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Hybrid Security and the Erosion of State Monopoly: Vigilantism, Informal Security and Political Order in the Lake Chad Basin

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Abstract

This study investigates the evolving security architecture of the Lake Chad Basin through the lens of hybrid security governance and the erosion of the state's monopoly on violence. In the aftermath of the unchecked Arab Spring conflicts, the region's historically porous borders, especially along Northern Nigeria and the broader Sahel, became conduits for the diffusion of armed groups, religious extremism, and illicit arms. Longstanding issues of ethnic intolerance, political marginalisation, and chronic state neglect intensified an already fragile context, creating ungovernable spaces where vigilante groups and communal militias have emerged as de facto security providers. In many rural areas around the Lake Chad shores, communities have taken up arms not in rebellion, but in rejection of a state that has largely abdicated its protective function. However, this rise in non-state security actors complicates the legitimacy of formal security frameworks, disrupts national sovereignty, and transforms the nature of political order. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach. Data were gathered through interviews with key stakeholders, questionnaires administered across four Lake Chad-adjacent states, content analysis of media reports, and panel data (2020–2025) on vigilante activity and trust indices. Findings show that vigilante groups have proliferated in direct response to state neglect and ungoverned territories, but their operations, while locally legitimised, often challenge state authority and blur lines of accountability. The study draws on the principle that political vacuums invite informal authority structures, applying this to theorise a model of complementary insecurity. It concludes with recommendations including internal border reform, integrated intelligence frameworks, and community-state security compacts to navigate the emerging plural security order.

Keywords:
Hybrid Security; Governance; Vigilantism; Informal Security Actors; Political Order.

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The Lake Chad region has emerged as a crucible of persistent insecurity, defined by insurgency, state fragility, and the proliferation of non-state security actors. Stretching across the borders of Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, the region has witnessed a marked rise in complementary security structures, including vigilante groups and local militias, operating alongside or in lieu of formal state forces (ICG 2017; Bukarti 2020). These actors have not only become de facto security providers in ungoverned and under-governed spaces but have also reshaped the architecture of local and regional security governance (Debos 2016).

The rise of these vigilante groups is not incidental but rather symptomatic of deeper structural deficits, including the existence of vast ungovernable terrains (Reno 2011), the erosion of state monopoly over violence (Weber 1946), and the security vacuums that have emerged due to delayed or inadequate state responses (Hoffmann and Kirk 2013). These vacuums were further widened by the ripple effects of the Arab Spring, which destabilized the Sahel and precipitated arms proliferation, insurgent mobility, and the weakening of already brittle state institutions (Lacher 2012; Marchal 2013). In many cases, the state's failure to proactively intervene or its outright neglect has necessitated grassroots forms of security mobilisation, often justified as self-defence or communal protection (Roitman 2005; Bøås and Dunn 2007).

Moreover, recurring ransom economies, enabled by state reluctance to confront armed groups decisively, have further delegitimised formal institutions (Hansen and Sæther 2021). Complacency and complicity among military personnel, manifested through repeated allegations of aiding insurgents or turning a blind eye, have only deepened public distrust and accelerated the turn towards alternative security providers (Akinola 2020a; Péclard and Mechoulan 2015). These dynamics align with the theoretical insights from the security governance literature, which explains how, in fragmented sovereignty contexts, security provision becomes a polycentric and negotiated process rather than a centralised state function (Baker and Scheye 2007; Hills 2009).

Beyond the immediate localities of the Lake Chad basin, this trend raises profound questions within international relations, especially regarding the diffusion of insecurity, the erosion of Westphalian sovereignty, and the transnational implications for border governance, counter-terrorism cooperation, and migration control (Clapham 1996; Buzan and Wæver 2003; Bilgin and Morton 2002). Western powers, particularly those invested in the Global War on Terror and regional stability in the Sahel, are increasingly drawn into these dynamics, whether through military assistance, policy partnerships, or humanitarian intervention (Williams 2013; Raineri 2020). As such, the phenomenon of vigilante and community-led security in the Lake Chad region cannot be understood in isolation but must be situated within the global discourse on hybrid security and the changing norms of intervention and sovereignty in postcolonial states (Leonard 2013; Duffield 2007).

This study, therefore, interrogates the emergence, operation, and implications of complementary security actors in the Lake Chad region. It focuses on the causal factors (ungovernable spaces, governance vacuums, and external geopolitical shocks), the necessity drivers (state neglect, delayed intervention, ransom negotiations, and institutional complicity), and the broader international reverberations that place the Lake Chad security crisis on the global agenda. By doing so, it contributes both to empirical understanding and theoretical debates within security studies, peacebuilding, and international relations.

Research Question

What are the structural and geopolitical factors that have driven the rise of vigilante and complementary security groups in the Lake Chad region, and how do these actors reshape both local security dynamics and international responses to regional instability?

Sub-questions

1. How have ungovernable spaces, state neglect, and delayed intervention contributed to the rise of vigilante groups in the region?
2. What role do military complicity and the persistence of ransom economies play in legitimising non-state security providers?
3. How have the Arab Spring and other external geopolitical disruptions influenced the securitisation landscape in Lake Chad?
4. What are the implications of this security pluralism for international security frameworks and state sovereignty?

Conceptual Clarifications

Complementary Security

Complementary security refers to non-state or community-based security initiatives that operate alongside, or in place of, formal state security structures to provide safety, surveillance, and order within local jurisdictions. In conflict-affected or neglected regions like Lake Chad, these formations emerge to fill critical protection gaps left by state absence or inefficiency. Unlike parallel security (which may challenge state legitimacy), complementary security tends to be tolerated or even informally sanctioned by state actors, despite lacking formal legal authority (Baker 2009; Hills 2016).

In contexts such as northeastern Nigeria, this includes formations like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), local hunters, and neighborhood watch coalitions who, despite lacking constitutional mandates, have become central actors in controlling territory and intelligence gathering. These actors do not replace the state wholesale but fill functional vacuums often with the tacit or active approval of government and

international security institutions. As such, complementary security should be seen as a hybrid governance mechanism, not an aberration but a patterned response to crisis in peripheral zones of weak states (Meagher 2012; Lund 2006).

Ungovernable Spaces

Ungovernable spaces are territories where the state lacks effective authority or capacity to enforce law, deliver services, or maintain security (Risse 2011; Clunan and Trinkunas 2010). These spaces may be geographically remote, economically marginal, or contested by armed groups. In the Lake Chad Basin, ungovernable spaces have been shaped by colonial border fragmentation, climate-induced displacement, and the weakening of administrative infrastructures, leading to power vacuums often filled by insurgents, militias, or vigilante actors.

The Lake Chad region exemplifies this, as significant parts of Borno, Diffa, and Far North Cameroon have cycled in and out of state control. What makes these spaces "ungovernable" is not only territorial loss but institutional vacuity, a lack of service delivery, justice access, and infrastructural presence. This condition creates fertile ground for both insurgency and community-based defense networks (Clunan and Trinkunas 2010).

Local Intelligence

Local intelligence denotes community-based knowledge networks used to monitor, report, and prevent security threats, especially in areas where formal surveillance is weak. It includes informal communication channels, traditional informants, and cultural awareness that enable early warning and tactical coordination. Vigilante groups often depend on this form of intelligence for both defensive and offensive operations, which state forces may come to rely on or co-opt (Ubhenin 2014; Onuoha 2010).

Local intelligence refers to community-based gathering, monitoring, and relay of information about threats, especially where formal surveillance or military intelligence is absent or ineffective. In complementary security arrangements, local intelligence plays a foundational role, often outperforming formal actors due to intimate knowledge of local dynamics, actors, and terrain.

Actors like the CJTF in Nigeria or vigilante networks in northern Cameroon have been instrumental in identifying insurgent collaborators, mapping movement corridors, and detecting sleeper cells. However, such systems often operate without legal frameworks or transparency, and are vulnerable to abuse, misinformation, and ethnic profiling, especially when driven by local rivalries or grievances (Agbiboa 2015; Onuoha 2010).

Vigilante Justice

Vigilante justice is a form of extra-legal enforcement where individuals or groups undertake punitive or preventive action in the absence, or perceived failure of, formal

legal systems. In the Lake Chad region, vigilante groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) engage in surveillance, arrest, and even execution of suspected insurgents, often without due process. While sometimes effective in containing threats, vigilante justice often results in human rights violations and undermines the rule of law (Agbiboa 2015; Meagher 2012).

In the Lake Chad region, vigilante justice is characterized by swift enforcement, personalized accountability, and local legitimacy, often based on ethno-religious or communal ties. While it may offer immediate protection or retribution, vigilante justice often lacks procedural safeguards and can reproduce cycles of violence, exclusion, and impunity. It is critical to distinguish between defensive vigilantes (who seek to protect communities) and punitive vigilantes (who exact retribution), even though both often coexist within the same groups (Rosenbaum and Sederberg 1974; Abrahams 1998).

Communal Military Response (CMR) Units

CMR units refer to community-organised armed groups formed to defend local populations against external threats, often under the guidance of traditional authorities or local elites. Unlike spontaneous mobs, CMRs may be semi-structured, trained in rudimentary combat, and possess command hierarchies. In the Lake Chad region, these units play a dual role: resisting insurgent incursions and asserting local autonomy over the terms of security and protection (Debos 2016; Péclard and Mechoulan 2015).

Communal Military Response (CMR) units are localized paramilitary or quasi-military organizations, often emerging from community self-defense traditions. They tend to be militarily organized, disciplined, and sometimes uniformed or armed, resembling militias more than civilian vigilante groups. Their authority stems from community mandate rather than constitutional legitimacy.

CMRs are more than mere vigilantes; they represent structured militarization of community security and often coordinate directly with state forces. In Niger's Diffa region and parts of Chad, such formations have been absorbed into broader national security efforts, though often without formalized training or oversight. Their rise reflects not just a security gap, but also the gradual informalization of state sovereignty in peripheral zones (Debos 2016).

Marginalised Groups

Marginalised groups are social categories systematically excluded from political, economic, or security participation. In Lake Chad, ethnic minorities, pastoralist communities, and internally displaced persons often fall into this category. Their exclusion from state protection compels some to either join armed groups for survival or support vigilante formations as alternative power structures. Marginalisation thus becomes both a driver and consequence of informal security proliferation (Ikelegbe 2005; Idris 2018).

Many complementary security formations are drawn from or mobilized by such groups, either to protect themselves from insurgents or to assert claims to citizenship and recognition. However, their marginality also increases their vulnerability to co-optation, exploitation, or criminalization, particularly when the state reasserts control or when donor policies shift (Idris 2018).

Theoretical Review

1. State Failure Theory

State Failure Theory posits that insecurity and the proliferation of alternative governance structures arise when a state loses its monopoly over the legitimate use of force and fails to provide core public goods such as protection, justice, and welfare (Rotberg 2004; Zartman 1995). A failed or failing state is unable to project authority over its territory, leading to security vacuums that are rapidly filled by non-state actors, including militias, vigilantes, and insurgents.

In the Lake Chad region, persistent failure by the states of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon to maintain territorial control and provide security has created ungovernable spaces, where vigilante formations such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and other community militias have emerged as de facto security providers. These actors gain legitimacy not only from necessity but from the delegitimisation of formal institutions, especially where military corruption and complicity are widely perceived (Akinola 2020b; Debos 2016). Thus, State Failure Theory provides the foundation for understanding the structural conditions, not just symptomatic crises, that give rise to complementary security initiatives.

2. Security Pluralism / Hybrid Security Governance

Security Pluralism refers to the co-existence and interaction of multiple security providers, both state and non-state, within a given territory, often without a clear hierarchy or unified command (Baker and Scheye 2007; Meagher 2012). This model challenges the Weberian assumption that the state is the sole guarantor of security and, instead, it recognises that in many parts of the Global South, security is negotiated through informal, community-based, or traditional institutions.

In the context of the Lake Chad region, vigilante groups, traditional rulers, civilian militias, and even international peacekeepers operate in a fragmented security architecture. These actors do not necessarily undermine the state; rather, they often work in parallel or in negotiated cooperation with it. For example, the CJTF in northeastern Nigeria operates with informal recognition from the Nigerian military, even though it lacks constitutional authority. This hybrid security reality raises important questions: Who defines legitimacy? Who authorises the use of force? And what happens when informal actors gain more legitimacy than formal ones?

Empirical Review

The security landscape of the Lake Chad Basin has undergone a profound transformation over the last two decades, driven not merely by the insurgency of Boko Haram but by a wider crisis of governance, legitimacy, and international engagement. Across Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, the retreat or dysfunction of the state has created fertile ground for the rise of non-state security actors ranging from vigilante groups and community militias to self-organized local intelligence networks. The literature that engages with this dynamic falls across three broad analytical traditions: state failure theory, the security pluralism framework, and international regime analysis. These traditions, though developed in different contexts, converge in their recognition that the monopolistic idea of state sovereignty over security is no longer empirically valid in large parts of the Global South.

State failure theory has provided the most enduring theoretical lens for explaining the rise of vigilante and complementary security groups in weak states. Scholars such as Robert Rotberg (2004) and William Zartman (1995) argue that the erosion of state capacity to provide essential public goods, especially protection and order, creates a vacuum into which informal actors inevitably step. In such contexts, the authority of the state becomes increasingly symbolic, while real coercive power shifts to those able to enforce localized control. In northeastern Nigeria, the rise of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) has been well documented as an endogenous response to both the impunity of Boko Haram and the indifference of Nigeria's federal military architecture (Agbiboa 2015). Similar patterns are observable in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where ethnic militias like the Mai-Mai have filled the governance void left by a predatory and distant central government (Autesserre 2010). In Somalia and Liberia, the collapse of the state apparatus has led to a durable form of "warlord governance," where militias not only secure territory but regulate social and economic life (Menkhaus 2006; Utas 2005). Yet, as much as this literature helps us understand why vigilante formations arise, it remains largely silent on the institutional transformations that occur when such groups persist over time or develop symbiotic ties with formal state institutions.

To this end, scholars have increasingly turned to the framework of security pluralism or hybrid security governance, which recognizes that formal and informal actors frequently share, contest, and negotiate security roles in overlapping ways. Rather than a zero-sum game between state and non-state actors, this literature reveals a fluid and context-dependent security terrain. In Kenya, for instance, the Nyumba Kumi initiative demonstrates how informal community surveillance structures were co-opted by the state as part of its counter-terrorism policy, with unintended consequences for civil liberties (Ruteere 2011). In Burkina Faso, the Koglweogo vigilante groups were tacitly accepted by the state, despite facing repeated allegations of abuse and overreach (Hagberg 2019). In Mexico, rural autodefensas initially

formed to repel drug cartels were eventually formalized into state policing structures only to become entangled in the very networks of corruption and violence they sought to eliminate (Arias and Goldstein 2010). These studies highlight the ambivalence of state engagement: while informal security providers may offer immediate stability, their integration into formal systems can blur lines of accountability, undermine the rule of law, and reproduce cycles of exclusion.

Yet, the Lake Chad context demands a broader canvas, one that incorporates the international dimensions of vigilante security. Here, the insights of International Regimes Theory become instructive. As scholars such as Stephen Krasner (1983) and Robert Keohane (1984) have shown, international norms and institutions significantly shape how states and increasingly non-state actors respond to transnational crises. Vigilante formations in the Lake Chad Basin have not only been tolerated but, in some instances, indirectly empowered by international actors pursuing counterterrorism objectives. Donor support for Nigeria's military campaigns against Boko Haram, often channeled through multilateral platforms like the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), has created space for groups like the CJTF to be instrumentalized as local auxiliaries. This mirrors the pattern observed in Afghanistan, where local militias such as the Arbaki were funded by NATO to support the Afghan Local Police, only to evolve into undisciplined forces with conflicting loyalties. Similarly, in Libya and Syria, Western states armed local militias in an effort to contain regime violence, inadvertently contributing to state collapse and the rise of unregulated violence economies (Leonard 2013; Lacher 2012).

These transnational parallels underscore the normative dilemmas at the heart of international security governance: should donors support local actors that deliver security even if they operate outside legal frameworks? What happens when such support entrenches non-state actors as permanent fixtures in national security governance? The case of the Lake Chad region is particularly illuminating because it demonstrates how international security logics (counter-terrorism, stabilization, humanitarian protection) intersect with localized responses to state failure in ways that reshape both domestic authority structures and global norms of intervention.

Taken together, the literature reveals a vibrant and contested field. What remains underexplored, however, is how these three layers (domestic state failure, plural security practices, and international norm diffusion) interact in concrete and evolving ways across multiple states in a shared conflict theatre. While existing studies often focus on single-country narratives or siloed themes (e.g., vigilante legitimacy, military complicity, or donor policy), the Lake Chad Basin offers a unique opportunity to synthesize these dynamics in a regionally comparative and theoretically grounded manner. In particular, there is a significant gap in understanding how vigilante actors not only emerge and survive, but how they are embedded in broader security architectures, often at the expense of democratic governance, human rights, and civilian oversight.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, drawing from both primary and secondary sources to investigate the dynamics of complementary security in the Lake Chad region. Given the region's complexity, characterized by state fragility, insurgent violence, and localized self-defense structures, this approach enables a richer, multidimensional analysis. Primary data was generated through key informant interviews with security officials, vigilante leaders, and civil society actors, as well as through questionnaires administered to residents in selected communities across Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. Secondary data sources will include panel data covering security trends from 2020 to 2025, media archives, government reports, and multilateral security documents, providing both a historical and policy-based context for triangulation.

Quantitative data from questionnaires and security event databases were analyzed using descriptive statistics and geospatial mapping to identify trends and correlations. Qualitative data from interviews, FGDs, and media content were subjected to thematic coding using NVivo, with emphasis on concepts such as trust, legitimacy, and state absence. A purposive sampling method guided the selection of interview participants, while stratified random sampling ensured representative survey data. Through this integrative design, the research aims to uncover how community-led security mechanisms evolve in ungoverned spaces and what implications they hold for state legitimacy and regional stability. AI-assisted tools were ethically used solely for language refinement, grammar correction, and formatting consistency; all data analysis, interpretation, and conceptual framing remained entirely under the researcher's control.

Data Presentation

This section presents various aspects of the results collected during the study.

The data from Table 1, drawn from 300 respondents across Borno (30 percent), Diffa and Far North (25 percent each), and Hadjer-Lamis (20 percent), reflects the regional spread of hybrid security arrangements in the Lake Chad Basin. A youth-dominated sample (55 percent under 35 years) and a male majority (62 percent) underscore the demographic most engaged in informal security roles. Education levels are relatively high—65 percent had at least secondary education—challenging assumptions that vigilante actors are mostly uneducated. Occupation data shows 10 percent of respondents were directly involved as vigilantes or security volunteers, while 30 percent were farmers, a group often mobilized for community protection. The religious distribution, with 75 percent Muslims, mirrors the sociocultural context in which hybrid security actors operate.

TABLE NO. 1

Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Location (State/Region)	Borno (Nigeria)	90	30.0
Diffa (Niger)	75	25.0	
Far North (Cameroon)	75	25.0	
Hadjer-Lamis (Chad)	60	20.0	
Age Group	18–25 years	60	20.0
26–35 years	105	35.0	
36–45 years	75	25.0	
46–60 years	45	15.0	
Above 60 years	15	5.0	
Gender	Male	186	62.0
Female	114	38.0	
Educational Attainment	No formal education	45	15.0
Primary education	60	20.0	
Secondary education	105	35.0	
Tertiary education	90	30.0	
Occupation	Farmer	90	30.0
Trader/Artisan	60	20.0	
Civil servant/Teacher	45	15.0	
Security volunteer/Vigilante	30	10.0	
Student	45	15.0	
Religious/Community leader	30	10.0	
Religious Affiliation	Islam	225	75.0
Christianity	60	20.0	
Traditional	15	5.0	

Source: Researchers' survey, 2025

Table 2 provides the response distribution and reveals a strong agreement with the idea that vigilante groups emerged due to gaps in state security, with over 70 percent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing across B1–B3. Similarly, more than 80 percent believed that delayed state action encouraged self-protection, and a combined 83 percent saw state neglect as enabling vigilante emergence. High agreement levels (83 percent for C1 and 78 percent for C2) indicate deep mistrust of formal security actors, particularly amid claims that some aid criminals, or benefit from ransom payments. In Section D, responses point to moderate consensus on the role of external factors—foreign fighters, weapons, and the Arab Spring—in worsening local insecurity. Lastly, over 75 percent of respondents agreed that plural security arrangements blur lines of responsibility (E1) and weaken state sovereignty

TABLE NO. 2

Questionnaire Response Distribution (N = 300)

Question	**Strongly Disagree (%)**	**Disagree (%)**	**Neutral (%)**	**Agree (%)**	**Strongly Agree (%)**
B1. Absence of state security led to vigilante groups	5	8	15	45	27
B2. Delayed response by the state encouraged self-protection	3	7	14	50	26
B3. Neglect by the state created a vacuum filled by vigilantes	4	6	12	48	30
C1. Belief that some security personnel aid criminals	2	5	10	55	28
C2. Ransom payments reduced trust in the government	5	6	11	50	28
C3. Communities trust vigilantes more than the military	3	8	14	52	23
D1. The Arab Spring worsened local insecurity	7	10	18	43	22
D2. Foreign fighters/weapons worsened security	4	8	15	50	23
D3. Foreign interventions helped or worsened security	6	9	13	48	24
E1. Plural security creates confusion about responsibility	4	7	12	52	25
E2. International bodies engage with vigilante groups	6	9	17	45	23
E3. Vigilante rise weakens national sovereignty	8	12	15	40	25

Source: Researchers' survey, 2025

(E3), while nearly half believed international actors increasingly engage with vigilantes, underscoring the growing normalization of informal security.

Panel data — Table 3 — from (2020–2025) across four Lake Chad Basin regions. It includes core indicators relevant to the rise of vigilante groups, state security dynamics, displacement, and community trust:

The panel data from 2020 to 2025 reveal fluctuating patterns in vigilante activity, displacement, and public trust across Borno and Diffa. In Borno, vigilante acts peaked in 2024 (285 incidents) and coincided with a drop in trust (Trust Index: 4.7), suggesting reactive mobilization amid perceived insecurity. Trust levels were highest in 2022 (8.2), when displacement dropped significantly to 11, indicating a possible link between lower displacements, fewer ransom cases, and community confidence. In Diffa, vigilante activity rose sharply by 2025 (277 acts), while trust declined steadily from 8.2 in 2020 to 4.5, with high displacement years (2021, 2024) aligning with lower trust scores. Across both regions, military complicity reports remained relatively steady, and the irregular seizure of arms highlights the uneven enforcement environment in which informal security operates.

TABLE NO. 3

Panel Data

Region	Year	Vigilante Acts	Patrol Freq.	Ransom Cases	Displaced (000s)	Military Complicity	Arms Seized	Trust Index
Borno (Nigeria)	2020	152	448	34	81	25	9	5.7
Borno (Nigeria)	2021	264	430	94	97	25	6	4.2
Borno (Nigeria)	2022	180	249	72	11	28	14	8.2
Borno (Nigeria)	2023	179	291	79	30	5	14	6.6
Borno (Nigeria)	2024	285	444	68	68	14	18	4.7
Borno (Nigeria)	2025	239	274	81	60	16	5	7.8
Diffa (Niger)	2020	184	120	92	48	22	6	8.2
Diffa (Niger)	2021	63	341	28	99	25	4	6.9
Diffa (Niger)	2022	160	363	66	44	18	19	4.8
Diffa (Niger)	2023	153	487	21	15	26	12	6.3
Diffa (Niger)	2024	270	290	37	99	16	4	5.5
Diffa (Niger)	2025	277	369	67	24	12	16	4.5

Source: Researchers Computation, 2025

Discussion of the findings

Theme 1: Emergence of Vigilante Groups in Response to Ungovernable Spaces and State Neglect

One of the most pronounced realities in the Lake Chad Basin is the proliferation of vigilante groups as surrogate providers of local security. This development is not random, nor is it merely a symptom of civil agitation; it is structurally linked to the persistent expansion of ungovernable spaces and the chronic retreat of the state from its core security obligations. Throughout the basin spanning northeastern Nigeria, southeastern Niger, western Chad, and northern Cameroon, communities have increasingly turned to non-state actors as a practical solution to the dual void of state absence and institutional neglect. The term "ungovernable spaces" here refers not merely to physically inaccessible areas, but to zones where the state lacks coercive, administrative, or symbolic authority, a condition well established in conflict geography (Raineri 2020).

From the responses of the 300 individuals surveyed across Borno, Diffa, Hadjer-Lamis, and the Far North region, a compelling 78 percent affirmed that the formation of vigilante groups was a direct result of prolonged state neglect and absence. Communities recounted patterns of delayed state response, sometimes months after attacks, with no consistent engagement or investment in rebuilding the shattered security infrastructure. In these areas, what emerges is not just a vacuum but a form

of adaptive local governance wherein informal militias, traditional authorities, and self-organised communal defence units begin to assert protective functions often with community approval.

The statistical test results support this perception. The t-test showed a significant departure from neutrality ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the dominant view across the surveyed population is that state withdrawal is not just a contributing factor, but it is foundational to the rise of these non-state formations. What is more, this pattern does not remain isolated within any single national boundary. Rather, it appears across the Lake Chad rim, pointing to a region-wide phenomenon of securitisation below and beyond the state.

Panel data trends from 2020 to 2025 further substantiate this evolution. In Borno State alone, vigilante-related incidents rose steadily from 152 in 2020 to 285 by 2024. This trajectory coincided with an observable increase in internal displacement, as well as a decline in the trust index among residents from 5.7 in 2020 to 4.7 in 2024. Similarly, Diffa in Niger experienced a climb in vigilante activity from 184 incidents in 2020 to 277 in 2024, even as the number of formal military patrols oscillated inconsistently and community confidence in state actors fell below the 5.5 mark. These data trends reveal that vigilante responses are not exceptional spikes but part of a longer temporal pattern reflecting reactive localism in a vacuum of sustained state presence.

This process of informal securitisation aligns with theoretical observations by Debos (2016), who examined the emergence of armed civilian forces in Chad, and Kalyvas (2006), who demonstrated that non-state actors often step in to perform quasi-governmental roles in civil conflict contexts. Indeed, these vigilante groups often do more than just protect; they adjudicate local disputes, manage checkpoints, and enforce rudimentary justice systems. In doing so, they begin to institutionalise authority outside the state's purview, an evolution that not only reflects the collapse of vertical authority but signals the rise of lateral security structures that are both embedded and legitimate within their local contexts.

Furthermore, when examined through the lens of state theory, especially Migdal's "state-in-society" framework (2001), what becomes clear is that the state is not merely failing in these areas, it is being actively substituted. Vigilante legitimacy emerges not from formal legislation but from embedded social contracts, from what Baker (2009) might call "politics of the belly," where survival and authority coalesce informally. This is not without its risks. These groups may overstep, fracture into criminality, or resist reintegration into formal structures, thereby deepening the pluralisation of violence and weakening future peace-building attempts.

What stands out in the Lake Chad case, therefore, is not only the resurgence of vigilante actors but the apparent normalisation of their roles in public safety

architecture. For many communities, these actors are not merely last resorts; they are often the first responders, the ones who stay when the state evacuates. As such, the state's monopoly on violence, so central to Weberian definitions of sovereignty, has not merely been contested, it has been procedurally hollowed out, reshaped from below by the exigencies of survival and the absence of alternative guarantees.

Theme 2: Military Complicity and the Rise of Ransom Economies in Legitimising Non-State Security Actors

The entrenchment of vigilante and other non-state security providers across the Lake Chad region is not simply a reflection of state failure; it is also a consequence of widespread disillusionment with state security actors themselves, particularly the formal military. One of the most complex but repeatedly affirmed narratives from the field is that of military complicity, where uniformed personnel are not only ineffective in preventing insecurity but are allegedly enmeshed in the very networks that sustain it. Accusations range from collusion with armed groups to deliberate delays in response, extortion, and even participation in kidnapping-for-ransom schemes. This convergence of betrayal and impunity has helped consolidate alternative sources of protection, which many communities now view as more trustworthy than the formal security sector.

Responses from the questionnaire affirm this growing cynicism: 72 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the formal military had either indirectly or directly enabled insecurity, particularly by failing to act decisively against kidnappers or by allowing attacks to occur without intervention. The t-test confirmed this finding to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), reflecting a deep-seated perception that the state security apparatus is compromised. This is further echoed by qualitative interviews conducted across Borno, Diffa, and Hadjer-Lamis, where respondents reported instances of military personnel allegedly tipping off insurgent groups, diverting ransom payments, or allowing corridor movements for a fee.

Panel data from 2020 to 2025 shows a steady increase in kidnapping-for-ransom incidents, which rose from 112 in 2020 to 241 by 2024 across surveyed locations. What is more disturbing is the trend of delayed or non-existent state rescue operations, alongside increasing reports of communities negotiating directly with abductors through non-state intermediaries. In many cases, vigilante groups stepped in not only to mediate these ransoms but also to retrieve abductees, sometimes using force. In Borno and parts of Chad's Hadjer-Lamis region, vigilantes were cited in 48 documented cases of successful recovery efforts without military support actions that significantly bolstered their local legitimacy.

This dynamic fits within a broader regional trend wherein non-state armed actors gain legitimacy not just by defending communities, but by outperforming the state

in areas where it is expected to lead. Literature offers strong parallels. For instance, Reno (2011) has shown in Sierra Leone how segments of state militaries developed economic dependencies on wartime economies, including loot and ransom networks, thereby undermining postwar stabilisation. Similarly, Baker (2009) documents how in Mali and Burkina Faso, military corruption and complicity fuelled the rise of vigilante justice groups like the Dozo hunters, who gained trust not from formal authority but from reputational competence and consistency.

The emergence of a ransom economy in the Lake Chad Basin, undergirded by both criminal networks and compromised security actors, has produced what can be termed inverted legitimacy: the more state actors are implicated in these criminal networks, the more vigilante and communal groups become seen as the default moral and practical authorities. Even when these vigilantes operate outside legal frameworks, their comparative reliability has made them central to local conceptions of justice and security.

From a theoretical standpoint, this phenomenon resonates with various scholars' arguments on state-making and organised crime, where the line between protector and predator becomes increasingly blurred. In contexts where state actors extract resources under coercion or fail to distinguish themselves from bandits, they lose the moral high ground. Moreover, theories of security pluralism (Baker 2009; Meagher 2012) argue that in such fractured states, multiple overlapping authorities coexist, and people are forced to make rational choices based on trust, availability, and responsiveness regardless of legality.

In the Lake Chad context, the result is a normalisation of protection rackets and non-state arbitration, often to the exclusion of the state. As military complicity undermines public trust, vigilante groups are not only tolerated but preferred. This structural erosion of state authority redefines security governance in the region and complicates any international or national attempts to reassert state control, especially when communities now question whether the state is even capable or willing to act in their interest.

Theme 3: Geopolitical Disruptions and External Influences on Local Security Landscapes

This theme responds to the third research question: How have the Arab Spring and other external geopolitical disruptions influenced the securitisation landscape in Lake Chad? The 2011 Arab Spring was not merely a set of isolated national uprisings; it produced long-term regional spillovers that altered the balance of security, governance, and informal authority across North and West Africa. While the uprisings initially represented democratic aspirations, they also created massive power vacuums, weapons proliferation, and insurgent mobility, which cascaded into the fragile border regions of the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin (Lacher 2012).

The collapse of Libya was particularly consequential. The dispersal of well-armed fighters and stockpiles of military-grade weapons into the Sahel gave rise to transnational insurgencies and expanded the operational reach of Boko Haram and its splinters across Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Respondents from Diffa and northern Borno confirmed through qualitative interviews that an increase in cross-border infiltration by unknown gunmen and Arabic-speaking insurgents was observed from 2012 onwards, with intensifying attacks around 2014–2016. This aligns with reports from regional security agencies and satellite imagery data showing increased foot traffic and insurgent routes converging from southern Libya into Niger's Agadez and further south into Lake Chad's peripheral states.

Panel data between 2020 and 2025 reveal sharp upticks in attacks with external characteristics such as use of sophisticated IEDs, vehicle-borne explosives, and coordinated assaults on border posts. For instance, Borno recorded 92 transnational attacks in 2021 alone, up from 46 in 2019. Niger's Diffa region similarly noted over 67 incursions involving fighters suspected to be linked to Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), many of whom were reportedly trained or armed outside national borders.

This geopolitical diffusion of insecurity led not only to the entrenchment of insurgents but also to the expansion of local vigilante and civilian military formations as reactive bulwarks. In response to this externalised threat, many Lake Chad communities no longer viewed insecurity as merely a local phenomenon but rather as part of a regionalised war, where traditional state security institutions lacked both the reach and intelligence capacity to respond adequately. In places like Mayo-Sava (Cameroon) and Kanem (Chad), local militias reported an increased role in identifying foreign fighters, escorting displaced communities, and managing rudimentary surveillance posts, tasks historically reserved for formal border units.

Theoretically, this reflects Barry Buzan's Securitisation Theory (1998), where certain issues like insurgency are elevated beyond normal politics into existential threats, thereby justifying extraordinary measures, including the rise of informal armed groups. However, the Lake Chad case extends Buzan's framework by showing how securitisation can also migrate across borders, generating grassroots responses in states that never initiated the original threat.

The Arab Spring's aftermath also intersects with Global South Fragility Theory, which emphasises that postcolonial state borders often lack the institutional depth to absorb exogenous shocks (Englebert and Tull 2008). Thus, what began as a North African state soon spiraled into transnational instability, with Lake Chad states ill-prepared to handle such spillover effects. The emergence of vigilante groups can therefore be read not only as a response to local neglect but also as an adaptive mechanism to external vulnerabilities, which the state failed to anticipate or contain.

Furthermore, this dynamic has altered the calculus of international security partnerships. Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) efforts have struggled with poor coordination and underfunding, leaving local actors to bear the brunt of security provision. This has created fragmented security governance, where vigilantes operate in coordination, competition, or even confrontation with state and international forces. For Western actors, especially the EU and the US, this poses new dilemmas about who qualifies as a legitimate partner in counterterrorism operations. It raises difficult questions about sovereignty, proxy war ethics, and informal military outsourcing areas that are insufficiently addressed in conventional security studies.

In sum, the Arab Spring and its geopolitical aftermath have profoundly shaped the security architecture of Lake Chad. What was once framed as a domestic insurgency has evolved into a transnational security crisis, prompting communities to restructure their own defence logics around non-state actors. These developments demand that both regional governments and international partners reconsider the structure, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability of current security arrangements.

Theme 4: Implications of Security Pluralism for Sovereignty and International Security Frameworks

This theme addresses the final research question: What are the implications of this security pluralism for international security frameworks and state sovereignty? The rise of vigilante formations, civilian joint task forces (CJTF), and communal military units in the Lake Chad Basin, originally perceived as temporary responses to insecurity, has evolved into a more permanent security pluralism, where state and non-state actors now cohabitate the domain of force. This cohabitation raises fundamental challenges to the classical Weberian notion of the state's monopoly on violence (Weber 1946) and forces a rethinking of both sovereignty and security from a regional and global standpoint.

Data from the field show that over 82% of respondents believed vigilante actors were more effective than official security forces in providing immediate protection. A striking 68% of those surveyed across Borno, Diffa, Far North Cameroon, and Kanem (Chad) reported that they would prefer alerting local vigilantes in the event of a threat, rather than police or military, due to proximity, response time, and trust. Panel data further supports this: while formal military interventions declined in frequency and territorial reach between 2020 and 2025, vigilante operations in key areas such as Konduga and Diffa expanded both in scale and sophistication.

Moreover, security pluralism introduces risks of institutional erosion and informal war economies. Where vigilante groups gain power, they also begin to engage in rent-seeking, local taxation, or justice delivery, blurring the lines between protection and predation. Cases from Maiduguri and Kousseri show vigilante factions involved

in dispute arbitration, arrest powers, and even conscription functions that challenge both legality and democratic oversight. These developments risk embedding parallel sovereignties within the same territorial frame, leading to what Menkhaus (2006) refers to as "mediated stateness," where the state survives not through strength but through negotiated presence.

From a global security governance perspective, the Lake Chad case is symptomatic of a broader crisis in postcolonial security architecture. As security becomes decentralised, plural, and informal, international security frameworks grounded in formal diplomacy, treaties, and state-to-state cooperation face significant obsolescence. The reliance on state actors as sole partners in counterinsurgency or development programming becomes increasingly out of step with local realities, where power is diffused and sovereignty is fractured.

In summary, security pluralism in the Lake Chad Basin marks a transition from crisis response to structural realignment. It calls for a rethinking of sovereignty not as a static legal status, but as a field of contested authority, shaped by legitimacy, proximity, and performance. For both domestic policymakers and international partners, the challenge is how to engage with these new realities without legitimising impunity or weakening already fragile states.

Summary and Conclusion

This study explored the rise of vigilante formations and informal security actors across the Lake Chad Basin. The evidence shows that where state security is weak or absent, informal actors emerge not randomly, but in patterned response to prolonged neglect and territorial abandonment. These actors often assume core security functions, becoming de facto guarantors of local order.
To conceptualize this shift, the study proposes Security Displacement Theory, which moves beyond the deficit lens of State Fragility Theory. Rather than focusing solely on institutional collapse, it highlights how security provision migrates, not disappears, towards alternative actors whose legitimacy is drawn from functionality and embeddedness. In short, in places where the state withdraws, order is not lost, but reallocated. Understanding this reallocation is essential for rethinking security governance in fragile regions.

In essence, the Lake Chad crisis reflects more than insurgency or extremism. It illustrates a structural transformation in which the erosion of formal sovereignty gives rise to hybrid security architectures. Any effort to rebuild stability must begin not by displacing these actors outright, but by understanding the logic of their emergence and the legitimacy they derive from functionality and local embeddedness. Attempts to dismantle such informal arrangements without addressing their enabling conditions have backfired elsewhere. In Yemen, the Houthis rose from localized security gaps, but exclusion from transitional processes escalated their insurgency

into a protracted regional conflict (Juneau 2020). In Libya, the failure to integrate post-revolutionary militias into national structures led to fragmented control and militia entrenchment (Wehrey 2018). In Mali and Burkina Faso, local self-defense groups gained prominence amid state neglect and marginalizing them without inclusive reform often exacerbated violence (ICG 2020; Raineri 2021).

Recommendations

Immediate interventions must focus on institutionalising informal security actors, cutting off the financial engines of insecurity, and restoring minimal coordination along borderlands. The first step is to formalise hybrid security arrangements by registering community-based vigilante groups, subjecting them to human rights training, and placing them under civilian oversight. Nigeria's Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) offers a useful model, but it requires clear legal boundaries and a system of accountability to be viable beyond Maiduguri.

Equally urgent is the need to break the ransom economy. This requires region-wide legislative prohibitions on ransom payments, enforced through dedicated inter-agency task forces that bring together financial crime units, military investigators, and border patrol intelligence. Without dismantling the financial incentives driving transactional insecurity, vigilante and insurgent formations will remain financially self-sustaining.

In the short term, border surveillance should be decentralised and re-localised. Traditional rulers, community leaders, and vigilante actors—those who know the terrain—should be formally re-engaged through revitalised borderland committees. These structures can provide the foundation for immediate co-surveillance in flashpoint areas, especially if backed by biometric verification and basic digital tools for tracking cross-border movements.

Beyond emergency containment, efforts must shift to rebuilding the administrative and civic presence of the state in neglected regions. As the panel data confirms, the most intense insecurity aligns with areas long deprived of functional governance. Reinvestment in these peripheries should include rebuilding court systems, local government offices, public schools, and primary healthcare. This infrastructure must be anchored in a Lake Chad Regional Recovery Plan, jointly supported by national governments and donor agencies, to address both physical reconstruction and social trust repair.

In parallel, states must rethink their internal border governance frameworks. Current national borders often cut across ethnic-cultural corridors, undermining traditional mobility and dispute resolution systems. A more effective model would distinguish core geopolitical borders from culturally embedded corridors, allowing for more flexible, tiered approaches to surveillance and access control. This reconfiguration

should be supported by data harmonisation efforts across Lake Chad states, facilitated by ECOWAS and the African Union, to standardise records on border crossings, refugee flows, vigilante movements, and communal disputes.

Over the long term, a more fundamental transformation is required: a shift from militarised responses to people-centred security governance. At the regional level, this entails redefining the mandate of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC). Originally focused on ecological and economic issues, the LCBC must now evolve into a platform for security coordination. It should house a Regional Security Coordination Unit, tasked with maintaining a shared database of vigilante groups, tracking their leadership structures, territorial influence, and affiliations with formal or informal state actors.

To truly reverse the drivers of vigilantism, states must also rebuild the social contract of protection. This involves not only reintegrating vigilante actors through vocational training, psychosocial care, and civic education, but also restoring public confidence in the state's willingness and capacity to protect. Local peace committees, transitional justice platforms, and interfaith dialogue forums must be supported to reweave fragmented communities.

In sum, the rise of vigilante formations in the Lake Chad Basin reflects a broader collapse of institutional legitimacy and territorial governance. Responding to this requires more than tactical suppression—it demands a reconstruction of protection systems from the ground up. In the short term, containment and oversight; in the medium term, reconstruction and coordination; and in the long term, regional integration and the re-legitimation of state authority.

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