP, seeking to join bandits

- Bandits aligned with jihadists still exercise autonomy

- What would motivate bandits to adopt ISWAP/Ansaru political economy?

WARLORDS?

- "Individuals who control small pieces of territory using a combination of patronage and force" – Kimberly Marten

- "Roving bandits" to "stationary bandits"

- May provide rudimentary governance but primarily pursuing personal power, wealth
  - Bandits' "turf" often includes villages

- Benefit from regime patronage networks
  - Less so in NW Nigeria, where herders not generally part of political elite

- Exist through complicity of state leaders
  - De facto rather than de jure in NW

CONFLICT/VIOLENT ENTREPRENEUR

- Volkov's *Violent Entrepreneurs* of post-Soviet Russia manage a resource (violence) that is in demand as "shock therapy" creates new political economy

- Utility of phrase: captures thin line between licit and illicit violence in regions with weak rule of law

- But flattens all actors into one, elides identity and ideology

- Works best when sponsorship not in question

- Overly academic phrase

DEFINING THE BANDIT-WARLORD

- Militants whose violence is primarily geared towards resource accumulation; who are *de facto* sovereigns and powerbrokers within a circumscribed area; who mobilize support around identity-based grievances; but who lack a broad political agenda

  - "Criminal insurgency with Nigerian characteristics" (insurgency > terrorism)

CONCLUSION: "PAROCHIAL REBELS," COOPTATION, AND "LEGAL" WARLORDISM?

How do you stabilize a region that is home to dozens of armed groups?