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Terrorism and Soft Power: Interrogation of the Clogs in the Wheels of Nigerian Efforts in Combating Terrorism

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Abstract

One of the major security challenges affecting both developed and developing countries alike is the issue of terrorism. In Africa, countries like Kenya, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria are facing terrorist attacks. Each of these countries also engages in seamless efforts to combat terrorism. Nigeria, in particular, has been facing terrorist attacks since 2009, when Boko Haram launched its first attacks. Since then, to date, a series of attacks, both large and small scale, has been mounted on innocent Nigerians. Successive governments have equally made concerted efforts to curb and combat terrorism in Nigeria. However, it seems those efforts have yielded little or no results. The perception in some quarters was that President Goodluck Jonathan did not do enough to fight against terror and that President Buhari, being a northerner and ex-serviceman, would do better. In fairness to him, he equally demonstrated more commitment to fighting these terrorists as he shifted military headquarters to Maiduguri. Despite all these, the situation still remains the same. Why is it difficult for Nigeria to get rid of terror despite efforts to do so? This study examines factors that serve as clogs in the wheel of Nigerian efforts to put an end to terrorism in Nigeria. The research adopts primary and secondary data with the use of interviews, textbooks, journals, online documents, and documentaries. It also adopts Protracted Social Conflict (PSC). The research finds that there are still socio-political and structural problems in Nigerian society that hinder all efforts to combat terrorism. The research recommends that the efforts to combat terrorism should not be concentrated only on the military approach, but must also involve a soft approach or the civil aspect of counterterrorism.

Keywords:

Media; Social Media; Nigeria; National Security.

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Introduction

Terrorism is an attack on innocent persons for the purpose of obtaining socio-political or economic gains. Many lives have been lost in developing and developed countries alike through terrorist attacks. Each state confronting the menace of terrorism equally frantically tries to put it under control. Developed countries have shown better capacity in curbing terrorism than developing countries. Perhaps it is partly because fighting terrorism requires financial commitment and because factors that trigger terrorism are more prominent in developing countries. For instance, America has shown a high level of capacity to prevent further terrorist attacks in America. Since the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and two other places, there have never been any major attacks. Similarly, Saudi Arabia, which is a middle-power country, equally demonstrated a high level of capacity. Therefore, since 12 May 2003, when there was a horrific coordinated suicide attack that killed 35 people by attacking three housing units in Riyadh, there have not been major terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Kenya suffered its worst terrorist attack in 2019 when al-Shabaab (AS) attacked the Dusit D2 hotel complex in Nairobi. The use of a suicide vest and the targeting of civilians were notable. However, the case in Nigeria is different, as terrorist attacks are unabated. In other words, the attacks are continual to date. In fact, it seems terrorists are challenging the capacity of Nigerian security.

Nigeria has not been able to curb terrorism. Of importance to note is that terrorism became a security challenge with the emergence of Boko Haram and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria. Boko Haram is an Islamic organization that has the name Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād. It means a group of the People of Sunnah for Dawah and Jihad. However, it became an insurgent group with a clash between the group and the Nigerian security forces in 2007. The government of Yaradua at the time cracked down on them, and their leader, Muhammad Yusff, was killed while in the custody of security men. The group retreated but regrouped in 2009. Since then, the group has become a self-proclaimed jihadist militant group based in northeastern Nigeria and also active in Chad, Niger, northern Cameroon, and Mali. In November 2013, the United States designated Boko Haram as a terrorist group. The group has claimed thousands of lives and properties of both Nigerians and foreigners.

Another terrorist group that has shaken Nigeria's security to its bone marrow is IPOB. This group was established in 2012 by Nnamdi Kanu. He also serves as one of the pioneer leaders of the group, while Uche Mefor is the deputy leader. IPOB is a separatist group, as it intends to re-establish the former Republic of Biafra. Biafra broke away from Nigeria in 1967 before the Nigerian Civil War and was disbanded after losing in 1970. Since IPOB was established, several lives have been lost to the attacks of this group. It not only targets Nigerian security and properties, but it also attacks civilians, especially those perceived to be working for the government or against their interests. For example, 30 people were killed on the Okigwe-Owerri

road in Imo State by IPOB gunmen ([Amnesty International 2025](#)). In a security report, it was noticed that “there is an increase in conflict and bloodshed. Once one of Nigeria’s more tranquil regions, the Southeast has seen an increase in violence. Given the increase in crime and security concerns in the area, the last several months have been terrible”. It was further said that, “in the first five months of 2021, 63 accidents were reported, resulting in about 254 fatalities. With 101 deaths, Ebonyi State led the incidence table, followed by Imo State with 60. 33 people died in Abia State, compared to 37 in Anambra State. With 22 fatalities, Enugu finished the table with the lowest mortality count” ([Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2025](#); [Nwagbo and Ofoke 2025](#)).

Terrorism in general has caused Nigeria a lot of havoc, which is not limited to loss of lives and properties, loss of respect, and a good image and dignity among the community of nations. This has discouraged and dragged both local and foreign investors away from Nigeria. Successive governments have tried to combat terrorism since its inception. For instance, President Musa Yar’Adua dealt decisively with Boko Haram and put them under control. However, it reappeared in 2009 when Yaradua was sick. The acting president at the moment, Goodluck Jonathan, equally confronted the group, but it seems the group was triumphant during his administration, as some local governments were under Boko Haram control. President Buhari, who came later, also made some efforts. He even shifted military commands to Maiduguri on the day he was sworn in. This shows his commitment to fighting against Boko Haram and other terrorist groups in the region. However, what could amaze observers and students of security and strategic studies is that terrorists are still successfully staging attacks not only on civilians but also on military bases. What could have been the reason for the inability to put terrorists under control? What are the clogs in the wheel of Nigerian counterterrorism efforts? These questions are begging for answers. This paper is an attempt to investigate reasons why terrorism, especially Boko Haram, has not yet been defeated despite the will to do so.

Theoretical framework

This paper makes use of Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) as a theoretical postulation. PSC was propounded by Edward Azar (1991). He links protracted violent conflicts within communal groups to their desperate need for necessities like acceptance, social recognition, and security. It also covers equitable involvement in the economy and access to political institutions. PSC theory opposes the idea that domestic and foreign politics are different and instead examines the interactions of intrastate players, including communities, tribes, and ethnic groupings. According to Agara and Ajisebiyawo (2017), a state’s function in the domestic connection between intrastate actors is to either please or frustrate them. This determines whether the state averts or encourages conflict.

Protracted Social Conflict theory focuses on intra-state relationships between major actors, with Azar (1986, 1990) identifying four major variables: community

content, deprivation of human needs, governance and state role, and international linkages. Disarticulation between states and racial, religious, ethnic, and cultural groups can promote tense conflicts. Deprivation of human needs, failure to address grievances, and rigid authority structures can lead to protracted social conflicts. International connections influence the formation of domestic social and political institutions and the role of the state. Agara and Ajisebiyawo (2017) trace protracted social conflict to past experiences, fear, and belief, as well as experiences from other states. Antagonistic actions are often seen as threatening, shrinking the space for compromise and accommodation.

Protracted social conflict is appropriate for the study, especially if we are to understand why terrorism exists and persists in Nigeria. Communal content and deprivation of human needs assumptions shall apprise us of why there are protracted conflicts in the northeastern part of Nigeria and give reasons why Nigerian efforts have not yet finally put an end to terrorism despite international support and the federal government and state governments' concerted efforts.

Methodology

We chose to use a qualitative type of research. It relies heavily on qualitative information, which is devoid of numeric figures and other statistical tools. It, however, makes use of both the primary and secondary methods of data gathering. For primary data, interviews are adopted to inquire about necessary information from experts in peace and conflict, residents of the affected area, soldiers who participated in Operation Lafia Dole, and workers of NGOs working in the affected areas of northeastern states, especially Borno and Yobe. Secondary data were sourced through textbooks, journals, online documents, and documentaries. The paper uses content analysis to analyze both primary and secondary data.

Results and Discussions

In reaction to the above question, the interviewees were emphatic that these boil down to a series of factors. According to Professor Tajudeen Akanji, Director of the Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria is facing serious challenges in fighting terrorism because of an inadequate legal framework. He explained that Nigeria's legal framework system is lopsided and cumbersome to the extent that there is a lacuna in the legal framework. He cited the example of the litigation problem, that it is not clear yet whether the trial of the suspected Boko Haram members arrested is a duty of the federal government or the state government. Akanji laments that "if it is a federal government exclusive, there are not enough courts to try these accused within a reasonable time. Furthermore, a special court has not been created to fast-track the process. And if the trial is the responsibility of state governments, states in Nigeria have little capacity to try them successfully. Not only that, are you aware that some of these accused were brought to Lagos for detention and trial? In the North, the legal framework is the Penal Code,

while in the South it is the Criminal Code. Which of these legal frameworks do the states want to prosecute them with?” (Interview conducted with Professor Tajudeen Akanji on May 11, 2021). This report corroborated the findings of Human Rights Watch (2018), which also lamented the flawed trials of Boko Haram suspects.

Another identified reason for Nigeria’s inability to curb terrorism is the problem with the structure of Nigerian security or security architecture. Professor Akanji (2021) maintained that there is a gap between the Office of National Security Adviser (ONSA) and the Chief of Army Staff. The ONSA to the President is situated under the President’s Office, but the office is not so recognized by the military as expected of them. This, according to Professor Akanji, has led to the inability of ONSA to be able to coordinate the implementation of the counterterrorism strategy. He explained further that what really played out in the field was that the military had direct contact with the president, and they gave little or no recognition to ONSA. As such, the efforts have little or no monitoring; rather, all the components that are supposed to work together in fighting against terror only work haphazardly.

The aforementioned issue was linked to a lack of cooperation among government agencies in charge of fighting against terrorists. Specifically, security agencies such as the army, police, customs, and immigration officers, as well as the civilian Joint Task Force (JTF), are not working in unison. There was little or no sharing of intelligent information. This lack of cooperation was also noticed between the military and civilians or natives. People did not give much cooperation to the MJTF, partly because of religious affinity and partly because of a lack of trust in modern government, having failed in the provision of means of livelihood for them over the years. There are even cases of giving terrorists intelligent information about Nigerian troops. Recent complaints of soldiers testify to this assertion (Ezinwa and Agbani 2020).

An additional factor militating against the war on terrorism is Nigeria’s economic issues, as explained by Professor Tajudeen Akanji (2021). He lamented that to fight against terrorists, as is expected, requires spending an exorbitant amount of money. In developed economies like America and Britain, it is easier to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism as prescribed by the first pillar of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Strategy (United Nations 2014). Unlike the American counter-terrorism strategy in Afghanistan, which consisted of combating the Taliban and feeding the masses, particularly the Northern Alliance, which provided American troops with support against their adversary, the situation in Nigeria was not the same (Relief Web 2001). Foods were not following the bullets, and this is not unconnected with the economic status of Nigeria. “Similarly, combating terrorists is expensive. Is it the building capacity of the military and other agencies that we would talk about? All are money-consuming”. Prof. Akanji and Dr. Raji lamented.

Explaining why it is that terrorism has not yet been curbed in Nigeria despite the will to do so, Prof. Akanji believes that there are a lot of things we have not addressed,

and until we address them, terrorism cannot be defeated. Those things are economic problems, bad governance, the elimination of the middle class, and human rights abuses. This position is supported by the work of Emmanuel (2021). Akanji equally laments that the kinetic approach in fighting against terrorists is just a reactionary measure to counter terrorism and that there is a need for the government to address eight pillars of peace: low level of corruption, sound business environment, efficient and well-functioning government, equitable distribution of resources, free flow of information, acceptance of the rights of others, high level of human capital, and good relations with labor, etc. (Vision of Humanity 2022).

There is a document called the National Counterterrorism Strategy (NACTEST). There is little awareness about the document and what it contains. Professor Akanji lamented that a lot of stakeholders who actually have roles to play in the implementation of NACTEST are not aware of it, let alone know their expected roles. He said he even interacted with members of the National Assembly and some House of Assembly Committee Members on National Security. They admitted their innocence regarding the document. Dr. Raji Shittu also seconded this view that the government is not doing enough to bring on board all stakeholders in the fight against terrorism. Dr. Raji emphasized that the government appears to prioritize the military approach over other aspects of counter-terrorism. He also added that the government has not been able to properly define who the terrorists are and what they really want because people are still mixing up the issue of terrorism with all other security issues in Nigeria. He lamented that this is the reason some people are comparing the terrorists with the Niger Delta militants, bandits, ritualists, and armed robbers. Dr. Raji Shittu took a theoretical approach as well. He explained that there are some theories that try to show the importance of a non-military approach. Social theory, for instance, tells us the importance of bringing in more people to participate in counter-terrorism. The structural theory of terrorism also explains that the way a society is structured determines the nature of the crisis it experiences. An unjust society can only bring about violence, and vice versa. Biological theory also explains that human beings need guidance and counselors, and if this is not done, there is a likelihood for such human beings to be wicked. Therefore, we need religious leaders and counselors to talk to youths to deradicalize them. The work of Associate Professor Raji Shittu corroborates his stand here (Shittu, et al. 2021).

In the view of Anonymous 1 (a Nigerian soldier who participated in Operation Lafia Dole between 2015 and 2019), he lamented that the Nigerian army, in particular, and Nigerian forces are trying their best, but the onus is in the hands of politicians. He buttressed his point by saying that the government controls the force; therefore, the government's readiness to curb terrorism would greatly determine the role of the forces and their performance. Therefore, there is a need for politicians to be more committed to the counter-terrorism crusade.

Like the reports of Segun and Segun (2024) and Bolaji (2025), Anonymous 1 explained further that another factor affecting the efforts of counter-terrorism is

the role of saboteurs among security forces. "These traitors relate information to the terrorists before an attack is made. Thus, this does not make our efforts to be successful" (Anonymous 1). Dr. Sarafa Ganiyu (a lecturer and a resident of Yola, Adamawa State) shared the same view. He explained that the choice of the Chief of Army Staff is always politicized, which always causes grudges among the military and, in turn, makes some soldiers justify their acts. Saboteurs are not only among Nigeria's forces but also among foreign forces. Anonymous 1 accused Chadian soldiers of aiding some terrorists. He explained:

After the creation of MJTF, Nigerian soldiers and other forces from Niger and Chad fought on the same line against Boko Haram under the command of the Nigerian commandant, but suddenly, Chadian soldiers withdrew from this cooperation and decided to guard their borders. Henceforth, attacks by Boko Haram took another dimension, causing devastation in the struggle against the terrorists. (Anonymous 1, a Nigerian soldier who participated in Operation Lafia Dole between 2015 and 2019).

Closely related to the above point is that the masses are not also helpful. Dr. Sarafa Ganiyu was the sole respondent who held this viewpoint. He believed that some civilians were harboring terrorists in their midst. According to him, some communities give intelligence to terrorists against the military. This makes it difficult for the military to overcome the terrorists. Another dimension of the role of the masses is the polarization between political parties and religions. Some people in the Northeast have supported either the ruling or opposition parties at some point. This, to some extent, determines their support for the government and military against the terrorists. Religion is another dividing factor. Dr. Sarafa Ganiyu considers that some see fighting against terrorists as a war against Islam. Consequently, they give little or no support to the government.

Another factor responsible for terrorism's failure to be curbed in Nigeria is the politicization of everything in Nigeria, including insecurity. Dr. Sarafa Ganiyu (a lecturer and a resident of Yola, Adamawa State) raised this point and explained that even right from the beginning of the Boko Haram menace, political parties have been pointing accusing fingers at one another. He said President Jonathan, ab initio, accused President Buhari and CPC of being responsible for their attacks to make the country ungovernable for him. It took time before he took them seriously. So, the same President Buhari did not believe that the PDP was behind the re-emergence of terrorists and all other insecurities in Nigeria. Similarly, political parties and religions divide the military. Prof. Akanji also seconded this view that politicians always look for one way or another to discredit one another. Therefore, the persistence of terrorism in Nigeria is not unconnected with the plots of politicians.

Anonymous 1 equally complained about the level of equipment that they were/are using. He protested about the fact that Nigerian soldiers are still using those old weapons used by the 1963 N.A., which was *Fabrique Nationale Herstal*, self-identified

as FN Herstal or simply FN. This personal weapon, according to him, does not work well during the rainy season or if it is affected by dust, unlike the AK-47, which is water-resistant and could be used anywhere, everywhere, and in any condition, even inside water. He explained further that the FN has a capacity of firing 20 rounds, but if it is affected by water or dust, it would be difficult for it to complete this process. Dr. Raji Shittu also corroborated the fact that there is a crisis of sufficient and adequate equipment for Nigerian soldiers. He equally added that they do not have enough equipment for intelligent gathering.

On the issue of collaboration among the forces in Nigeria, scholars have different views. Prof. Akanji was of the opinion that they are not doing well at all. He buttressed his position with the fact that each force is now taking credit for a job well done. He cited the example of the police and the Department of State Security (DSS), which would be looking for the same criminal but would find it difficult to share intelligence information with each other. Prof. Akanji believes that this is happening among the forces fighting against terrorism in Nigeria and is greatly affecting their performance. Professor Akanji's position is supported by reports from government officials, including President Isamotu I. (2024) and Nwachukwu J. O. (2024).

Contrary to this view, the soldier interviewed (Anonymous 1) answered in the affirmative. He stated that they had real relationships and collaboration with other forces such as police, customs, immigration officers, and so on. He cited cases when customs would discover some terrorist camps, and they would notify them for prompt action. He equally added that they shared intelligence with one another and that there was also collaboration between land, air force, and naval officers. Closely related to the above is the collaboration with other countries. Dr. Raji Shittu argued that Nigeria is doing great in this area. "You will be hearing from MJTF, which is a collaboration between Nigerian forces and their laboring states in fighting terrorism." States like Chad, Niger, and Cameroon are cooperative with Nigeria. The US is also helpful. The only challenge in getting US assistance is the issue of human rights violations. Once that is improved, the US is ready to improve its support in fighting terrorism" (Dr. Raji Shittu).

Moreover, apart from the points raised by interviewees above, the submission of Mr. Ibrahim Jumu'at (a staff member of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), a non-governmental organization taking care of victims of terrorism in the North-East) is that terrorism and counter-terrorism have been turned into a business. Terrorists have seen it as a means of livelihood. Some youths have seen the government as unserious, only ready to take care of them when they engage in violence. The same is true of so-called counterterrorism. He lamented that those stakeholders in counterterrorism have turned it into a business, which they would never expect to come to an end. He explained further that the government would not like it to end because of the money the government is gaining from NGOs that pay exorbitant amounts of money in taxes to the government. This money is

likely realizable from companies' taxes or otherwise. The military, too, would prefer to keep the war going because of the special benefits some stakeholders among the military enjoy from the war. Only young military men are suffering and dying from the process. Communities are also benefiting from the process. While some are collaborating with the terrorists and getting richer from the process, others are benefiting from the government for empowerment or from NGOs for empowerment or employment. These people see the crisis as beneficial to them, and it must not just end so soon.

From the points raised by scholars and stakeholders in the war on terrorism, one could conclude that terrorism is yet to be put under control in Nigeria, unlike America and European countries, because there are still legal, economic, social, political, and structural problems in Nigerian society; a gap between the office of NSA and the military; the government concentrated more on the military approach and neglected the civil aspect of counterterrorism; there are many saboteurs among the soldiers; equipment used in fighting terrorism is inadequate and substandard; and stakeholders have turned counterterrorism into business.

Conclusion and recommendations

As soon as terrorism emerged, the counterterrorism strategy equally emerged. The global war on terrorism started in recent times in the United States after the attacks on the World Trade Center. Both developed countries like Britain and developing countries like Kenya are making efforts to fight against terror. Nigeria equally swung into action and demonstrated its commitment to putting an end to terrorism. Several efforts were put in place, ranging from police actions and reactions to military involvement in operations, joint task forces among Nigerian forces, and collaboration with other states in the neighborhood. NACTEST was also launched in 2016 by President Muhammadu Buhari and was given the political will it deserves. This is noticed from his body language and policies, and his command to shift the army headquarters to Maiduguri. Despite these efforts, the menace of terrorism persists. This paper has investigated the possible factors responsible for these challenges.

From our findings, Nigerian counter terrorism efforts are as effective as its capabilities as a developing country. It has successfully uprooted the terrorists from areas they had previously occupied. It has also succeeded in sending them away from Sambisa Forest. However, terrorists are still engaging in guerrilla war. They have also resorted to kidnapping, suicide bombing, and sporadic attacks. These attacks have challenged the earlier victory announced by the government. Could we just say that the defeat of terrorist Boko Haram declared by the previous government and the recent one is not sustainable? This problem of unsustainability is not unconnected with the following challenges: firstly, there is a fundamental problem of dichotomy between the office of the National Security Adviser and the military. This gap really created a

vacuum in the efficient fight against terrorists. Secondly, corruption, which has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerians, is still reflected in the fight against terrorism in Nigeria. It has been discovered from the work that many stakeholders have turned war against terrorists into a business. Literature consulted, and all the interviewees unanimously identified corruption as a major reason for the persistence of terrorism in Nigeria. Be they military, politicians, contractors, or civil societies, many of them were suspected of being guilty of this menace. Also, some interviewees identified equipment. Soldiers who were interviewed stressed the role of insufficient and substandard weapons in reversing the victory over the terrorists. Another challenge is that the terrorist outfit had changed from local to international as they had connected with other international terrorist groups in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, the Nigerian government should strengthen its strategy in the area of collaboration with other states since the level of Nigerian cooperation with other nations determines its level of achievement. Moreover, there is a challenge of inadequacy in the provision of needed social amenities, which could assist in curbing crime in the affected part of Nigeria. Only the stability of the electricity supply can go a long way to combat terrorism and crime-related issues. Next is the nature of the socio-political and economic structure of the country, which was also identified by scholars who were interviewed and some literature. In tandem with Protracted Social Conflict, it has been argued that terrorism triumphs in an unjust environment. Finally, it has been mentioned that many Nigerians are not patriotic enough to fight against terrorism, as some still connive with them against the Nigerian state; even some security men are not exonerated from this heinous act.

Since terrorism is a social menace, scholars have argued that it can never be eradicated. However, it could be curbed if adequate steps are taken. Hence, this paper recommends that corruption should be reduced to a minimum in Nigeria. It is often said that either we kill corruption or we allow corruption to ruin our dear nation. Before corruption finally ruins this country, it is better to be controlled. Since the impact of corruption on keeping terrorism flourishing is high, there is a need to curb corruption to allow for curbing terrorism as well. The lamentation of the military and all other concerned Nigerians is the state of weapons being used by Nigerian forces, while terrorists use superior weapons. It is therefore needed to recommend the provision of necessary equipment for the MJTF so that this war can end as soon as possible. The world has become a global village. This fact has been exploited by the terrorists by networking with other terrorist groups in the world. What then disturbs Nigeria to also form alliances with other nation-states in the world to end this menace? Cooperation with foreign countries in terms of intelligent information sharing, training, and strategy, and access to modern equipment should form the basis for the cooperation.

Fighting terrorism is quite expensive; hence, there is a need to seek financial support from the United Nations and developed countries as well. In advanced countries where crime and terrorism are adequately combated, there are adequate social

amenities. These amenities make it easy for them to detect crime and criminals at ease. The provision of needed social amenities in Nigeria will go a long way to curb terrorism in Nigeria. These amenities include, but are not limited to availability of good roads, electricity, crime-detecting gadgets, satellites, etc. A good road, for instance, can make road users move at a speed that could ensure their safety. Restructuring the socio-political and economic structure of the country is another crucial suggestion. Nigeria's structure presently is made in such a way that few benefit from the wealth of the country. There is an urgent need to restructure Nigeria to allow for even development. Resources in the nation are more than enough to cater to everyone's needs if properly managed. Then the idea of using youths for political gains and afterward dumping them should stop. The political structure should be restructured in such a way that people's mandate is not robbed by desperate politicians, as is shown in the formation of Boko Haram. Reorientation for people to be patriotic should be taken with high esteem. The above point has made some people feel unpatriotic. It is quite disheartening that some Nigerians still act as saboteurs, giving terrorists information about Nigerian soldiers' movements. This is a high-level unpatriotic act. This has to change. The issue of reorientation has to be total and general since this ailment is felt all around the country. Vandalization of the state's properties, killing of security men, and agitation for separation and secession are all products of a lack of patriotism and loyalty to the Nigerian state. Finally, there is a need for total compliance with global templates, especially in the area of human rights. The reason is that no one could have any justification to perpetrate any terrorist act in the future.

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Complex vs. Complicated Systems in the Social Network HUMINT Arena

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Abstract

Understanding Human Intelligence (HUMINT) within the context of social networks requires a clear distinction between Complicated and Complex systems. Complicated systems are predictable, decomposable, and governed by linear relationships. Complex systems, by contrast, are adaptive, nonlinear, and characterized by emergent behaviors that cannot be fully anticipated.

This paper argues that clandestine and illicit networks—such as terrorist cells, insurgent groups, and criminal syndicates—function as Complex adaptive systems rather than merely complicated organizations. These systems challenge conventional intelligence methodologies because they can absorb disruption, self-organize, and continuously adapt to changing circumstances. Applying complexity thinking can enable HUMINT professionals to detect potential shifts, exploit vulnerabilities, and navigate uncertainty more effectively. The paper ultimately contends that embracing complexity is essential to enhancing HUMINT's effectiveness within dynamic and unpredictable social network environments.

Keywords:

Complex Adaptive Systems; Complicated Systems; HUMINT;
Social Networks; Counterintelligence.

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Introduction

Human Intelligence (HUMINT) remains one of the most vital and enduring methods of information collection. Despite the technological revolutions of the 20th and 21st centuries, such as satellite imagery, signals, and artificial intelligence, HUMINT continues to provide unparalleled access to human behavior, motivation, and trust (Clark 2014; Miller 2022). However, the environments in which HUMINT operates are increasingly shaped by social networks (Kanellopoulos 2025). These networks may be physical, grounded in family ties, tribal affiliations, clandestine cells, or insurgent groups, or they may be digital, formed through encrypted platforms, online forums, and global communication infrastructures (Sterelny 2007).

Analysts and practitioners need clear conceptual frameworks to distinguish between systems that are merely Complicated and those that are genuinely Complex in order to operate effectively in such environments (Menkveld 2021). While Complicated systems may appear intricate, they remain fundamentally mechanical, capable of being mapped, decomposed, and addressed through linear analysis. Complex systems, by contrast, are defined by feedback, emergence, and adaptability, meaning their behaviors cannot be understood simply by examining their constituent parts (Lahneman 2010). This distinction is not just theoretical; it has practical implications for how intelligence officers perceive and interact with human networks.

This paper presents a literature review and synthesis of ideas drawn from intelligence studies, systems theory, and social network analysis so as to examine how the Complicated/Complex distinction influences HUMINT practice. It highlights the aspects where traditional approaches remain effective and where they fall short, based on existing research. Furthermore, it demonstrates how adopting complexity thinking can foster greater stability and effectiveness in intelligence operations. The paper argues that HUMINT officers should move beyond mechanistic metaphors and instead adopt methodologies that view human networks as dynamic, adaptive, and emergent systems, best approached through iterative, flexible, and holistic engagement.

Complicated Systems: Linear but Intricate

Complicated systems can be difficult to comprehend, yet their behavior remains largely predictable. They consist of numerous interdependent components, each performing a specific function, with interactions that are primarily linear and governed by established rules (Kravtsov and Kadtko 1996; Sitte 2009). This principle is most evident in classical engineering. For instance, an aircraft engine comprises thousands of precisely aligned parts that must work together seamlessly to operate correctly. Similarly, modern computer systems integrate hardware and software into

intricate yet comprehensible architectures. Though complicated in construction, such systems can be disassembled, analyzed, and reassembled through systematic procedures that almost always restore functionality. Errors in these systems are rarely mysterious; rather, they can typically be traced to identifiable components. Diagnostic tests allow these issues to be located, repaired, and verified against predefined performance standards. This capacity for restoration illustrates the linear causality inherent in Complicated systems: when a component fails, the system's underlying rules remain unchanged, only its temporary performance is affected (Prencipe, Davies, and Hobday 2003; Huang, Darrin, and Knuth 2012).

This conceptual reasoning is commonly applied to human networks in intelligence operations. Analysts and practitioners have frequently considered clandestine organizations as mechanistic entities: frameworks that, once delineated, could be systematically deconstructed by pinpointing pivotal nodes and removing key individuals. The fundamental assumption is that the isolation or elimination of "high-value targets" would trigger a series of disturbances that would destabilize the entire network (Magee 2010). This kind of mechanistic thinking could be encountered in both HUMINT and Counterintelligence operations. For example, Western intelligence agencies have often designed campaigns around leadership decapitation strategies, whereas state-run services, such as the Russian security apparatus, have historically planned HUMINT operations in a mechanistic manner, assuming a direct and predictable relationship between command decisions and operational execution (Anderson 2007).

Eventually, it is important not to underestimate the value of this approach. By interpreting networks as Complicated systems, intelligence personnel can impose analytical order on uncertain and opaque environments. This paradigm has given rise to tools such as link analysis, network mapping, and computational prioritization techniques, which allow practitioners to systematically visualize relational structures, rank stakeholders by relevance, and identify potential vulnerabilities (Strang 2014). Such methods can yield valuable insights and practical advantages, particularly within highly hierarchical organizations such as bureaucracies, traditional militaries, or doctrinally uniform groups. However, when applied to covert or illicit networks, this mechanistic paradigm reveals significant limitations. Human systems are adaptive, creative, and self-directed; they do not operate as inert, rule-bound mechanisms like engines or computers. When a leader is removed, a successor often emerges; when communication channels are disrupted, actors devise new methods of coordination; and when infiltration occurs, relational trust is recalibrated to mitigate future risk. The central risk lies in assuming that meticulous mapping equates to comprehensive control. Overreliance on mechanistic metaphors can foster overconfidence and strategies that fail under the pressures of human adaptability.

Complex Systems: Adaptive, Emergent, and Resilient

In Complex systems, behavior arises from the often-unpredictable interactions among individual components rather than from the mere sum of those components ([Bishop and Silberstein 2019](#); [Gao and Xu 2021](#)). A single act of betrayal, a shift in resource allocation, or even a minor rumor can propagate through the entire network, triggering cascading effects disproportionate to the original cause. Consequently, Complex systems are inherently dynamic, resistant to direct control, and they defy explanation through reductionist frameworks ([Taleb 2007](#); [Kamensky 2011](#); [Zuccaro, De Gregorio, and Leone 2018](#)).

Human networks exemplify these complex dynamics. Unlike fixed hierarchies, such networks are in constant flux, adapting to external pressures such as surveillance, infiltration, and disruption. Leadership within them is seldom stable; authority often shifts in response to situational demands. When crises arise, a charismatic individual may emerge to unify the group, whereas during periods of stability, leadership may devolve to those with specialized expertise ([Taleb 2016](#)). Moreover, clandestine networks often fragment under threat, yet these fragments rarely vanish. Instead, they reorganize into new configurations, enhancing their resilience and redundancy ([Kanellopoulos 2024a, 2024b](#)). This behavior mirrors that of ecological systems, where disruption does not necessarily precipitate collapse but can instead drive adaptation and renewal ([Gharajedaghi 2011](#); [Arthur 2023](#)).

Moreover, feedback loops further intensify these dynamics. In clandestine environments, information flows, whether accurate or deliberately deceptive, have recursive effects on the system. A mere rumor of betrayal can fracture alliances, while shared successes can reinforce trust and solidarity. Conversely, failed operations or poorly calibrated intelligence interventions may be interpreted as signs of external hostility, thereby strengthening group cohesion rather than weakening it. Such recursive processes alter network trajectories in ways that render linear prediction impossible, producing conditions where small perturbations can yield disproportionate and unforeseen outcomes ([Clark 2025](#)). Thus, the expansion of cyberspace has compounded the complexity of HUMINT environments. Intelligence activities now unfold within nonlinear and self-adaptive digital ecosystems marked by high degrees of resilience and fluidity ([Gilad 2021](#); [Alberti and Belfanti 2023](#); [Broeders 2024](#)). Encrypted communication channels, platform migration, and transnational online communities create dynamic conditions in which disruption is rarely permanent. The integration of artificial intelligence adds another layer of complexity, enabling adversaries to devise novel methods of communication, recruitment, and surveillance, while simultaneously transforming how intelligence is collected, processed, and analyzed ([Moran, Burton, and Christou 2023](#)).

HUMINT in the Social Network Arena

HUMINT is inherently relational, embedded within networks of trust, loyalty, obligation, and manipulation that shape the behavior of both individuals and collectives. Every act of recruitment, infiltration, or influence takes place within networks that are not static but continuously evolve in response to external pressures and internal dynamics. Unlike technical intelligence disciplines that rely on discrete data points, HUMINT depends on the fluid and adaptive structure of human relationships ([Barnea 2019](#)).

In contemporary practice, HUMINT officers must operate across both physical and digital domains, each characterized by distinct complexities and constraints. Physical networks, such as those comprising tribal elders, insurgent cells, or organized crime groups, are often rooted in kinship, cultural codes of honor, and enduring historical ties ([Kanellopoulos 2023](#)). Recruitment within these contexts cannot be understood as an isolated individual transaction; rather, the defection or cooperation of a single actor reverberates through broader relational structures, influencing patterns of trust, suspicion, and cohesion. A compromised individual may provoke resistance, trigger retaliation, or activate mechanisms of social sanction at the familial or communal level ([Serscikov 2024](#)). Historical examples underscore the resilience of such systems. The foreign intelligence service of the German Democratic Republic, for instance, demonstrated how HUMINT architectures grounded in relational networks could sustain operational capacity under continuous external pressure, highlighting the adaptability inherent in socially embedded intelligence frameworks ([Kanellopoulos 2025](#); [Maddrell 2025](#)).

Subsequently, cultural dynamics further complicate HUMINT operations. In paternalistic or gender-stratified societies, the participation of female intelligence professionals has proven essential for accessing networks that would otherwise remain closed to male operatives, thereby broadening the range of actionable opportunities and deepening the sophistication of engagement ([Lau and Bauer 2022](#)). These dynamics underscore that the effectiveness of HUMINT is inseparable from its cultural context, co-produced by the prevailing norms, hierarchies, and symbolic structures of the operational environment. In addition, the rise of the digital realm amplifies these challenges by introducing additional layers of fluidity and redundancy. Online extremist forums, encrypted communication platforms, and transnational communities linked through diasporas exhibit remarkable resilience, rapidly reconstituting after disruption by migrating to alternative or more secure digital spaces ([Broeders 2024](#)). For HUMINT practitioners, effective digital operations require the cultivation of credible virtual identities, sustained immersion in closed online networks, and continuous monitoring of evolving narratives and allegiances. The convergence of online and offline identities further demands adaptive strategies capable of functioning within hybrid spaces, where

digital discourse, physical action, and interpersonal trust intersect and mutually reinforce one another.

Applying Complexity Thinking to HUMINT

To effectively apply complexity thinking in HUMINT, it is crucial to move beyond linear and reductionist approaches and adopt frameworks that account for the unpredictable, adaptive, and emergent properties of human networks. Traditional paradigms often suggest that covert organizations can be dismantled by targeting key individuals or disrupting communication nodes, based on a mechanistic view of causality. Complexity thinking challenges this assumption by emphasizing four interrelated dynamic processes: emergence, adaptation, resilience, and feedback loops, which collectively illuminate the behavior of networks under stress and intervention.

Emergence emphasizes the unpredictable appearance of new structures, leaders, or tactical innovations within clandestine settings. Leadership vacuums rarely persist; instead, they often give rise to unexpected leaders whose legitimacy derives not from formal hierarchy, but from charisma, ideological commitment, or control over exclusive resources ([Carnabuci, Emery, and Brinberg 2018](#); [Clark 2025](#)). For HUMINT professionals, this necessitates an analytical approach that goes beyond traditional command structures, seeking out cultural, symbolic, or relational indicators that may signal the consolidation of new authority ([Coulson 2025](#)).

Adaptation highlights the learning capacity of illicit networks. Operational setbacks, such as failed infiltrations, disrupted nodes, or exposed recruitment pipelines, rarely bring activity to a halt. Rather, they prompt the network to adopt countermeasures designed to mitigate future vulnerabilities ([Catanese, et al. 2016](#); [Bright, Koskinen, and Malm 2018](#)). These may include more stringent vetting processes, the implementation of encrypted communication tools, or the redistribution of trust and authority within the network. Every HUMINT intervention thus produces second-order effects, reshaping the adversary's risk calculus and influencing its future actions ([Stottlemyre 2024](#)).

Resilience refers to the ability of networks to reorganize and persist in the face of significant disruption ([Holling 1973](#)). After decapitation strikes, terrorist groups often fragment into smaller cells, which later recombine in new configurations, typically increasing their agility and reducing their detectability. Similarly, criminal organizations displaced by law enforcement frequently relocate across borders, using diasporic ties to maintain illicit operations ([Duxbury and Haynie 2019](#); [Cavallaro, et al. 2020](#)). For HUMINT officers, this necessitates continuous monitoring, as disruption tends to redistribute, rather than eliminate, adversarial capabilities.

Feedback loops capture the recursive and sometimes paradoxical effects of HUMINT interventions. Information, whether disinformation, selective leaks, or rumors, does not spread linearly within a network; it interacts with preexisting rivalries, suspicions, and narratives. A campaign designed to fragment a group might unintentionally strengthen its cohesion in response to an external threat (Kis 2023). Conversely, a strategically placed rumor may destabilize trust and accelerate internal conflicts. Effective HUMINT requires an acute awareness of second- and third-order effects, with interventions rigorously tested against multiple potential outcomes.

Practical Implications for Intelligence Practice

Recognizing social networks as Complex, rather than merely Complicated, these systems represent a fundamental shift in how HUMINT is conceptualized and executed. Within this framework, recruitment, disruption, analysis, and training can no longer be treated as discrete, linear tasks; instead, they must be understood as adaptive, iterative processes embedded within dynamic and evolving environments.

Recruitment strategies must move beyond the reductionist assumption that individuals can be isolated from their relational context. Every potential source exists within interconnected webs of kinship, ideological alignment, economic dependence, and reputational obligation. Persuading a target to cooperate is not an isolated act of negotiation but an intervention within a broader social matrix (Kanellopoulos 2025). When one person agrees to cooperate, it can trigger ripple effects within family structures, raise suspicions in clandestine groups, or destabilize already fragile trust networks. Effective recruitment, therefore, requires systematic mapping of relational dependencies, anticipation of second- and third-order effects, and, in many cases, the cultivation of tacit acceptance or tolerance from broader kinship or community structures.

Disruption strategies also need recalibration. Approaches based on targeting individual nodes—such as the leader of a terrorist cell, the financier of a trafficking network, or the patriarch of a clan—often assume that the removal of a central actor will lead to systemic collapse. In practice, however, such interventions frequently trigger succession processes, producing replacements who may be more radical, adaptive, or operationally competent. HUMINT operations are therefore most effective when integrated into broader, multi-layered strategies, including psychological operations to erode morale, disinformation campaigns to sow doubt and fragmentation, and protracted engagements designed to gradually weaken cohesion. The goal is not a decisive rupture but the continuous shaping of internal dynamics to push networks toward fragmentation, vulnerability, or eventual strategic irrelevance (Sargut and McGrath 2011).

Analysis must also shift from static to dynamic assessments. While conventional network charts and link analysis provide useful snapshots of relational ties, they quickly lose relevance in adaptive environments. Complexity thinking necessitates monitoring the flows of trust, influence, and loyalty over time, incorporating iterative assessment cycles that account for shifting allegiances, emergent leaders, and hidden brokers. In this model, HUMINT becomes a recursive feedback system, where each intervention generates data and alters the environment in ways that require constant reassessment.

Training and doctrine must institutionalize an understanding of complexity. Intelligence officers need to approach networks through the lenses of nonlinearity, feedback loops, and emergent behaviors, rather than just mechanical outcomes. This requires a pedagogical approach that combines theoretical instruction with scenario-based experiential learning, immersing practitioners in environments where minor interventions produce disproportionate consequences, alliances shift unpredictably, and outcomes defy linear causality (Stacey 2001). Such training fosters agility, resilience, and humility—key attributes for navigating the uncertainty and unpredictability inherent in HUMINT operations within Complex social networks.

Key Takeaways: Navigating Complexity in HUMINT for Enhanced Efficacy

The distinction between Complicated and Complex systems is not merely semantic; it represents a fundamental conceptual divide with profound and lasting implications for HUMINT practice. When clandestine or illicit networks are viewed through the lens of complication, analysts and practitioners often prioritize structural mapping, the identification of key nodes, and the targeted removal of high-value individuals. These strategies are appealing because they offer analytic clarity, measurable results, and a sense of operational control. However, this mechanistic logic oversimplifies the complexities of human systems. Social networks are not rigid machines made of interchangeable parts; they are dynamic communities shaped by cultural contexts, human relationships, and evolving motivations. While a Complicated systems approach may yield tactical successes—such as the arrest of a leader or the disruption of communication channels—these interventions often fail to create lasting degradation. Instead, networks typically reconstitute, shift allegiances, or, paradoxically, emerge strengthened by disruption.

Complexity-informed approaches require a fundamental rethinking of HUMINT practice. Instead of focusing solely on the static structure of networks, complexity thinking highlights the nonlinear interactions, feedback processes, and emergent behaviors that influence outcomes. This approach demands an interpretive mindset, sensitive to cultural cues, adaptive behaviors, and recursive effects

that cannot be captured by static diagrams or linear models of causality. From this perspective, HUMINT practitioners must recognize that outcomes arise probabilistically, not with certainty. For example, the removal of a node might lead to fragmentation in one case, but catalyze consolidation in another. Similarly, disinformation may undermine trust among adversaries or, conversely, strengthen solidarity in response to an external threat. Complexity thinking equips intelligence professionals to anticipate diverse outcomes, introduce flexibility into planning, and view interventions as ongoing engagements rather than one-time actions.

Moreover, complexity thinking underscores the temporal dimension of these systems. Effects are rarely immediate; they unfold over extended time frames, requiring continuous observation, adaptive recalibration, and a tolerance for uncertainty. HUMINT officers must, therefore, evolve from roles as mere collectors or disruptors to positions of cultural interpreters and relational brokers, adept at detecting subtle shifts in trust, sentiment, and morale that signal potential structural changes. In the modern operational landscape—where adversaries increasingly exploit decentralized digital platforms, hybrid organizational forms, and transnational networks—linear methods of analysis and intervention are insufficient. HUMINT’s success depends on embracing complexity as a core principle, fostering adaptability, resilience, and humility in navigating uncertainty. Ultimately, the future of HUMINT lies not in treating networks as puzzles to be solved definitively, but as living systems to be understood, influenced, and carefully navigated. By adopting complexity-informed tools such as network theory, systems thinking, scenario modeling, and adaptive feedback, intelligence agencies can remain responsive to the unpredictable realities of modern conflict and security competition.

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Social Media communication practices at war: A tactics comparative analysis between the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

Social Media has ingrained itself into daily life by enabling connections and providing a range of viewpoints on world affairs. Additionally, Social Media platforms are said to be crucial in influencing public opinion regarding conflicts due to their ability to mould and sway public opinion. In light of current events surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since October 7, 2023, this article focuses on how platforms like X/Twitter and TikTok have impacted public perceptions. Further, based on the literature references, we qualitatively examine the dissemination of fake news and the conduct of propaganda, which are tactics frequently employed strategically to advance particular narratives and political agendas. A detailed analysis of how the Israeli government and Hamas utilize Social Media to influence public opinion demonstrates the broader influence of disinformation on global politics. Lastly, a comparison between the aforementioned practices and those used in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is also provided.

Keywords:

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; Russian-Ukrainian War; Social Media; Fake News; Propaganda.

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1. Introduction

For decades, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been an issue widely discussed and contentious topic. The conflict dates back to 1947 when the United Nations adopted Resolution 181, also known as the Partition Plan, whose goal was the division of the British Mandate of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. Fighting continued throughout the years, and in 2007, the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, took over the Gaza Strip after defeating Fatah, a long-dominant faction within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Since then, tensions seem to have increased in the region, reaching particularly high levels in 2021, to finally peak on October 7th, 2023 ([Council on Foreign Relations 2023](#)). In the past decades, it has been evident that since the beginning of the conflict, traditional media have played a significant role in the way information is disseminated, as well as in the way public opinion perceives the conflict.

The use of Social Media in order to project one's narratives and agenda and/or to promote propaganda that benefits one side over the other is not something new. Since the 2008 Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it has been evident that they have revolutionized the process of transmitting information. In the conflicts that followed, in 2014, 2018, and 2021, the literature indicates that they have played a significant role and have been used extensively.

No matter the conflict they were used in, on the one hand, they have facilitated communication between the elites, including diplomatic discourse, tactical communication by leaders, rebel groups, and military commanders. Moreover, Social Media are also being used by the elites in order to regulate the behavior of the masses, as well as to shape public opinion through the promotion of a narrative that best fits a certain agenda ([Zeitsoff 2017](#)). On the other hand, a large percentage of information shared online is biased, misleading, or even completely fake. This information can be shared both by actors whose main goal is to inflict harm, dissent, and doubt, and to increase the levels of polarization, but also by unaware users of the Internet, who tend to share and internalize information without cross-checking with reliable sources ([Hristakieva, et al. 2022](#)). This is a fact that seems to be taking place in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has been proven that some news sources, or certain Social Media accounts, have been promoting information that is considered fake, in order to promote a certain agenda that favors one of the two sides. During the past months, many media sources claimed to show the atrocities that were committed by one of the two main actors in the conflict, which were later debunked and proven to be fake. Moreover, both the Israeli government and Hamas have been promoting their own narratives through Social Media. Both the spread of fake news and propaganda and the weaponization of Social Media by either side have proven to be effective tools to influence public opinion.

In this paper, a literature review analysis of the weaponization of Social Media by either side is attempted, as there is strong evidence that they have influenced the crisis in many aspects in an unprecedented way. Moreover, in an attempt to provide a better overview of this context, a comparative analysis with Social Media tactics in the Russo-Ukrainian war is presented. For a better conceptual escalation, the use of Social Media in previous conflicts in the region under investigation is first highlighted.

2. Literature Review and Methodology

The role of Social Media in previous conflicts in the Middle East has been investigated using diverse approaches, in an effort to highlight its use as both a communication tool as well as a strategic instrument in information warfare. For instance, Seo (2014) used Social Media and online social networking to analyse photographs shared on Twitter by the Israel Defence Forces and Hamas' Al Qassam Brigades during the 2012 Israeli-Hamas conflict in an effort to comprehend elements of visual propaganda. In order to find themes and frames that stood out in the 243 Twitter photos that the two sides shared over the course of two months, he conducted content analysis, discovering that the most common themes in the photos uploaded by Israel were resistance and unity, while the most common themes in the photos uploaded by Hamas were resistance and civilian casualties (Seo 2014). Zhang (2018) investigated the goals of Hamas at various points in the psychological battle between the two sides in the two-month Israel-Gaza conflict in 2014. The study used grounded theory to examine the themes of Hamas's political marketing by choosing texts and images from two Arabic Social Media accounts affiliated with Hamas. By comparing events on the timeline, the study was able to track the themes' changes over time and frequency (Zhang 2018).

Moving to the present day, where the role of Social Media has been upgraded, there have been many scientific attempts to analyse their contribution, using several research methods over different media datasets. Ezeabasili and Amaefuna (2024) used content analysis to investigate how Social Media affects public attitudes and perceptions on the Israeli-Hamas conflict. The Framing theory was used as the theoretical framework for the study, while textbooks, journal articles, newspapers, and magazines were the sources of secondary data. According to the study's findings, Social Media significantly influenced how the public perceived the Israeli-Hamas conflict by amplifying a variety of voices, creating echo chambers, spreading false information widely, evoking strong emotions, and influencing user-generated content, all of which led to polarized and biased opinions (Ezeabasili and Amaefuna 2024). Bartal (2023) claimed that supporters of Hamas presented the conflict against Israel as a religious war with an anti-Semitic attitude (Bartal 2023). Granger (2024) investigated media content by analysing 310 videos from various large news

outlets and 3338 articles from Al Jazeera to demonstrate how media coverage of the conflict has evolved and how they affected user sentiments (Granger 2024). Similarly, Zawawi et al. (2024) utilized a qualitative descriptive research method, in order to comprehensively depict the framing processes employed by Al-Jazeera and BBC in reporting on the Hamas-Israel conflict and showed that variations in the framing of reporting on the conflict can have an impact on regional diplomacy and peace initiatives as well as international support for either of the parties (Zawawi, et al. 2024). Yıldırım and Şahin (2024) also investigated the extent to which media organizations affect the flow of information from an information warfare perspective (Yıldırım and Şahin 2024).

The abovementioned research emphasizes the multifaceted role of Social Media in contemporary conflicts and its ability to influence public opinion, political narrative, and diplomatic engagements. Nevertheless, there still exists a gap when it comes to how Social Media can be weaponized across different geopolitical contexts, which this study aims to address.

In order to provide a multifaceted overview of how both Hamas and the Israeli government utilize Social Media to influence public opinion and global politics, based on a literature review, this study adheres to PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). The systematic review method guarantees a methodical and transparent evaluation of scientific papers on the subject.

The academic articles, reports, media analyses, and newspaper articles used in this paper were sourced from databases such as Google Scholar and newspapers like the BBC and Al Jazeera. The selection criteria included peer-reviewed papers that were published within the last decade that explicitly analyse Social Media's role in modern warfare, prioritizing the information warfare and digital propaganda in the Israeli-Hamas and Russian-Ukrainian conflicts. It is also important to note that, besides the data sources mentioned before, this paper also used data from the profiles of these groups on social media, on platforms such as X, TikTok, and Facebook, in an effort to identify the strategies used by each side as a means to affect public sentiments. A content analysis was also conducted in an effort to identify recurring themes and strategies across different conflicts in the region. Lastly, the findings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were contrasted with the practices applied in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in an attempt to conceptually highlight the contemporary weaponization of Social Media in modern warfare, considering factors such as state or non-state actors or how public sentiment can be manipulated in different geopolitical conflicts.

Through this methodological framework, this paper aims to underline how the weaponization of Social Media in the modern era can alter public opinion on international conflicts, as well as the trust in the legitimacy of news one can access online.

3. Social Media Tactics

3.1. *The Israeli government side*

The Israeli government often employs Social Media as part of its broader “hasbara” efforts (Hebrew word for “to explain”), also known as Israeli digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy, in general, refers to the way information and communication technologies (ICTs) have impacted how diplomacy is being practiced today, from emails to smartphones and social networking sites. Social Media, in particular, has facilitated the communication and influence that Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) could exert on audiences’ perceptions in a direct and easy manner, without cost. Social Media is also considered to be one of digital diplomacy’s most important tools, given the fact that it aids a two-way engagement and dialogue with foreign audiences. In the past few years, and especially since 2016, Israel has been one of the most active countries when it comes to using digital diplomacy, especially when it comes to its foreign affairs in the Middle East region ([Shalash 2023](#)).

Israel’s digital diplomacy affects the way it projects itself on an international level. It involves certain practices and strategies, often considered to be conflicting, intended to boost Israel’s reputation while also garnering support from all around the world. Since the Second Intifada, Israel’s international image has shifted significantly. Due to the critique that the country faced, a more serious diplomatic effort was needed, leading to the professionalization and intensification of Israel’s “hasbara” by forming an informal Ministry of Hasbara, as part of the Foreign Ministry, in 2013. It is also important to note how hasbara narratives that are meant to increase pro-Israeli frameworks are similar to the general journalistic language. Through the years, this general language that has been constructed has also affected the way that both Israel and Palestine are being portrayed and perceived ([Aouragh 2016](#)).

Since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7th, 2023, the Israeli government, besides conventional types of warfare, has also been extensively using Social Media. The Israeli government, along with the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), has been posting daily on various platforms such as X, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. Through Social Media, the Israeli government is trying to promote its agenda, shape public opinion, and gain the sympathy of international actors, as well as of simple internet users. In order to achieve that, they have been posting content that includes, amongst other things, calls for the return of the hostages that are being held by Hamas back to their homes, heartfelt videos, and infographics to raise awareness about the situation all over the world, using hashtags like #BringThemHomeNow and #LetThemGoNow. The IDF has used Social Media to provide real-time updates on military operations, including its raid on the al-Shifa hospital on November 15, 2023. Posts from official IDF accounts sought to justify the operation by alleging that the hospital was being used as a Hamas military base, although these claims remain contested ([IDF 2023b](#)). Moreover, the Israeli government has participated in a direct rhetorical attack against Hamas, characterizing the leadership as extremist

(Israel 2023a), claiming that Hamas does not care about Israeli or Palestinian lives, while also comparing them with the jihadist group ISIS (Israel 2023b).

Another strategy that is being used by the IDF is publicizing its humanitarian efforts, which include the aid shipments that have been allowed into Gaza, claiming in many of these posts that they are at war with Hamas and not with the people in Gaza (IDF 2023a). Last but not least, the Israeli government has been utilizing Social Media in order to shape public opinion by promoting dozens of ads that include brutal images of the violence that is taking place in Israel. The ads have spread on platforms such as X and YouTube and are aimed at adults over the age of 25 in Western cities like Brussels, Paris, Munich, and The Hague. In these paid videos and images, Hamas is linked once again with the Islamic State, while there are also many gruesome images to show the atrocities committed (Martin, Goujard, and Fuchs 2023). On certain occasions, ads including disturbing footage like rocket attacks, fiery explosions, and masked gunmen were included in children's video games. Since the October 7th attack, the Israeli government is said to have spent more than \$1.5 million on internet ads, claiming that the reason behind this act is that people need to know about the massacre that is taking place in Israel. Although the Israeli Foreign Ministry claims that these ads were supposed to be blocked for people under the age of 18, many children around the world in places like Britain, France, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands, have come across a gruesome ad that reads "We will make sure that those who harm us pay a heavy price", while also including disturbing images on supposedly family-friendly games like "Angry Birds", "Subway Surfers" and "Solitaire: Card Game 2023" (Satter, et al. 2023).

Another strategy that has been widely used by the Israeli government in the past few years is using Social Media as a means to communicate with the Arab population, both in Palestine and in the rest of the Arabic-speaking countries. During the Arab Spring, the interest of the Arabic population in the use of the Internet increased significantly since it provided an alternative place where people had the opportunity to freely express themselves, in contrast to traditional media, where mostly the regimes were conventionally represented. In 2010, a special channel addressed to the Arabic population was launched by the Israeli MFA within its Digital Diplomacy Department. As a result, several Arab speaking accounts were launched on Social Media, some of which still operate today (Shalash 2023). For example, the Facebook page "Israel speaks Arabic" currently has more than 3 million followers, posting daily, multiple times a day. The content that this page contains includes: promoting the actions that the IDF and the Israeli government take in order to defeat Hamas, highlighting the violence that has been committed by Hamas, while also appealing for the return of Israeli hostages (Isra'il tatakallam bil 'arabiyya 2024). Similarly, this page is also available on the platform X; it includes the same content that is being posted on Facebook, is called "Israel in Arabic", and it has more than 500 thousand followers (Isra'il bil 'arabiyya 2024). The Israeli Defence Forces Spokespersons' Unit is heavily engaged

in carrying out the goals of this diplomacy, particularly during times of conflict. The head of the Arab Media Department of the Israeli Defence Force, Avichay Adraee, for example, uses his X account, in which he uses the Arabic language, with more than 550 thousand followers, to support the Israeli army's operations, while also promoting the army's commitment to human values (Adraee 2024). This account has also utilized religion and Qur'anic verses in a strategic manner, specifically during religious holidays or religious instances in general, like the month of Ramadan (Shalash 2023).

The members behind these channels are most times fluent in the Arabic language because they themselves have an Arabic heritage. Some of these teams' members have migrated to Israel from Arab countries like Yemen, Iraq, or Syria, which is why the digital diplomacy team that focuses on approaching the Arab speaking population has a deep knowledge and understanding of Arabic traditions, customs, and preferences. When it comes to the main goals of these channels, they include portraying a positive image of Israel, promoting the country's democratic and peaceful values, the diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as the moral and human values. In these accounts, the scientific, technological, and medical capabilities of Israel are also often highlighted. Through this initiative, the Israeli government tried to achieve a dialogue with the Arab population and promote to them the policies of Israel. However, these accounts also use Social Media in order to spread content that attacks and slanders the Palestinians, mostly during times of conflict. Nevertheless, these Social Media outlets are considered to be a secret diplomatic weapon that could facilitate relations with the Arab world, which is the reason why more and more Israeli institutions and official figures have adopted this strategy and have developed an active interaction with the Arab audiences, through which they have the opportunity to promote a positive narrative about Israel (Shalash 2023).

3.2. The Hamas side

During the past few years, especially during conflicts, Hamas has extensively used Social Media in different ways. Seo (2014) argues that during the 2012 conflict, Hamas' Twitter account @AlQassamBrigades, which is now deactivated, for the most part contained posts that portrayed graphic images of human suffering, including infants or children. In a sample of 171 images posted by Hamas during this conflict, 42.1% of these posts refer to civilian casualties. The reason why there was a notably higher percentage of posts about civilian victims by Hamas could have resulted either from the fact that the biggest portion of casualties during the conflict were Palestinians, or from the fact that Hamas in general has been using Social Media to portray Palestinians as victims and Israelis as the aggressors (Seo 2014). Generally, Hamas' strategy is widely based on portraying Israel as an oppressive occupier that harms the Palestinian population through its military operations and policies. A large amount of the content that Hamas has posted includes Israel's policies and operations in Gaza, the occupation of the West Bank, as well as other operations in the region (Byman and McCaleb 2023).

Other prominent issues portrayed on Hamas' Twitter account included the need for resistance, as well as the need for unity, the casualties of Hamas' soldiers, and images of the destruction caused by Israeli forces. In many cases, the images posted by Hamas resort to emotional propaganda so as to maximize the effects of the message they are trying to convey. During the 2012 conflict, 53.8% of the images shared on the Al Qassam Brigades Twitter account included the emotional factor. For example, images of crying parents in front of children killed by Israeli airstrikes are often shared through Social Media. There was also a significant use of calls to action, urging users to share certain posts in order to spread their messages and reach a wider audience (Seo 2014). Hamas urges its audience to witness Israel's aggression and the suffering it has caused to the Palestinians, prompting the users to denounce Israel and show their support for Hamas' cause. Sometimes, the Hamas accounts used English and Hebrew, besides Arabic, in order to reach a wider audience that is not only confined to the Arabic-speaking population, but also to the rest of the world. In Hamas' online presence, the group's history, teachings, and missions were widely highlighted, especially on their websites, where they posted biographies of important figures like Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, they tribute suicide bombers and people that died for the Palestinian cause, while others also posted their "living wills" on the Internet (Byman and McCaleb 2023).

Lastly, Social Media has also been used operationally by Hamas, albeit on a small scale. Hamas launched what is now known as Operation Broken Heart, where they posed as attractive young women on platforms like Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, attempting to use dating apps as a way to make Israeli soldiers download spyware on their phones (Byman and McCaleb 2023).

Hamas is currently being barred from most Social Media platforms. Online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have banned any account linked to terrorist organizations, Hamas included, as well as posts that appear sympathetic to Hamas' cause, due to the fact that these posts are against their content policies about extremism (Thompson and Isaac 2023). However, for a while, Hamas' officials found a safe haven in the app Telegram, while many Hamas-affiliated accounts posted regularly on X, both platforms characterized by their minimum or non-existent content moderation policies. In the wake of the October 7th attack, Social Media has been flooded by violent and graphic videos and images of Hamas' initial attack against Israel (Frenkel and Myers 2023). Other posts shared on Telegram include Hamas stirring up anti-Israeli sentiments, as was seen after an attack on a hospital in Gaza, where pictures of people and kids severely injured surfaced, while officials traded blame. Hamas took it to Social Media to accuse the Israeli government and to motivate its supporters to act against the "enemy" (Harwell and Dwoskin 2023).

In an effort to humanize its fighters, Hamas also used Telegram to post videos where fighters tried to comfort Israeli children. In one video, a Hamas fighter is seen holding a crying baby, pressed on his shoulder, the same shoulder on which he is

carrying his Kalashnikov, and patting it on the back, whereas another fighter was depicted bandaging the foot of an injured Israeli toddler, then proceeds to put the boy on his lap while simultaneously moving another crying baby back and forth in a stroller (Kirkpatrick and Rasgon 2023). Another video that went viral portrayed twenty-one-year-old Israeli hostage Mia Schem, who was shown saying that she was given medical care by Hamas soldiers, for an injury that she suffered on her hand, stating that everything is fine and she just wants to get back home to her parents (Kirkpatrick and Rasgon 2023). It is important to note that in most of these videos, Hamas fighters have their faces blurred off and their voices distorted. These videos were widely viewed and applauded by Palestinians and Arabs, with some of these videos reaching more than one million views and getting comments like: “the morals of the fighters of the Islamic resistance” (Kirkpatrick and Rasgon 2023).

Other videos that were posted on Telegram right after the October 7th attack, portrayed burning cars in Israeli towns or young Israeli men with their arms tied behind their backs. “This picture is your picture, this might is your might, this flood is your flood, and this blessed action is for all of you!”, said a news anchor addressing Palestinians around the world, followed by a recorded message from Saleh al-Arouri, deputy chief of Hamas’s political bureau, urging Palestinians to resist the Israeli settlers in the West Bank and the soldiers protecting them, confirming that a big objective for Hamas is to spark a broader objective among Palestinians (Kirkpatrick and Rasgon 2023).

The abovementioned lead to the conclusion that Hamas is using Social Media for specific reasons, which include: increasing support, inciting anger against Israel in neighbouring nations, justifying the violence that is being used by their militia, and creating a sense of compassion for the situation that Gaza is faced with (Harwell and Dvoskin 2023). However, as the war went on, platforms grew more wary of the content that was being posted by the organization. On the one hand, by October 12th, X took action against content posted by Hamas-affiliated accounts, which led to the removal of thousands of profiles and the labelling of many posts as harmful (Dugar and Abinaya 2023). Telegram on the other hand, which has been the tool mostly used by Hamas to promote its agenda, with some of the accounts reaching thousands of followers, has restricted access to many Hamas-related accounts, including that of the armed wing of the organization al-Qassam Brigades and Gaza Now, a channel that was responsible for informing people about the events that took place in Gaza in real time (Hale 2023).

4. Fake news in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Regarding fake news in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the main issue is the repurposing and recontextualizing of videos and images to depict something completely different. A video has been reported that claims to depict a Hamas fighter shooting down an Israeli helicopter is actually a clip from a video game called

“Arma 3”. A video supposedly showing an Israeli woman being attacked in Gaza was actually filmed in Guatemala in 2015 (Bond 2023). In many cases, various accounts, some using pseudonyms, others posing as news agencies, have misused images or inaccurate geographic locations in order to provide a fake portrayal of what is currently going on either in Israel or in Gaza (Chin-Rothman 2023). A study that was conducted by Cyabra, an Israel-based company that focuses on analysing Social Media, showed that one in five accounts that have participated in conversations about the conflict since October 7th are fake. On platforms like TikTok and X, approximately 40.000 accounts turned out to be fake and some of them spread misleading content in order to show their support for Hamas (Spring 2023). These fake profiles are used to manipulate public opinion by intervening in political discussions online, which can lead to public behaviours and attitudes being influenced (Luo, et al. 2023).

Besides individuals, government agents have also been accused of spreading fake news since the beginning of the conflict. Russia, Iran, and China have been carrying out disinformation campaigns in order to harm Israel’s reputation and enhance that of Hamas. On one occasion, Russia and Iran spread the information claiming that Israel bombed the Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza and that the United States provided the bomb used to demolish it.

In the case of Iran, while official sources have denied any involvement in the attack of October 7th, multiple Iranian state-affiliated accounts have fit the attack into the narrative of the “Resistance Axis”, in which Iran and other Muslim countries are situated against Israel and the United States. Different Social Media accounts, mainly on X, connected with Khamenei, promote an agenda that is highly critical of the West’s involvement in the crisis, while also highlighting the suffering that the Palestinians are facing by Israeli forces. Moreover, on various Iranian state-affiliated accounts, violent content and graphic images have been posted in order to highlight the brutality of the Israeli troops and to augment support for the Palestinian cause. Unverified content and disinformation have also been distributed by Iranian state-affiliated accounts, with one such example being a video supposedly captured by CNN of the Hamas attack, where a user inserted a fake audio in order to give the impression that it was staged (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2023).

Russian state-affiliated accounts have also exploited the Hamas attack against Israel, as well as Israel’s response, in order to further the Russian geopolitical agenda and to promote already existing anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian narratives. Accusations made by Russian officials that the West is responsible for the escalation of violence between the two sides, have been reinforced by Russian diplomatic accounts on Facebook and X. When it comes to fake news, Russian state media and diplomatic accounts, have also alleged that Ukraine supplied Hamas with weapons previously supplied by Western nations, in an effort to defend against Russia (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2023). To this day, however, there has been no hard evidence to link Hamas’ military weaponry to Ukraine, with Ukrainian officials dismissing the

possibility that Hamas' fighters have been able to get hold of the country's weapons. Based on these allegations, Ukraine's military intelligence agency took it to their official Facebook page, in order to accuse Russia of preparing a disinformation campaign against them ([Khatsenkova 2023](#)).

A rise in anti-Israeli sentiment has also been observed on China's highly censored internet, especially after the country's decision not to blame Hamas for the October 7th attack, responsible for starting the war. Different Social Media platforms have seen varying levels of criticism of both Israel's use of violence and the apparent indifference on the part of the US to Israel's aggression ([Wakabayashi, May and Fu 2023](#)). On Facebook, on the one hand, an attitude of neutrality was predominantly maintained by Chinese state media profiles, as well as profiles of Chinese diplomats, while the decision to de-escalate the crisis was strongly supported. On X, on the other hand, profiles of Chinese journalists and politicians participated in discussions that mainly criticized Western politicians and Western media for maintaining double standards, with the Israeli response to the October 7th attack also being significantly criticized. A key argument discussed in Chinese Social Media profiles concerned the extensive promotion of Israeli victims' stories and the lack of Palestinian voices and experiences in media coverage ([Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2023](#)). Disinformation has proliferated in Chinese Social Media, such as Weibo, WeChat, and Doyin. Content from Western Social Media platforms, such as Telegram and X, which include false information, videos, and images that, although reflecting something completely different, have been used in a conflict-related manner, have been translated and shared hundreds of times on Chinese Social Media ([Xing 2023](#)).

5. Social Media Tactics Comparative analysis: Israeli-Palestinian conflict vs Russo-Ukrainian war

To better understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the role of Social Media and propaganda in shaping the crisis, a comparative analysis with the corresponding war between Russia and Ukraine is presented. Despite their differences regarding their historical and geopolitical basis, these two conflicts show remarkable similarities in the use of Social Media and the dissemination of fake news and propaganda, offering valuable comparative observations.

Similar to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Russia-Ukraine war has also been widely affected by social media. In fact, it is regarded as the first full-blown "Social Media war". Because of the wide digital transformation and the fact that it explores uncharted areas on a technological level, it is also considered to be the first full-blown cyber war and the first hacker war, where both state and non-state actors are attacking the information infrastructures of the fighters ([Ciuriak 2022](#)). Social Media has been extensively used by both sides as a means to portray their own versions of the existing situation and to promote different narratives regarding the causes, the consequences, and the potential continuation of the war. Platforms like

Facebook, X, TikTok, YouTube, and Telegram have been used in order to upload information by government officials, individual citizens, and state agencies. Right before the declaration of a full-scale invasion by Russian President Vladimir Putin, intelligence on Russian troops' border movements and military plans were leaked on Social Media platforms. Moreover, Ukrainian citizens have also been using Social Media and specially designed apps as a means to inform their army about Russian movements. Lastly, footage of military aggression in occupied territories, as captured by smartphones, can spread more easily through Social Media and can even be used as evidence in international courts (Karalis 2024). While the exact amount of content uploaded on these platforms is difficult to measure, it is undeniable that the overall number has been very significant, given the fact that in just the first week of the war, videos posted on TikTok with the hashtags #Russia and #Ukraine amassed 37.2 billion and 8.5 billion views, respectively (Perez and Nair 2022).

Generally, the narratives that have been portrayed both by Russia and by Ukraine are completely different. The war in Ukraine, according to the Russian government, is considered to be a "special military operation", a necessary defensive measure against NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe. Putin has also promoted the narrative that this military campaign is necessary, in order to "de-nazify" Ukraine and to stop a supposed genocide that the Ukrainian government is conducting against Russian speakers (Perez and Nair 2022).

When it comes to disinformation, the Russian government has been accused many times in the past of using this tactic as a means to fulfil certain objectives and to promote a particular narrative that serves the country's interests, the most well-known accusations being the Russian government's involvement in both Brexit in 2016 and the 2020 US elections. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, the Kremlin and its allies, in an attempt to shift the blame from Moscow and undermine support for Ukraine, have been spreading false narratives through propaganda, fake Social Media accounts and bots, forged documents, and manipulated content (Bond 2023). Russia regards Social Media as a different channel for creating the "fog of war", in order to sow doubt on what is seen and documented on Social Media, about the wrongdoings and the crimes committed by Russia (e.g., the atrocities in Bucha) (Ciuriak 2022). It should also be noted that Russian disinformation tactics are not always committed to consistency and often promote contradicting narratives. This tactic ultimately leads to confusion and ambiguity, eroding trust in trustworthy news sources and deepening the fog of war in an effort to hide the truth.

Internally, Russia paid significant attention to controlling domestic audiences by restricting access to information that could undermine or go against the government's narratives. Early in the conflict, a law was signed making it illegal to use the term "war" in Social Media about it, in news articles and/or in broadcasts, claiming that it was a "special military operation", while people promoting "fake news" about the conflict, about the Russian government or the Russian military in general, could face

up to 15 years in prison (Troianovski and Safronova 2022). Additionally, in March 2022, Roskomnadzor, a Russian federal executive agency responsible for monitoring Russian mass media, blocked access to Social Media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, accusing Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, of being an “extremist organization” (Freedom House 2024).

Since the beginning of the war, the Kremlin has been aiming to weaken the morale of Ukrainian audiences and undermine their will to fight on Social Media. Some of the tactics used included posting deepfake videos of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy fleeing the country and urging Ukrainian troops to surrender, forging documents about Ukrainian officials in order to damage their reputation, along with fake marketplaces on the dark web claiming that Ukraine resold Western weapons for profit (Messieh 2023). The largest known influence operation was also launched on TikTok by Russia, in an effort to spread rumours about Ukrainian political corruption. Following Russia’s invasion in February 2022, a number of European countries were exposed to false accusations, created by thousands of fake accounts, claiming that high-ranking Ukrainian officials and their families have purchased expensive cars and houses abroad (Robinson, Robinson and Sardarizadeh 2023).

Ukraine, in contrast, uses Social Media platforms as a means of raising public awareness globally. Since the first days of the conflict, both the Ukrainian government and ordinary citizens have been posting content on Social Media, sometimes harsh and raw, of everyday life after the Russian attack. Through Social Media, the Ukrainian government showcases the country’s resolve and resilience in the face of Russian attacks, presenting Ukraine as courageous and united in its fight for freedom. A post on Ukraine’s official X page, on the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, argued that only through unity can Russian aggression be countered, as “there are no walls that do not fall” (Ukraine 2024a). Another post on TikTok emphasizes the Ukrainian word “Volia”, meaning freedom and will, as a key term that motivates the Ukrainian cause (Ukraine 2024b). Equally important is the promotion of Ukraine’s heritage, both natural and cultural, which is evident in the posting of content relating to the country’s customs (Ukraine 2024c), its environment, and the attractions it offers, as well as the achievements of its citizens. Lastly, the importance of highlighting and showcasing the brutalities committed by the Russian army is also promoted in the different Social Media platforms of the Ukrainian government, and especially on that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (@mfa_ukraine on Instagram).

Similar to Russia, there have been several instances where pro-Ukrainian profiles on Social Media spread fake news and propaganda, most of which quickly went viral. For example, on TikTok, a video clip titled “Ghost of Kyiv”, which claimed to depict a fighter pilot shooting down Russian jets, received millions of views. In reality, the content was taken from a video game called D.C.S. World, whose shaky, blurry visuals might easily pass for real footage. People shared the video and other similarly mislabelled recordings despite the fact that they were fake. A video featuring Russian

paratroopers was actually taken back in 2016. Another one depicts a power facility being struck by lightning, not by a military assault. Finally, a clip of airplanes vs artillery was computer-rendered in 2021 ([Chayka 2022](#)).

Overall, there has been a significant amount of fake news and propaganda coming from both sides. Researchers claim that within 40 minutes of signing up on TikTok, users are directed to false information about the Russian-Ukrainian war. Since the beginning of the conflict 310,000 pieces of content were removed from X due to the content being deceptive, misleading, or providing inaccurate context, 70,000 pieces of content were removed from YouTube, mainly because they referred to Russia's invasion as a "liberating mission", which violates the platforms' major violent events policy and 41,191 pieces of content were removed from TikTok for violation of the harmful misinformation policy. Moreover, 100,000 fake Social Media accounts run by Russian bot farms were shut down by the Ukrainian government, while 240 sites of Russia-Ukraine disinformation were identified in different languages: English (108), French (42), German (21), Italian (27), and other (42) ([Perez and Nair 2022](#)).

When it comes to public opinion, a study conducted by University of Cambridge showed that by the eve of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the percentage of Westerners who had a favourable opinion of Russia had already dropped from two out of five (39%) to less than a quarter (23%) and is currently only one out of eight (12%). Meanwhile, there has been a sharp decline in public support for Russia from once-friendly European nations like Greece (69% to 30%), Hungary (45% to 25%), and Italy (38% to 14%). However, Russia is still seen favourably in developing nations. This comprises 68% of responders in Francophone Africa, 62% in Southeast Asia, and 75% in South Asia. In fact, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, India, and Vietnam all maintain favourable public perceptions of Russia in spite of the 2022 invasion ([Lewsey 2022](#)).

To sum up, both the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Russia-Ukraine war highlight the significant role of Social Media during international crises and how they can affect public opinion, even though they manifest in a different manner. In both of these cases, there has been a widespread information warfare, where both state and non-state actors actively use Social Media platforms like TikTok and X, in an effort to promote their interests and their own narratives, which in turn could lead to the spread of propaganda and fake news. One could also argue that the governments involved are using Social Media in a similar way, trying to gain sympathy from all around the world and reach international audiences, or showcase the atrocities and crimes committed by the opposing side. In most of these cases, users come across emotionally charged imagery and language to humanize one side and dehumanize the opposition, while Social Media algorithms amplify this content.

Another important development that both of these cases have in common is the rise of citizen journalism, where civilians have been documenting content of the conflicts in real time and sharing it across different Social Media platforms, using hashtags

such as #StandWithUkraine or #FreePalestine. Tsakiris (2022) claims that soon after Russia invaded Ukraine, this conflict started being referred to as the first “TikTok war”, given the degree to which Ukrainian citizens were posting their experiences of the war on various platforms like TikTok, X, Facebook, etc. On certain occasions, even before media outlets arrived, civilians had already reported the view from the ground on millions of people on the internet, in a very moving and successful manner (Tsakiris 2022). Similarly, Palestinian people have used Social Media in an effort to show the world the view from the ground, especially during times of a complete internet blackout in the Gaza Strip, imposed by the Israeli government. Regular citizens, namely those with a smartphone and an eSIM internet connectivity, stepped in by recording and uploading images and videos of the current situation that would otherwise remain unknown to the rest of the world (Al-Hajj 2024). Through these efforts, attention from all over the world is garnered, international solidarity movements are created and mobilized, while stories that would otherwise go undetected gain the visibility they deserve.

There are, however, some important differences. One of the most evident ones is the way in which each side tries to gain sympathy from users. For example, Palestinian content often emphasizes civilian suffering, while Ukrainian media highlights resistance and leadership. More specifically, a study conducted by Amer (2023), focusing on tweets posted on Palestine Info Center’s account (@palinfoen), showed that the majority of these posts focused on “Israeli attacks”, covering a range of topics pertaining to Israeli aggression. Another important category was that of “Palestinian issues”, which focuses on internal Palestinian issues, resistance actions, and Hamas statements. Amongst the most frequently used words on those tweets were terms such as “Israeli”, “Palestinians”, and “Jerusalem” (Amer 2023). In order to keep people engaged with their cause, Ukraine tries to showcase the human side of the war, even after years of the original attack in February 2022. Karalis (2024) claims that the first method to achieve this is through continuous footage captured on the ground, while the second method is creating enduring relationships with a global audience via social media. Perez & Nair (2022) also claim that Ukraine has publicly embraced social media as a means to reach a wider audience and rally support for its resistance initiatives.

When it comes to disinformation, it is argued that Western platforms have acted against Russian disinformation, while less moderation was observed on content about the Israel-Palestine conflict. According to Human Rights Watch (2022), social media and messaging services have taken a number of actions since February 2022, as a reaction to the conflict in Ukraine. The majority of these actions have been directed at combating damaging disinformation, labelling or blocking state-sponsored or state-affiliated media, or implementing additional safety precautions. Some of these measures are only applicable within the EU, while others are applicable worldwide, and some are specific to Russia or Ukraine (Human Rights Watch 2022). Pierri et al. (2023) found that, as a consequence of the policies implemented by social media

platforms, there was a significant drop in Russian disinformation and propaganda online. The study also showed that posts including links to Russian propaganda sites and other dubious sources are generally more likely to be deleted than posts that are merely random. However, just 8–15% of Facebook posts and tweets that were linked to Russian propaganda and unreliable news websites were taken down, indicating that misinformation did not entirely vanish from these platforms (Pierri, et al. 2023). Moreover, while platforms like Facebook, X, and TikTok have banned Hamas accounts on paper, in reality, they have had difficulties managing real-time crises. These platforms often rely on automatic systems in order to flag hazardous terms or phrases, considering the vast amount of content that is posted online daily, possibly tens of millions of posts every day. Nevertheless, existing algorithms are infamously flawed; they do not have a human comprehension of the subtleties, cultural contexts, and meanings associated with word associations or patterns, which in turn leads to a significant drop in recognizing and removing possibly harmful content (Chin-Rothmann 2023). More specifically, claims that social media platforms, such as Meta, are unable to moderate content in Hebrew, due to the “absence of translation” and the lack of human reviewers with an expertise on the Hebrew language (Paul 2024), as well as the cases of online censorship of Palestinian voices, as was documented by events such as content removal, suspension or deletion of accounts and/or inability to interact with content (Carbonaro 2023), show that despite the efforts to prevent and monitor misinformation during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by social media platforms, these efforts tend to fall short.

Lastly, it is important to note that the Russia-Ukraine war features a more centralized state propaganda effort, because of the fact that Russia is using methods such as troll farms and censorship to promote its own narrative both internally and externally, something that is not evident by the other side (Silverman and Kao 2022). Despite these differences, however, both conflicts showcase how Social Media can shape narratives, intensify global engagement, and, in turn, influence public opinion on these crises.

6. Discussion, limitations, and suggestions for further research

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict develops, the impact of Social Media and propaganda on shaping public opinion cannot be overlooked. In the wake of the conflict, platforms like Facebook, X, and TikTok were flooded with fake news, manipulated images, repurposed content, and graphic videos, posted by either side or by third parties, in an effort to advance certain narratives.

The Israeli government has been using Social Media as a means to highlight security threats, justify its military actions, and gain solidarity and support from people all around the world. Similarly, Hamas, despite platform restrictions, managed, briefly, to utilize Social Media to show the opposing side's aggression and to gain sympathy

regarding the Palestinian cause. The aim of both sides, however, is to attract support on an international level, justify their actions, discredit their opponent, and generate solidarity or outrage among audiences worldwide.

In addition to state actors, ordinary users, often unintentionally, have shared misinformation without verifying its credibility. Foreign governments, including those of Iran, Russia, and China, have also exploited the conflict to spread disinformation that supports their strategic interests and challenges Western influence in the region. The algorithmic structure of Social Media and its tendency to prioritize engagement over accuracy lead to inflammatory content being pushed to the forefront, amplifying extremist views. This, in turn, has contributed to the rise of both antisemitic and Islamophobic sentiments all around the world. The effects of this polarization are not only limited to the digital world, but they have also manifested in real life through offline violence, protests, or even hate crimes.

The comparative analysis of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Russia-Ukraine war reveals significant parallels in the strategic use of Social Media to promote propaganda, construct national narratives, and influence both domestic and international audiences. Despite differing geopolitical histories, both conflicts are marked by the rapid dissemination of misinformation, fake news, and emotionally charged content, often designed to evoke strong reactions, polarize global discourse, and obscure objective understanding. In both cases, state and non-state actors leverage digital platforms not only to present their side of the story but also to undermine their opponents through the spread of unverified or deliberately distorted information. This creates a complex media environment in which discerning truth from falsehood becomes increasingly challenging for the average user, further deepening political and ideological divides.

Despite the lack of precise literature clearly documenting the exact extent to which fake news and propaganda have influenced public opinion on the Israel-Palestine conflict, the preceding analysis suggests that their influence is likely to be proven critical. Existing research suggests that the dissemination of misinformation and propaganda material can have a significant impact on shaping public opinion, indicating the need for further qualitative or quantitative research in this area. At the same time, the frequency and intensity with which this false information is shared on Social Media platforms, possibly decisively changing the views of many users, especially those of young people, raises the need for developing AI algorithms in order to control the information disseminated online, especially by popular Social Media platforms like X, Facebook, and TikTok. This also constitutes a broad research field for further investigations.

This analysis is constrained by the limited availability of real-time, peer-reviewed studies that directly measure the influence of misinformation on public opinion during the current phase of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Much of the current

evidence is derived from journalistic sources, NGO reports, and early-stage research. Additionally, the complex political sensitivities surrounding the conflict can affect access to accurate data, while platform transparency around moderation efforts remains inconsistent. Further qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of disinformation, particularly across different demographics and geographic regions.

Future research should aim to empirically assess the specific impact of misinformation and propaganda related to the Israel-Palestine conflict on public opinion across different populations. This includes comparative studies that examine how misinformation affects attitudes toward the conflict among users from various political, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. There is also a pressing need for interdisciplinary research that explores the psychological mechanisms behind the spread and reception of fake news, particularly on emotionally charged topics such as war and human rights. Moreover, future investigations should evaluate the effectiveness of existing moderation strategies implemented by major platforms like X, Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram. Developing and testing advanced content moderation tools, potentially driven by AI, can help address the rapid spread of harmful or misleading narratives. Such tools should be transparent, adaptable across languages and cultural contexts, and guided by international ethical standards. Without a clearer understanding of how misinformation shapes beliefs and behaviours, efforts to combat digital propaganda will remain reactive and insufficient.

In conclusion, the Israel-Palestine conflict is clear proof that, while Social Media can serve as a powerful instrument for information-sharing, awareness-building, and digital solidarity, it can also function as a weapon for spreading propaganda and harmful stereotypes and inciting division. The ease with which misleading content can be created and circulated highlights the urgent need for content moderation, transparent algorithmic governance, and public education initiatives aimed at improving media literacy. Without such safeguards, the manipulation of digital information will continue to distort public understanding, inflame tensions, and obstruct efforts toward meaningful dialogue and peacebuilding.

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Strengthening Nuclear Security with ML: Full-Spectrum ^{137}Cs Burial Depth Estimation

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Abstract

The non-intrusive characterization of buried radioactive sources is a critical capability for thwarting illicit trafficking, mitigating orphan-source hazards, and safeguarding civilian populations against radiological threats. Depth estimation, in particular, enables rapid threat assessment and informed countermeasure deployment following incidents such as transnational uranium diversion or the loss of medical and industrial sources. In this feasibility study, we demonstrate a machine learning approach to estimate the burial depth of a ^{137}Cs point source in dry sand over the range of 5–95 cm. Our method employs gradient-boosted decision trees trained on simulated full gamma-ray spectra partitioned into 1024 energy bins, thereby exploiting subtle variations across both the Compton continuum and multiple photopeaks. After hyperparameter tuning, the model achieved an average depth-estimation standard deviation of 5 cm across the full depth range. By leveraging the entire spectral profile rather than isolated peak ratios, this algorithm delivers enhanced accuracy and robustness in heterogeneous field conditions. The results validate the potential of full-spectrum, gradient boosted models as field-deployable tools for rapid subsurface threat localization, reinforcing layers of nuclear security and environmental monitoring efforts worldwide.

Keywords:

Nuclear Security; CBRN; Artificial Intelligence; Gradient Boosted Decision Trees;
Buried Radiation Sources; Gamma Radiation.

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Introduction

Non-intrusive localization and depth characterization of subsurface radioactive materials sit at the nexus of global security and public safety. In January 2025, Takeshi Ebisawa—a senior Yakuza leader—pleaded guilty in Manhattan to conspiring to traffic uranium and weapons-grade plutonium from Myanmar, allegedly intending to supply Iran’s clandestine weapons program ([U.S. Department of Justice 2024](#)). Just six months later, on July 17, 2025, Georgian security forces detained two individuals in Batumi for attempting to sell \$3 million worth of uranium—enough to build a rudimentary nuclear device—underscoring the persistent vulnerability of fissile materials to illicit diversion ([Reuters 2025](#)).

Beyond state-level trafficking, the proliferation of “orphan” sources poses an equally grave risk to communities worldwide. In December 2013, a 111 TBq cobalt-60 teletherapy source was hijacked en route from Tijuana to a Mexican waste facility; thieves removed its shielding and abandoned it in a field near Hueypoxtla, creating a severe radiological hazard before recovery ([IAEA 2013](#)). In January 2023, a caesium-137 capsule, used as a nucleonic level sensor in a Western Australia mine, detached from a truck and remained missing for nearly three weeks, prompting a statewide radiation alert and demonstrating how easily high-activity sources can become lost in transit ([ABC News 2023](#)). These examples highlight the urgent need for tools that can not only detect radiation but also estimate its depth below ground to inform safe recovery and containment actions.

This need is especially critical in Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) defense contexts, where rapid, non-intrusive characterization of contaminated environments is essential for safe and effective response. In radiological release scenarios or during interdiction of illicit materials, first responders and CBRN teams must determine not just the presence of radioactive sources but also their subsurface positioning to guide protective measures and mitigation strategies. Conventional handheld detectors may signal increased dose rates, but without depth estimation, responders risk improper triage or unsafe excavation. The method presented in this work addresses this operational gap by delivering real-time, data-driven estimates of source burial depth using machine learning on full-spectrum gamma-ray data. This provides actionable intelligence for CBRN missions, enhancing both personnel safety and decision-making efficiency in complex field environments.

In current practice, responders can detect elevated dose rates but lack rapid, accurate depth estimation to guide standoff procedures and excavation planning. Traditional depth-estimation techniques typically analyze the ratio of Compton-continuum counts to photopeak counts in a gamma-ray spectrum, leveraging the fact that deeper burial alters the relative intensities of these spectral features. While effective in controlled settings, peak-ratio methods can suffer from reduced accuracy in

heterogeneous soils, variable moisture conditions, and low-count regimes common in real-world deployments.

To target this gap, this paper presents a novel algorithm based on gradient boosted decision trees that harnesses the entire gamma-ray spectrum—divided into 1024 energy bins—as input features. By exploiting subtle variations across the full spectral profile rather than focusing solely on isolated peaks, our approach delivers enhanced depth-estimation accuracy and robustness across diverse soil types and isotope mixtures. This comprehensive spectral machine-learning framework represents a significant advance for global security applications, enabling faster threat interdiction, more reliable site characterization, and improved protection of both national borders and civilian populations.

Related Work

Non-intrusive depth estimation of buried radioactive sources has evolved through a succession of increasingly sophisticated techniques. Early analytical models assumed homogeneous media and fit simple attenuation laws to photopeak or scatter-continuum counts. For example, (Ukaegbu and Gamage 2018) introduced a novel 3D linear attenuation method—validated in sand up to 12 cm depth—by fitting logarithmic count-rate ratios across a spatial grid to infer ^{137}Cs burial depth. That year, they also proposed an extension using a CZT detector, demonstrating accurate depth estimation for ^{137}Cs and ^{60}Co sources buried at greater depths in sand (Ukaegbu and Gamage 2018).

To address soil heterogeneity, (Ukaegbu, Aspinall and Gamage 2019) combined ground-penetrating radar (GPR)–derived bulk density estimates with gamma attenuation curves, achieving reliable ^{137}Cs depth estimation up to ~25 cm in mixed soils. Parallel work by (Shippen and Joyce 2010) implemented a dual-photopeak ratio method for ^{137}Cs in concrete, using a NaI detector to estimate the depth of ^{137}Cs up to ~15mm.

More recently, machine learning techniques have shown increasing promise in gamma-ray spectroscopy by enabling automated analysis and pattern recognition in complex spectral environments. In their comparative study, (Kamuda, Zhao and Huff 2020) evaluated artificial neural networks (ANNs) and convolutional neural networks (CNNs) for the identification of radioisotope mixtures, demonstrating that these models can effectively replicate the decision-making process of trained spectroscopists—even under challenging conditions such as calibration drift and unknown background radiation fields. Their findings highlight the potential of deep learning models to operate reliably in diverse gamma spectroscopy scenarios. However, most existing applications have focused on isotope identification rather than continuous parameter regression, and often rely on discrete classification or mixture recognition rather than detailed physical characterization, such as burial depth estimation.

Building on this body of work, our approach is to apply gradient boosted decision trees directly to the entire 1024-bin gamma spectrum—sans manual feature extraction—for continuous depth regression over 5–95 cm, leveraging a KNIME-based workflow and Geant4 simulations to deliver high accuracy and robustness across realistic background conditions.

Methodology

This study comprises two main components: (1) generation of a controlled, physics-based spectral dataset via Geant4 simulation, and (2) formulation and optimization of a gradient boosted decision tree (GBDT) regression model to predict burial depth from the full gamma-ray spectrum. Below, we describe each step in detail.

1.1. Geant4 Simulation Framework

As shown in Figure 1, all spectra were generated in a controlled Geant4 (Agostinelli, et al. 2003) simulation environment. A ^{137}Cs point source (662 keV) was positioned at depths from 5 cm to 95 cm measured from the sand surface, within a cubical block of dry sand measuring $1\text{ m} \times 1\text{ m} \times 1\text{ m}$ ($\rho = 1.60\text{ g/cm}^3$, SiO_2 composition). A $3'' \times 3''$ NaI(Tl) scintillation detector was centered directly above the source axis and fixed at a height of 35 cm above the sand top. Photon transport processes—including photoelectric absorption, Compton scattering, and Rayleigh scattering—were simulated using Geant4.10 with a combined physics list incorporating both QGSP_BIC_HP for accurate hadronic interactions and PENELOPE for detailed low-energy electromagnetic processes. This configuration ensured high-fidelity modeling of gamma-ray interactions in the detector and surrounding materials across a broad energy range. The energy deposited in the NaI(Tl) detector volume was recorded in 1024 uniform channels spanning 0–1.6 MeV. These raw Monte Carlo spectra, generated under consistent geometry and physics settings, served as the foundation for all subsequent data augmentation and machine learning analysis.

TABLE 1. Simulation Parameters

Parameter	Value
Isotope	^{137}Cs (662 keV gamma)
Medium	Dry sand ($\rho = 1.60\text{ g/cm}^3$; SiO_2 composition)
Burial depths	5 cm – 95 cm, in 5 cm increments (19 settings)
Detector	NaI(Tl) scintillator, $3'' \times 3''$
Detector height above surface	35 cm
Energy range/bins	0 – 1.6 MeV, 1024 uniform bins
Generated events per depth	$\sim 4 \times 10^9$

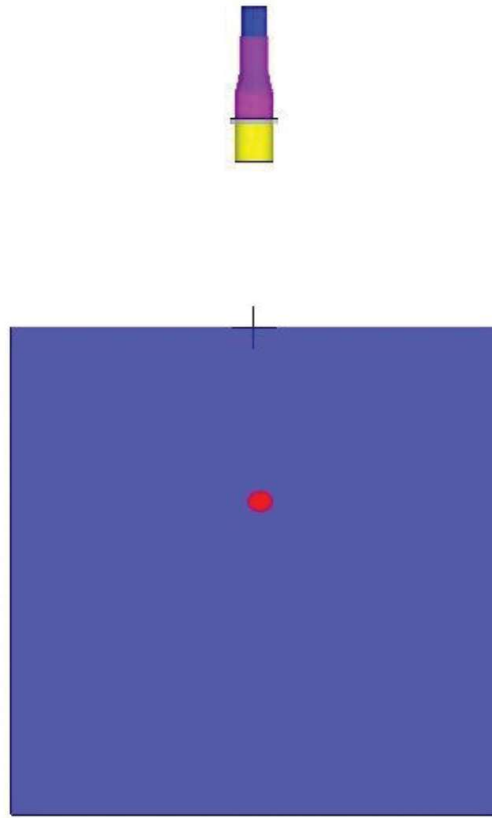


Figure 1 Geant4 simulation setup: a 3 in \times 3 in NaI(Tl) detector placed 35cm above a 1m³ sand block, with a ¹³⁷Cs source buried at depths of 5–95 cm; spectra recorded in 1024 channels (0–1.6 MeV).

1.2. Gamma Spectrum Dataset Generation

For each of the 19 burial depths, a high-statistics Geant4 simulation was performed in which approximately 4×10^9 gamma photons were emitted from a ¹³⁷Cs point source, capturing all relevant photon interactions in the detector. From this sample, we generated 500 spectra by bootstrap sampling with replacement. For each spectrum, the total number of sampled counts, $N_{sig} N_{sig}$, was drawn uniformly between 5000 and 100000, thereby emulating variations in acquisition time or source activity. Each sampled event energy E was Gaussian smeared to reflect detector resolution with a full width at half maximum (FWHM) as in eq (1):

$$FWHM = A \sqrt{\frac{E}{E_c}} \quad (1)$$

where $A = 19.2$ keV and $E_c = 662$ keV. The smeared energies were then histogrammed into the 1024-channel spectrum.

A signal-fraction coefficient, α , was then sampled uniformly from 0.1 to 1.0, defining the desired proportion of signal in the final spectrum. From these values, the required number of background events was calculated as

$$N_{bg} = N_{sig} \frac{1-\alpha}{\alpha} \quad (2)$$

To assemble the background contribution, N_{bg} events were then randomly drawn (with replacement) from the measured background event list—i.e., the recorded event energies comprising the background spectrum. These sampled background energies were binned into the same 1024-channel histogram as the signal.

Finally, the smeared-signal histogram $S_{signal}[i]$ (containing N_{sig} counts) and the sampled-background histogram $S_{bg}[i]$ (containing N_{bg} counts) were combined channel-wise:

$$S_{final}[i] = S_{signal}[i] + S_{bg}[i] \quad (3)$$

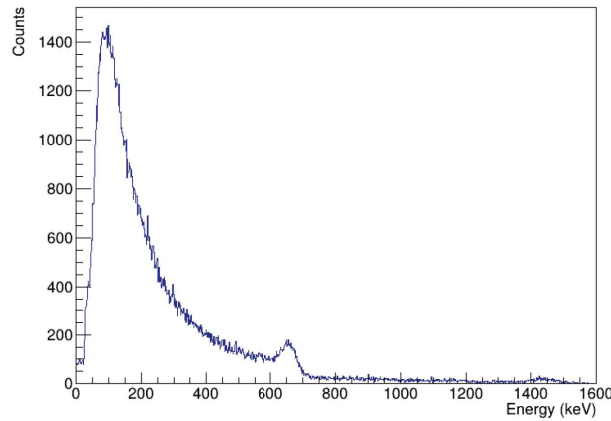


Figure 2 Energy spectrum histogram for a ^{137}Cs source buried 30cm below the sand surface, measured by a $3'' \times 3''$ NaI(Tl) detector positioned 35cm above the ground. The x-axis shows deposited energy (keV) and the y-axis shows counts per channel, with the prominent 662 clearly visible

By construction, the total counts in S_{final} equal $N_{sig} + N_{bg}$, and exactly fraction α of those events originate from the ^{137}Cs signal, while the remainder reflects the authentic, measured background. Thus, the resulting dataset inherently spans both weak and strong source conditions as well as low and high background scenarios. By this approach, the training set possesses the advantages of broad count-statistical variation and diverse signal-to-noise ratios, “stressing” the gradient-boosted decision-tree model so that it learns depth-sensitive spectral features robustly across the full range of realistic nuclear security environments. This procedure yielded a total of 9500 full-spectrum training examples (as in Figure 2) that encapsulate realistic count fluctuations, detector resolution effects, and environmental background, ready for input into the regression model.

1.3. Gradient Boosted Decision Trees for Depth Regression

To translate the rich, high-dimensional spectral information into accurate depth estimates, we adopted gradient boosted decision trees (GBDT) (Friedman 2001) within the KNIME Analytics Platform (Berthold, et al. 2007), an ensemble learning method renowned for its ability to capture complex, nonlinear relationships without extensive manual feature engineering. Gradient boosted decision trees build a series of simple decision trees in sequence, where each new tree focuses on correcting the errors of the previous ensemble. Rather than fitting one large, complex model, GBDT constructs many small “weak learners” and combines their outputs to form a strong overall predictor. This strategy excels when the input space is high-dimensional—as is the case with 1024-bin gamma spectra—because the model can automatically identify and exploit subtle interactions among features (e.g., fine shifts in Compton continuum shape or slight photopeak distortions that correlate with burial depth).

Hyperparameter tuning was carried out via a structured optimization loop on a held-out test set (30 % of the total data). We explored a two-dimensional grid over:

- **Maximum tree depth:** from 3 to 10 levels, controlling how many successive splits each tree can make.
- **Number of trees (estimators):** from 70 to 200 total models in the ensemble.

The learning rate was fixed at 0.1 based on preliminary trials, indicating a good balance between convergence speed and generalization. For each candidate configuration, the model was trained on the 70 % training split and evaluated on the 30 % test split, using the minimization of the root-mean-square error (RMSE) as the selection criterion (eq. 4):

$$RMSE = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N (d_i^{\text{pred}} - d_i^{\text{true}})^2} \quad (4)$$

Where:

- d_i^{true} is the known depth (in cm) of the i – th spectrum,
- d_i^{pred} is the depth estimated by the GBDT model, and
- N is the total number of spectra in the test set

The optimal settings—seven layers per tree and 200 trees—were chosen because they yielded the lowest RMSE on the hold-out dataset.

By combining full-spectrum input with a finely tuned GBDT ensemble, our approach leverages both broad continuum shapes and narrow peak features, yielding a regression model capable of inferring ^{137}Cs burial depths with high accuracy and robustness across the 5 – 95 cm range. The trained model evaluates a single 1024-bin spectrum well under one second on commodity laptop hardware, enabling in-field, near-real-time depth estimates.

Results

The GBDT model, trained on a comprehensive dataset of Geant4-simulated gamma-ray spectra, demonstrated strong performance in estimating the burial depth of a ^{137}Cs radioactive source under diverse and realistic conditions. The dataset used for testing included spectra generated with a wide range of source strengths (total signal counts between 5,000 and 100,000) and background conditions (signal-to-total ratios, SNR, between 0.1 and 1.0), ensuring a robust evaluation across scenarios relevant to nuclear security operations.

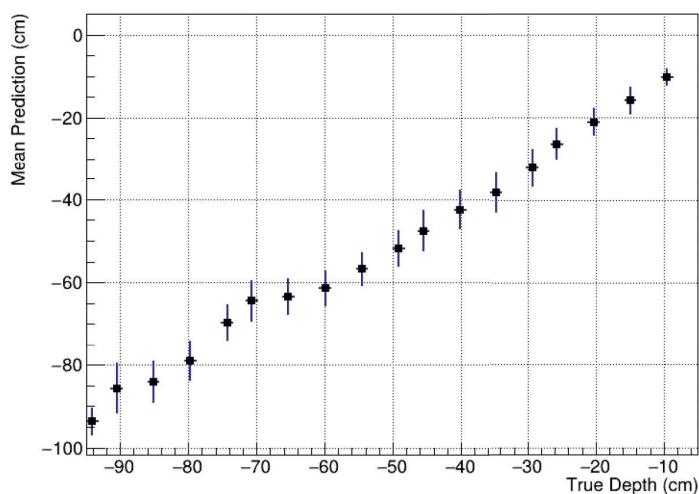


Figure 3 Mean predicted depth versus true burial depth for the GBDT model across the full range of 5–95 cm. Error bars represent the standard deviation of predictions at each depth point, reflecting the model’s precision. The close alignment with the 1:1 line and consistent ~5 cm standard deviation demonstrate that the model maintains high accuracy and stability across all tested depths, regardless of signal-to-noise ratio.

Quantitatively, the model achieved a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.96$, indicating that 96% of the variance in source depth was captured by the spectral features learned from the training data. The RMSE of the predictions was approximately 5cm across the full depth range of 5 to 95cm, demonstrating a high degree of accuracy even in the presence of varying noise levels and statistical fluctuations. As illustrated in Figure 3, the mean predicted depth tracks very closely with the true burial depth across the entire range. Importantly, the standard deviation of the predictions remains consistently around 5cm, regardless of depth or signal strength, showing no observable degradation in accuracy with increasing burial depth. This suggests that the model is not only accurate but also stable across all operating conditions tested. These accuracies translate to actionable guidance for standoff, excavation planning, and rapid triage in reconnaissance workflows where seconds matter.

To further evaluate the influence of background contamination on prediction performance, the mean resolution—with resolution defined as the difference between the predicted and true burial depth—was plotted as a function of the signal-to-total ratio (SNR), as shown in Figure 4. The results demonstrate that the model exhibits minimal bias, with the mean resolution remaining effectively zero across all SNR bins. For SNR values greater than 0.25, the standard deviation of the resolution remains within ~5cm, consistent with the overall RMSE. However, as expected, for spectra dominated by background (SNR = 0.1), prediction uncertainty increases significantly, with standard deviation reaching approximately 12cm. This behavior reflects the difficulty of extracting depth-sensitive features from spectra with minimal signal contribution but also highlights the model’s resilience in noisy environments, maintaining usable accuracy even under severe degradation.

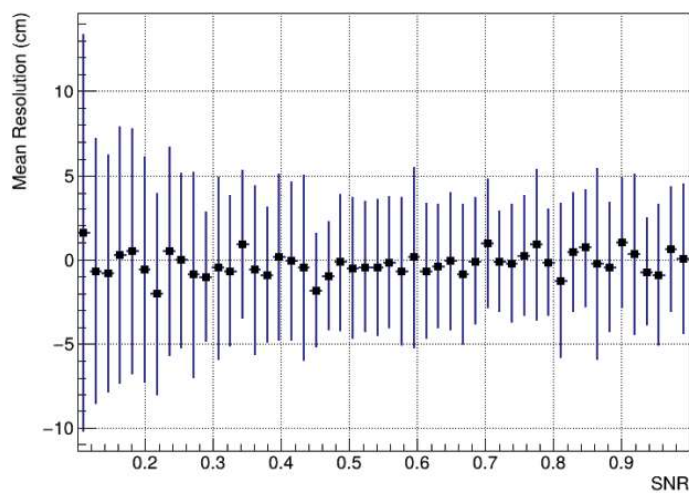


Figure 4 Resolution (defined as predicted depth minus true depth) as a function of signal-to-total ratio (SNR). Error bars indicate the standard deviation of the resolution within each SNR bin. The mean resolution remains near zero across all SNR values, indicating minimal bias. Standard deviations are approximately 5 cm for SNR > 0.25, increasing to ~12 cm only at the lowest SNR (0.1), demonstrating the model’s robustness under high-background conditions.

These findings are particularly important when considered in the context of nuclear security applications. Real-world threats such as the attempted trafficking of uranium in Georgia (2025), the interdiction of plutonium and uranium by a Yakuza criminal network (2024), and the repeated losses and thefts of sealed radioactive sources in Mexico and Australia all underscore the need for reliable, field-deployable systems capable of non-intrusively detecting and characterizing buried or shielded sources. In such scenarios, fast and accurate depth estimation is crucial for enabling appropriate response actions, whether by emergency responders, military units, or nuclear forensics teams. The GBDT model presented in this work, by leveraging the full 1024-bin gamma spectrum and capturing subtle features beyond traditional peak-based methods, provides a practical and effective solution for this task.

Conclusions

The gradient boosted decision tree (GBDT) model developed in this work demonstrates a highly accurate and robust method for estimating the burial depth of a ^{137}Cs radioactive source using full-spectrum gamma-ray data. Trained entirely on Geant4-simulated spectra that incorporate realistic energy resolution, statistical fluctuations, and environmental background conditions, the model achieved a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.96$ and a root-mean-square error (RMSE) of 5 cm across depths ranging from 5 to 95 cm. As shown in Figure 3, the mean predicted depth closely matches the true burial depth at all levels, with consistent standard deviation errors of approximately 5 cm, regardless of signal-to-total ratio (SNR). Figure 4 further illustrates that the model exhibits minimal prediction bias, with the centered near zero and standard deviations remaining under 5 cm for SNRs greater than 0.25. Only at the lowest SNR level (0.1), representative of highly background-dominated scenarios, does the model's precision decline significantly, with uncertainty rising to approximately 12 cm.

The model's combination of full-spectrum inputs and real-time inference provides immediate value in CBRN reconnaissance: responders can (i) estimate depth to plan digging or shielding strategies, (ii) prioritize sites when multiple hotspots are present, and (iii) communicate quantitative uncertainty (~ 5 cm at moderate SNR) to inform risk and resource allocation. Integration into handheld or backpack systems is straightforward since only a single NaI(Tl) spectrum is required.

These results have important implications for the field of nuclear security, where non-intrusive detection and localization of radioactive materials are essential for preventing radiological terrorism, illicit trafficking, and public exposure to orphan sources. Real-world incidents, such as the attempted trafficking of uranium in Georgia (2025), the Yakuza-led plutonium smuggling operation thwarted by U.S. authorities (2024), and the repeated thefts and losses of industrial radiological sources in Mexico and Australia, highlight the urgent need for accurate and field-deployable tools to locate hidden or buried radioactive threats. In such scenarios, conventional detection systems may struggle to distinguish signal from background or estimate source depth, particularly when shielding or burial is involved. The machine-learning approach presented here—capable of interpreting the entire gamma spectrum without relying on hand-engineered features—offers a fast, data-driven solution that is both flexible and adaptable to challenging field conditions.

Looking forward, future work will focus on validating the algorithm with experimentally measured spectra, particularly using ^{137}Cs sources buried in real soil under varying moisture and density conditions. Additional extensions will include expanding the model to handle other isotopes of security concern (e.g., ^{60}Co , ^{192}Ir , ^{241}Am), incorporating soil heterogeneity, and investigating sensor fusion with other modalities such as neutron detection. The integration of temporal data from

mobile detector platforms and spatial data from sensor arrays also holds promise for improving 3D localization and discrimination of multiple buried sources. Overall, this study contributes to the development of machine learning-based methods for radiological source depth estimation, demonstrating that full-spectrum models can achieve reliable performance under realistic conditions. The results highlight the potential of such approaches to support future tools for non-intrusive assessment in nuclear security and emergency response applications.

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Organizational Culture and Combat Readiness: A Thematic Review of Military Performance Drivers

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Abstract

Combat readiness has become a principal strategic preoccupation for NATO and Western armed forces in the face of large-scale conventional warfare returning to Europe. While leadership, morale, and training receive abundant intellectual attention, readiness's cultural underpinnings remain theoretically fragmented and empirically undefined. This study, therefore, answers the following research question: How does organizational culture generate, sustain, and differentiate levels of combat readiness across contemporary military establishments? The problem is formulated as a lack of any integrated framework connecting cultural mechanisms with the psychological, operational, or institutional components of readiness. It adopts a qualitative conceptual methodology based on a structured thematic literature review that synthesizes works from organizational behavior theory through military sociology to defense studies. Six theoretical lenses are applied-Resource-Based View; High Reliability Organization theory; Social Identity Theory; Social Exchange Theory; Mission Command doctrine and Organizational Learning Theory-to develop an integrated Culture-Readiness Framework. The five cultural drivers identified as readiness are mutually reinforcing in a virtuous cycle: discipline, esprit de corps, trust and cohesion, mission command, and learning orientation. Motivation is enabled by an outcome of readiness. The analysis shows what motivates soldiers individually or collectively toward the achievement of victory, even against all odds, with scant resources available. Hence, the requirement for adaptive execution is expressed through institutional resilience, wherein failure does not lead to collapse but instead inspires greater effort until success is attained.

Keywords:

Organizational Culture; Combat Readiness; Cohesion; Mission Command; Military Leadership; Defense Transformation; Resilience; Military Sociology.

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1. Introduction

Large-scale conventional warfare has returned to being a central feature of international security. Military organizations are therefore reassessing the very fundamentals of combat readiness. Despite the huge doctrinal attention paid to the subject, readiness continues more or less conceptually through material indicators—force structure, equipment serviceability, and training hours logged. This is an analytical omission regarding those cultural mechanisms that permit cohesion, elasticity, and resilience within militaries under extreme stress until better understood at some later date. Useful work has been done on leadership, morale, and cohesion, but these strands remain fragmented within existing scholarship on the subject and do not explain why similarly trained and equipped forces perform so variously in real combat. The article begins by filling this conceptual gap and develops the argument that organizational culture is a strategic capability that creates and sustains combat readiness. Culture defines the way in which military personnel resolve ambiguity, internalize mission purpose, allocate trust, and synchronize action under pressure. Recent conflicts – from the surprisingly quick downfall of the Afghan National Army to unanticipated endurance displayed by Ukrainian forces -have proven that cultural factors can easily overmatch apparent preparedness for battle in determining eventual success or failure on the battlefield.

The article therefore proposes a Culture-Readiness Framework in six theoretical perspectives to integrate the fragmented knowledge: Resource-Based View (RBV), High-Reliability Organization theory (HRO), Social Identity Theory (SIT), and Social Exchange Theory (SET); Mission Command Doctrine; and Organizational Learning Theory (OLT). The synthesis of these theories develops five readiness cultural drivers as mutually reinforcing deep structures of readiness at three levels — discipline, esprit de corps, trust/coherence/mission, command/learning orientation — at psychological, operational, and institutional levels. The study contributes to the literature on military organizations by conceptualizing culture as a dynamic readiness capability, specifying mechanisms linking cultural attributes to performance under risk, and developing a single unified model that also happens to explain cross-national variation in military effectiveness. The proposed approach is therefore an advance over descriptive accounts of “military ethos” in providing a theory-driven explanation for how culture transforms material inputs into sustained combat power.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptual Foundations of Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is one of the most studied, yet conceptually elusive, constructions in organizational research. It has been variously defined as the “social glue” binding organizations together ([Deal and Kennedy 1982, 98-103](#)), a process of

normative control operating beyond formal authority to regulate behavior (Ouchi 1981), and a shared system of meanings shaping the way people interpret and respond to their environment (Schein 2010). In military organizations, culture is both symbolic and instrumental; it forms the basis of decision-making, discipline, cohesion, risk behavior, and ultimately mission success (Soeters 2018; Kolditz et al. 2003; Snider 1999).

2.1.1. Defining Organizational Culture

Schein (2010) assumed, “Culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group has learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. Therefore, culture is shared and learned; something deep but strongly behavior-oriented. Hofstede et al. (2010) described culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one organization from another,” thus providing a structural view on the concept. Culture, according to Pettigrew (1979), develops through values, symbols, and rituals that get historically embedded within the very fabric of organizational life. This allows military culture to be perceived as a historically established system of values and assumptions determined by hierarchy, battle experience, and national ideology (Soeters et al. 2007).

2.1.2. Components of Organizational Culture

Schein’s (2010) three-level model provides a valuable lens for understanding culture’s depth within armed forces (See Table 1).

TABLE no. 1. Layers of Organizational Culture in Military Contexts

Layer	Description	Military Example
Artifacts	Visible structures and observable practices that reflect organizational priorities and identity	Uniforms, saluting rituals, parades, and insignia
Espoused values	Formal doctrines and official beliefs guiding organizational behavior	Duty, honor, loyalty, and service ethos
Basic assumptions	Deep, taken-for-granted truths that are unconsciously shared and rarely questioned	Obedience, chain of command, legitimacy of authority

Source: Adapted from Schein (2010). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. John Wiley & Sons.

This layered model explains why culture in military institutions is highly resilient: formal systems reinforce informal norms that, over time, solidify into institutionalized assumptions central to organizational identity and combat behavior.

2.1.3. Organizational Culture as a Performance System

Since the 1980s, research has increasingly emphasized links between culture and performance. Deal & Kennedy (1982) argued for the creation of behavioral alignment by “strong cultures”, while Kotter (2008) discussed adaptive and non-adaptive cultures. Adaptive cultures that can easily readjust in response to change are crucially important for militaries working in unstable and ambiguous environments (Farrell,

Terriff, and Osinga 2020; King 2013). More recent scholarships consider culture as an integrated performance system that organizes behavior under uncertainty (Chatman and O'Reilly 2016). From a High-Reliability Organization (HRO) point of view, it is cultural attributes such as vigilance, disciplined communication, and constant learning that create operational resilience within high-risk domains like aviation, nuclear operations, or warfare (Weick and Sutcliffe 2015). Readiness is thus not the outcome of training and equipment but rather a function of cultural mechanisms that maintain collective discipline as well as adaptability under stress.

2.2. Military Organizational Culture: Characteristics and Frameworks

Military organizational culture is a unique sociological and psychological phenomenon developed by the specific requirements of armed conflict, defense needs, and highly institutionalized traditions (Soeters 2018; Winslow 1998). In comparison with civilian organizations operating inside market economies characterized as relatively safe, low-risk settings, the military must be prepared to operate amid uncertainty, moral dilemmas, and lethal risk. Thus, culture serves not only symbolic purposes but operationalizes capability in the organization of discipline, cohesion, and leadership (NATO 2025b; King 2013; Wong and Gerras 2015).

2.2.1. Distinctive Characteristics of Military Culture

While civilian organizations emphasize innovation, competitiveness, or customer value (Schein 2010), military institutions are defined by obedience and duty, sacrifice, loyalty, and mission accomplishment (Soeters, Winslow, and Weibull 2007). They can be carried out through hierarchy and discipline by collectivism or esprit de corps, tradition, and mission orientation. All of these behaviors stabilize the organization under combat pressure (see Table 2).

TABLE no. 2. Core Traits of Military Organizational Culture

Military Cultural Trait	Description	Example
Hierarchy & Command Structure	Strict authority and rank hierarchy ensuring order and control	U.S. Army Chain of Command Doctrine (ADP 6-0, 2019)
Discipline	Compliance with orders and maintenance of standards	Turkish Armed Forces' principle "Emre itaat esastr"
Collectivism	Team-before-self orientation	British Army motto: "Serve to Lead."
Esprit de Corps	Strong unit identity and pride	U.S. Marine Corps warrior ethos
Tradition & Continuity	Preservation of symbols, rituals, and heritage	NATO regimental identity systems
Mission Orientation	Operational focus and readiness	Israeli Defense Forces' "Tnufa" agility reform

Source: Adapted from Soeters et al. (2007); NATO (2025a).

These features underscore the fact that an effective performance in combat needs to be collectively aligned and psychologically resilient. Therefore, cultural mechanisms become stabilizers in uncertainty, disruption, and chaos ([Weick and Sutcliffe 2015](#); [Gerras and Wong 2016](#)).

2.2.2. Structural Foundations of Military Culture

The military culture emanates from structural and institutional bureaucracy. Hierarchy and professionalism duality ([Huntington 1957](#)) integrated with operational autonomy of a constabulary force, balancing capability and legitimacy-preferred society by Janowitz ([1960](#)). Institutional dualism embeds enduring values inside professional ethos: duty to honor nations.

Cultural evolution in military organizations is path-dependent ([Farrell, Terriff, and Osinga 2020](#)). For instance:

- The German Bundeswehr institutionalized *Innere Führung* to prevent authoritarian command culture.
- The U.S. Army institutionalized Mission Command in the post-Vietnam era to permit greater decentralization.
- Discipline in the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) is amalgamated with a nationalist identity, and that it is an outcome reflecting the ethos of the War of Independence.
- The Russian Armed Forces maintain a centralized obedience culture shaped by Soviet doctrine ([Galeotti 2019](#)).

These examples highlight the fact that national histories shape distinct cultural trajectories while maintaining universal elements essential to combat readiness.

2.2.3. Cognitive, Functional, and Analytical Perspectives on Military Culture

Military culture provides the shared cognitive schemas through which members interpret uncertainty, impose self-discipline, and coordinate action under duress. It delivers to soldiers a means by which they can collectively understand ambiguous operational environments ([Hedlund and Björkman 2017](#)), and shares both in garrison aspects of behavioral norms that define what is acceptable or prohibited as well as combat ones ([Griffith 2002](#)). Culture works through these cognitive and normative mechanisms to synchronize collective behavior for better coordination with quicker responses, plus enhanced psychological stamina during high-pressure operations. Four functions sustain readiness within an integrated framework of military culture:

- *Motivational Function*: Reinforces warrior ethos, morale, and purpose.
- *Coordination Function*: Ensures behavioral predictability under uncertainty.
- *Control Function*: Maintains lawful conduct and command integrity.
- *Adaptation Function*: Facilitates learning, flexibility, and tactical innovation.

This closely tallies with the Resilience Doctrine ([2022b](#)) of NATO, which articulates that contemporary preparedness is an organizational capability to function

and maintain cohesion and will under hybrid threat conditions. Analytically, several conceptual frameworks-assumptions, norms, performance, and cohesion approaches-offer perspectives on military culture. A common inference across these perspectives is that culture offers interpretive logic and provides normative stability for the very acts of performance, adaptation, and resilience readiness expressed. In this respect, readiness is not only materially determined but also culturally mediated through mechanisms of collective sensemaking, sustaining discipline, and supporting continuous adjustment in combat operations.

2.4. Combat Readiness: Operational and Organizational Dimensions

Combat readiness is a basic concept of military science and doctrine. It is generally defined as the ability of armed forces to undertake missions in combat or crisis situations. The early conceptualizations of readiness provided for actual accounting indicators such as personnel strength, equipment serviceability, and logistic provisioning (U.S. Department of Defense 1962; Millett and Murray 2010, 10-11). In later works by defense scholars and within current NATO doctrine, readiness is highlighted as a multidimensional construct that comprises operational capabilities on the one hand and organizational competence plus human factors on the other (King 2013; NATO 2025b; RAND 2019). Readiness now means being ready but also having a dynamic capability driven by leadership training, logistics, morale, and organizational culture (Brooks 2016; Griffith 2002).

2.4.1. Definitions and Evolution of the Concept

Traditionally, readiness has been considered a measurable outcome of force structure and material condition. For decades, the U.S. Army reported on readiness in terms of personnel strength and weapons availability combined with training status reporting (U.S. Army 1994; Feickert 2019). However, later operational experiences from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan illustrated the fact that apparent high levels of material readiness do not necessarily translate into actual combat capability (Biddle 2010; Krepinevich 1992). The new concept of readiness integrates all forms of adaptability, resilience, and interoperability as a state of readiness. Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) doctrine conceptualizes “hazırlık seviyesi” (state of readiness) as a synthesis of physical, psychological, and doctrinal preparedness. It is related to “eğitim disiplini, birlik ruhu” (esprit de corps), and “göreve adanmışlık” (mission commitment). An analysis conducted on the two different levels-NATO and national doctrines shows an emerging consensus on recognizing readiness as having cultural and organizational roots.

2.4.2. Dimensions of Combat Readiness

Both scholarly and doctrinal sources identify several interrelated dimensions of readiness (See Table 3).

These dimensions demonstrate that readiness transcends tactical proficiency. It is an organizational and cultural state based on trust, cohesion, and institutional adaptability (King 2013; Gerras and Wong 2016). In other words, being ready for

TABLE no. 3. Key Dimensions of Combat Readiness

Dimension	Description	Representative Sources
Training Readiness	Proficiency in mission-essential tasks and tactical competence	NATO (2025a); U.S. Army FM 7-0 (2021)
Personnel Readiness	Physical, psychological, and professional suitability of personnel	Griffith (2002); RAND (2019)
Equipment & Logistics Readiness	Availability and maintenance of weapons, supplies, and mobility assets	Millett & Murray (1988); Feickert (2019)
Operational Readiness	Capability to execute missions under real combat conditions	Biddle (2010); King (2013)
Leadership Readiness	Quality of command, decision-making, and force management	Wong & Gerras (2015); ADP 6-22 (2019)
Moral Readiness	Motivation, cohesion, discipline, and will to fight	Siebold (2007); Lester, et al. (2015)
Organizational Readiness	Institutional adaptability, learning, and command climate	Weick & Sutcliffe (2015); Brooks (2016)

Source: Compiled by the author based on NATO (2025a), RAND (2019), and military readiness literature.

combat means a person is mentally and morally set to engage in actual fighting and that the organization is prepared for sustained performance in war.

2.4.3. *Readiness vs. Combat Effectiveness*

Readiness and effectiveness are usually conflated, analytically they can be separated. Readiness is associated with preparedness, while effectiveness can be associated with the eventual output of performance (Biddle 2010; Cohen 2012). Therefore, a unit may be ready but still eventually perform ineffectively due to bad leadership or low morale within the unit, as was documented in Iraq and Afghanistan where so many units were reported to have been very prepared before deployment (Freedman 2017; Galeotti 2019) or cohesive and disciplined units performing effectively with scant resources (King 2013; Kolditz et al. 2003). This distinction highlights that it is organizational culture that serves as connective tissue between readiness and effectiveness through motivated and resilient or even undisciplined behavior under stress (Soeters 2018; Snider 1999).

2.4.4. *Organizational Readiness*

Organizational readiness, in the words of defense transformation theorists, is the anticipative and adaptive capabilities, collective competencies of military organizations (Brooks 2016; Farrell and Terriff 2002). More recently, however, preparedness has been defined as a function or outcome emanating from certain cultural attributes (RAND 2019; NATO 2025a; NATO Mission Command

Concept 2020). These include:

- *Mission command philosophy* - decentralized leadership and initiative.
- *Learning culture* - after-action reviews and doctrinal evolution.
- *Psychological resilience* - sustaining morale and mental endurance.
- *Ethical cohesion* - maintaining discipline and legitimacy.

Empirical research shows that organizational readiness's long-term effectiveness is more reliable than material preparedness (Ulmer 2012; Gerras and Wong 2016). Culturally cohesive units adapt faster, even if they are less technologically advanced than their rigid counterpart, an interoperability study found within NATO (NATO ACT 2020).

2.4.5. The Cultural Dimension of Readiness

Even with growing acknowledgment of human and institutional factors, the cultural aspect of readiness stays under-theorized (Farrell, Terriff, and Osinga 2020; Farrell, Osinga, and Russell 2015). Culture gets shaped by readiness in the enforcement of discipline, the facilitation of cohesion, and the building of trust and innovation through psychological safety. Culture turns readiness from a mechanical state into a living capability. The next section develops this argument further by amalgamating these findings into a single Culture–Readiness Framework to show how cultural dimensions and mechanisms jointly generate readiness outcomes.

3. Methodology

The study develops a concept using an approach of theory building supported by a structured thematic literature review. The intention is not to develop some comprehensive systematic review but rather to weld various strands of scholarship into one coherent theoretical framework that explains how organizational culture creates combat readiness.

3.1. Literature Search Strategy

The initial search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR. It later expanded to ProQuest and specific defense-oriented repositories such as NATO ACT, RAND, RUSI, and U.S./UK doctrinal publications. The search spanned from 2000 to 2024. However, in order to provide a theoretical grounding for the research, some earlier works have also been included.

3.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Included sources:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles,
- Monographs in the field of military sociology and organizational behavior,
- NATO/DoD doctrinal documents,
- RAND/RUSI research reports,
- Empirical case analyses of contemporary conflicts.

Excluded sources:

- Non-academic commentary,
- Journalistic reporting with no analytical depth,
- Sources focusing only on technology or logistics, with no consideration of organizational variables.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis was based on a structured thematic coding process:

Thematic clustering: Concepts were grouped into higher-order theme clusters (discipline, trust, identity, initiative, learning).

Theoretical mapping: Themes were cross-referenced with six theoretical lenses. (RBV, HRO, SIT, SET, Mission Command OLT)

Framework synthesis: The Culture–Readiness Framework was constructed by integrating cultural drivers and mechanisms and readiness outcomes into a single unified theoretical model.

3.4. Justification of Methodological Approach

A conceptual design is appropriate due to the fact that the literature on military culture and readiness is wide but fragmented across different disciplines. The aim here is toward the integration of theory, not a meta-analysis. This approach aligns with leading conceptual review standards used in strategy, organizational behaviors, and defense studies.

4. Findings

4.1. Theoretical Links Between Organizational Culture and Combat Readiness

The link between organizational culture and behavioral readiness is proven by military doctrine and in research literature, but the real mechanism needs further theoretical integration. Readiness was earlier considered a structural or logistical condition ([U.S. Department of Defense 2018](#); [NATO 2023](#)). In recent discourse, it is viewed more as cultural and psychological processes through which readiness is achieved and sustained – consider trust, learning, adaptability, and identity ([Soeters 2018](#); [King 2013](#); [Gerras and Wong 2016](#)). This section provides a composite of six theoretical perspectives that together explain how military culture transforms structure and training into combat capability: Social Identity Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Organizational Learning Theory, and High Reliability Organization Theory.

4.1.1. Social Identity Theory: Cohesion and Willingness to Fight

Social Identity Theory (SIT), originally developed by Tajfel & Turner (2004), deals with the aspect of group self-concept and its resultant loyalty, motivation, and willingness to sacrifice. In military application, SIT occupies a unit culture shared identity space ([Siebold 2007](#)), moral readiness ([Griffith 2002](#)), and under fire cohesion ([Lester et al. 2015](#)). Classic research by Shils & Janovitz (1948), reiterated later ([Kolditz et al. 2003](#); [King 2013](#)), proves that soldiers fight first for comrades

and then for unit identity before ideology. NATO (2023) codifies this mechanism as ‘fighting spirit’, placing collective identity at the core as a readiness enabler. Therefore, culture leads to enhanced readiness through cultivated belongingness, unity, and resilience.

4.1.2. Social Exchange Theory: Trust, Commitment, and Command Climate

The Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau 1986) stresses reciprocal trust as the base of climates of effective command. In perceptions of fairness and support from the organization in return, loyalty, compliance, and extra-role effort are manifested (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Trust replaces control in an interdependent yet hierarchical military environment to foster resilience with disciplined initiative (Wong and Gerras 2015; Snider 1999). Supportive leadership cultures raise psychological readiness at the level of unit performance according to empirical evidence provided by research conducted by Bartone (2006) and Britt et al. (2005). The Turkish Armed Forces’ doctrine defines strategic cultural asset protracted operations sustaining readiness as “güven duygusu” (trust). Culture enables readiness through social exchange norms that reinforce cohesion and legitimacy.

4.1.3. Organizational Learning Theory: Adaptation Under Uncertainty

Organizational Learning Theory (OLT) (Argyris and Schön 1996) describes how the adaptive military cultures oriented toward learning are able to maintain the state of readiness under high levels of uncertainty and high operational tempos through institutionalization of after-action reviews and feedback loops on flexibility in doctrine (Garvin 2000; U.S. Army 2021, FM 7-0). Militaries fostering double-loop learning shall rapidly adjust tactics and doctrines as evidenced in cases of hybrid wars (Farrell, Osinga, and Russell 2013; Murray and Millett 1998), while doctrinal inertia and strategic lag characterize hierarchical organizations with rigid structures (Ulmer 2012; Farrell and Terriff 2002). Learning translates into sustained readiness when Israel Defense Forces or Ukrainian Armed Forces’ type adaptive cultures learn continuously until preparedness becomes part and parcel, hence making culture Ready through continuous learning, then rapid adaptation (RAND 2019; Freedman 2017).

4.1.4. High Reliability Organization Theory: Readiness Under Risk

High Reliability Organization or HRO theory (Weick and Sutcliffe 2015) describes the way in which complex organizations manage to support high levels of reliable performance even under conditions of extremity. HROs develop cultural norms around vigilance, redundancy, and expertise-based hierarchy rather than rigid structural forms. The military inculcates these attributes through disciplined alertness, collective mindfulness, and elasticity in high-reliability air, naval, and special operations forces (Roberts 1993; Rochlin 1999; King 2013). NATO Mission Command Doctrine (2020) as well as U.S. Army leadership doctrine manuals (U.S.Army 2019, ADP 6-22) articulate this message linking a reliability culture to a readiness culture. In this conceptualization, readiness is defined as a function of an organization’s cultural capacity for sustaining reliable performance amidst uncertainty and shock.

4.1.5. Mission Command Doctrine: Cultural Empowerment of Readiness

Historically rooted in the Prusso-German tradition of Auftragstaktik, which later evolved into the modern ‘Mission Command’ doctrine (Führen mit Auftrag), this philosophy today reflects a broader, alliance-wide emphasis on decentralized execution and commander’s intent. Mission Command (U.S. Army 2019, ADP 6-22; NATO 2025b) blends doctrine and culture by decentralized decision in promoting disciplined initiative and mutual trust. It works best in a transmitting intent-and-trust environment rather than a micromanaging one (Echevarria 2012; Wong and Gerras 2015). Decentralization leads to chaos without shared purpose, but with it, units display operational agility and initiative (O’Hanlon 2015). The cultural doctrine is attributed to battlefield adaptability by the Bundeswehr, British Army, as well as the U.S. Army (Shamir, 2011). This is, therefore, a case where readiness through a trust-based culture can be operationalized dynamically across preparedness for warfare.

4.1.6. Resource-Based View: Culture as a Strategic Readiness Capability

The Resource-Based View (Barney 1991) of strategic management argues that a firm’s competitive advantage lies in resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). For the military organization, culture itself becomes a strategic resource, a readiness capability continuously available beyond periods of technological or budgetary sustainment (King 2013; Brooks 2016). Culture cannot be copied easily; it emanates from collective history, sacrifice, and professional identity (Farrell and Terriff 2002). This is why armies such as the Finnish or Israeli can maintain high levels of readiness with scant resources through strong professional cultures (Galeotti 2019). Culture is thus the enduring ability that transforms structure into combat power (See Table 4).

TABLE no.4 . Theoretical Perspectives Linking Organizational Culture and Combat Readiness

Theory	Core Cultural Focus	Mechanism	Impact on Readiness
Social Identity Theory (SIT)	Culture as shared identity	Cohesion, esprit de corps, loyalty	Morale, unit effectiveness, collective action
Social Exchange Theory (SET)	Culture as reciprocity and trust norms	Leader–member exchange, perceived support, mutual obligation	Cohesion, loyalty, and discretionary effort under stress
Organizational Learning Theory (OLT)	Culture as feedback and adaptation system	After-action reviews, double-loop learning, shared knowledge	Continuous improvement and long-term readiness
High-Reliability Organization (HRO)	Culture as a reliability system	Error control, redundancy, and mindful learning	Safety, mission continuity, error resilience
Mission Command Doctrine	Culture as empowerment and intent alignment	Decentralized trust, initiative, disciplined autonomy	Flexibility, decision speed, agile coordination
Resource-Based View (RBV)	Culture as an intangible resource / dynamic capability	Discipline, trust, collective learning	Sustained adaptability and performance

Source: Author’s synthesis based on Barney (1991), Weick & Sutcliffe (2015), Tajfel & Turner (2004), Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005), NATO (2020), and Argyris & Schön (1996).

4.2. A Narrative Synthesis of Key Cultural Drivers of Combat Readiness

Military readiness is still mostly measured in material and operational terms. Increasingly, it is a function of those cultural variables that dictate the way armies fight, adapt, and endure (King 2013; Soeters 2018). Culture acts not as some background condition but as an operational force that sustains discipline, cohesion, trust, and adaptability through which culture delivers effects via motivation and identity, command behavior, and learning capacity mechanisms regulating how soldiers and units respond under stress and uncertainty (Weick and Sutcliffe 2015; Snider 1999).

Five major cultural drivers of combat readiness were synthesized and found consistently common across the NATO, TSK, U.S., British, and Israeli forces (See Table 5). These are:

- Discipline and command culture,
- Esprit de corps and collective identity,
- Trust, cohesion, moral readiness,
- Mission command and adaptive execution,
- Learning culture and operational resilience.

TABLE no. 5. Cultural Drivers of Combat Readiness – Mechanisms and Evidence

Cultural Driver	Mechanism	Academic Sources	Doctrinal Sources	Readiness Impact
Discipline & Command Culture	Enforces order, maintains operational control	Soeters (2018); Ulmer (2012)	ADP 6-22 (2019); TSK Disiplin Kanunu (2013)	Increases reliability under battlefield stress
Esprit de Corps & Collective Identity	Enhances belonging, motivation to fight	Siebold (2007); King (2013); Kolditz et al. (2003)	NATO (2025a)	Strengthens unit morale and perseverance
Trust, Cohesion & Moral Readiness	Builds horizontal and vertical trust	Griffith (2002); Lester et al. (2015)	U.S. Army Leadership Doctrine (2019)	Improves resilience and psychological readiness
Mission Command & Adaptive Execution	Enables initiative and decentralized decisions	Echevarria (2012); Gerras & Wong (2016)	NATO Mission Command Concept (2020); U.S. ADP 6-0	Enhances agility in complex battlefields
Learning Culture & Operational Resilience	Institutionalizes adaptation and improvement	Argyris & Schön (1996); Farrell & Terriff (2002)	NATO ACT Transformation (2021)	Increases long-term readiness and innovation

Source: Compiled by the author based on NATO (2025a), RAND (2019), and military readiness literature.

4.2.1. Discipline and Command Culture

Discipline is one of the foundational expressions of military organizational culture, providing order, dependability, and collective unity in high-risk environments (Huntington 1957; Janowitz 1960; Soeters 2018). Beyond rule-bound compliance,

culturally embedded discipline is understood across doctrines as a moral and professional commitment that enables coherent mission execution under legitimate command authority (King 2013). Western and non-Western militaries persistently represent discipline as the ethical basis of cohesion: a moral obligation in the U.S. Army (2019, ADP 6-22), founding collective professionalism in NATO (NATO 2023), or keeping military order within Turkish Armed Forces (TSK Disiplin Kanunu 2013). All readiness enablers are pressed behaviors under stress that maintain formation integrity and survivability on the battlefield (Biddle 2010; Griffiths 2002). It further articulates healthy command climates through trust reinforcement between lawful obedience to orders, relationships, and leaders-subordinates (Snider 1999; Ulmer 2012). Psychologically resilient because Lester et al. (2015) say social cohesion is built when shared standards adherence builds resilience

Disciplined command cultures are ready to deliver at the moment of execution, and operational evidence supports this fact. British forces in Korea and the Falklands attribute tactical successes to disciplined small-unit actions, as do Turkish units engaged in nonlinear operations with insurgents inside their territory (RAND 2019). Rapid organizational collapse among Iraqi forces was observed when Mosul fell due to apparently weak discipline, accelerating disintegration within an already failing organization (Galeotti 2019). However, rigidity can have a negative effect by stifling initiative or suppressing mission command, thus reducing agility (Gerras and Wong 2016; Shamir 2011). Modern armies emphasize professional values-based forms of discipline, combining responsible autonomy, ethical leadership, and lawful obedience (Soeters 2018; Wong and Gerras 2015).

4.2.2. Esprit de Corps and Collective Identity

Esprit de corps is defined as pride, emotional bonding, and a sense of shared commitment within the unit. It is one among several standing cultural forces that stand ready to shape combat readiness. More than just morale, it implies an emotional contract built on loyalty and shared hardship, in willingness to endure dangers for the sake of comrades (Griffith 2002; Kolditz et al 2003). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004) explains this mechanism: group identification enhances motivation and sacrifice while making resistance against psychological wear-and-tear possible by military rituals/traditions/collective hardship, which strengthen the same binding identity under fire with cohesion. Empirical research links high levels of unit identification with confidence/endurance,/combat effectiveness. In 2022, the Ukrainian forces were highly ready with a resilience based on a strong national identity and moral cohesion. On the other hand, it was an illustration of how quickly an army with a feeble collective identity disintegrates, no matter what material investments have been made in the collapse of the Afghan National Army (Jones 2021; RAND 2022). This is more proof that emotional-cultural cohesion should be attained by cultural cultivation because there can never be sufficient resources to create it. Spirit de corps is taken as a doctrinal requirement. NATO defines it within warrior spirit\endash related endurance components (NATO 2025b), emphasized

through shared hardship in U.S. Army doctrine (U.S. Army 2019), and the Turkish Armed Forces highlight “spirit of unity and comradeship” among their core values for resilience. At the Battalion/System level, Esprit de Corps enhances readiness via three mechanisms: Stress resistance (Sustaining alertness under prolonged strain), determination (reinforcing perseverance during hardship), and value-based (preventing fragmentation under pressure). Esprit de corps is not at all an obsolete concept but a central psychosocial readiness factor in the modern hybrid warfare, where identity, morale, and cohesion have again assumed the role of decisive strategic elements. However, in fact, it explains what has changed about this rather than suggesting that hybrid warfare has rendered it obsolete (King 2013; Wong and Gerras 2015; RUSI 2022).

4.2.3. Trust, Cohesion, and Moral Readiness

Trust and cohesion are the psychological core of readiness. They have always turned out to be some of the best predictors of actual performance on the battlefield (Griffith 2002; King 2013; Lester et al. 2015). Trust coordinates action under risk whereby confidence is reinforced in leaders, fellow soldiers, and the mission itself that discipline structures behavior (Britt, Castro, and Adler 2005; Wong and Gerras 2015). Cohesion binds them into a single fighting unit capable of sustaining combat with emotional resilience (Siebold 2007; Soeters 2018). This is what sustains moral readiness – the will to fight psychologically despite adversity – trust at different levels between peers horizontally and toward leaders vertically as distinguished by military research (Griffith 2002; Siebold 2007). The insurance among comrades never to leave each other behind remains one powerful source among many for courage found on battlefields (Shils and Janowitz 1948; Kolditz et al. 2003). Obedience is based on perceived competence and fairness rather than fear. Vertical trust enhances a higher level of obedience based on perceived competence and fairness (Snider 1999; Gerras and Wong 2016). Empirical findings among the U.S. forces, NATO forces, and Israeli forces state that cohesion is a much better predictor of combat performance than material or numerical superiority (Ben-Shalom and Shamir 2011; Lester et al. 2015). Trust drives moral readiness: “preparedness in the mind” and willingness to go through the stress of battle (Britt et al. 2007). Moral readiness emanates from ethical conviction, emotional resilience – a soldier’s alignment with his leaders’ purpose, cultural attributes enhanced through training (Soeters 2018; RUSI 2022).

Recent wars have emphasized this dynamic relationship between trust and defense: Ukraine’s defense of Kyiv in 2022 was dependent largely on strong horizontal trust and volunteer cohesiveness, while the collapse of the Afghan National Army was a result of long-term erosion of vertical trust-in leadership (Jones 2021; RAND 2022). According to the doctrines of both NATO and national armies (Turkiye included), morale, cohesion, and institutional trust form the basic parameters of readiness. Trust is considered a strategic resource by modern armies, which sustains endurance, allows decentralized execution and accomplishment of missions, and is therefore being treated as much more than just a psychological contract within their

organizations. The breakdown at any level in command of authority due to a lack/trust would mean an extremely fast deterioration of organizational readiness.

4.2.4. Mission Command and Adaptive Execution

Mission Command is both a doctrinal philosophy and cultural system oriented toward the facilitation of initiative-based execution through decentralized command structures. This, therefore, involves trust elements between different echelons in the intent put forward by commanders; disciplined initiatives are considered within distributed decision-making processes (Shamir 2011; Echevarria 2012). That a command climate, where subordinates are empowered by intent rather than detailed control, exists at all levels implies, however, that it cannot exist or be practiced effectively within any organization whose dominant culture happens to be one of fear, rigidity, bureaucracy, etc. (Ulmer 2012; Soeters 2018). From an aspect concerning readiness, mission command enables what NATO has defined as “adaptive execution” ability, forces change intentions, tactics, and real-time situational awareness (NATO 2023). Two components allow this to happen culturally: decentralized initiative, junior leaders allowed to exploit opportunities, and mutual trust and shared understanding prevent the paralysis of decisions under uncertainty. Top-down orders increase organizational survivability. Contemporary conflicts demonstrate a connection between readiness and the fact that Ukrainian drone cells are organized around small autonomous units. The government and military leadership admitted the effectiveness of this strategy in restricting Russian advances through accelerated adaptation for 2022/23 winter operations (Watling and Reynolds 2022; RUSI 2022). RAND reports also highlighted a fact that has been largely glossed over in public discourse: luck ran out long before Western material support arrived because something far more important was institutionalized within the armed forces after the 2014 reforms—central mission-type command culture. Meanwhile, Russian forces were suffering another well-documented fate: centralized rigidity where initiative is punished, and tactical flexibility arrives late. NATO’s Mission Command warfighting principle is again contested inside its own ranks but codified as core doctrine by the Capstone Concept for Turkish Armed Forces, stating they practice mission-oriented command: “Commanders provide their intent at all levels down to the lowest echelons possible; subordinates determine how best execute based on the situation.” Thus, Mission Command is a readiness enabler. Accelerating decision cycles, such as Boyd’s OODA loop, improves adaptability and survivability against hybrid and asymmetric threats by embedding empowerment and ethical command norms into organizational culture through training that makes the rules second nature to all members of the organization.

4.2.5. Learning Culture and Operational Resilience

A new buzzword for being ready to fight has entered the scene. Resilience. The ability of a force to stay functional under disruption and be able to dynamically adjust in real time (NATO 2023; Murray and Millett 1998). What sits at the heart of resilience is learning culture – the organizational capability standing on failure detection and

assimilation of battlefield feedback into rapid adjustment of doctrine, tactics, and procedures (Argyris and Schön 1996; Garvin 2000). Readiness as a cultural process rather than a condition when adversaries are continually adaptive within high-risk dynamic environments becomes something that is pursued continuously by military organizations. There are three levels at which military personnel learn: individual experiential learning, unit-level collective learning, and institutional doctrinal adaptation (Crossan, Lane, and White 1999; Farrell and Osinga 2015). Integration between these levels through after-action reviews (AAR) and more structured lessons learned systems, which convert operational shortfalls into improvement forms, effective learning cultures (U.S Army 2021, FM7-0; NATO JALLC 2019).

Recent wars display a clear connection between the readiness advantages and learning-oriented cultures. Small Ukrainian units rapidly adjusted their tactics in the early stages of the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion, agility attributed to a NATO-style learning system introduced into the armed forces after 2014 (Watling and Reynolds 2022; RAND 2023). On the other hand, Russian units were found with doctrinal rigidity supported by a punitive command climate that hardly allows any form of learning through adaptation-by-mistake processes Galeotti (2019). It has therefore become an agenda for readiness transformation across NATO formations where cognitive agility is emphasized together with interoperability and organizational adaptabilities as reflected among Turkish Armed Forces who institutionalized debriefing-and-review practice within joint training cycles Learning-oriented cultures enable junior leaders execute innovations under pressure situations while keeping them disciplined executors, hence what many have described “disciplined flexibility” (Shamir 2011; Raetze et al. 2022; Weick and Sutcliffe 2015). A modern military is prepared if it can learn faster than its opponents. This has become a popular aphorism in contemporary defense scholarship (Freedman 2017; Farrell et al. 2013). Readiness may not be an attribute sitting at the periphery of learning culture, but is rather the process by which battlefield friction is transformed into adaptation and sits at the core of resilient, combat-effective organizations.

5. Discussion

These results show that organizational culture is not some peripherally sociological variable but lies at the very heart of a determinant pathway toward combat readiness. Only part of the variance in battlefield performance can be explained by material indicators: training hours, equipment availability, and force size, as parameters within which outcomes are possible. A self-reinforcing system is formed by five cultural drivers discovered in this study that determine what militaries think about learning and action under conditions involving risk and uncertainty. Three key insights emerge:

First, readiness is fundamentally cultural before it becomes material. A force with strong discipline, identity, trust, initiative, and learning orientation always

outperforms a materially better adversary. The collapse of the Afghan National Army despite huge external investments shows the limits of a material-centric readiness model. On the other hand, Ukrainian forces show how much operational resilience can be exhibited when there is strength at the cultural level.

Second, cultural drivers interact synergistically. Trust with discipline and order. Cohesion with mission command is synergetic to order from trust and discipline. Identity with learning- readiness as an emergent property of a balanced, integrated system between different cultural drivers.

Third, the Culture–Readiness Framework explains that military organizations differ vastly in their speeds of adaptation. Cultural factors permit quick processing of information on battles, readiness for decentralized initiatives at lower levels, and continuous improvements or changes. These are capabilities necessary under conditions of hybrid warfare where an opponent develops new tactics faster than they can be countered through traditional bureaucratic means.

They challenge dominant readiness metrics and demand conceptualization-integration wider than including cultural variables into policy, doctrine, and force development.

Conclusion

This study shows organizational culture as the deep structure of combat readiness, in how military organizations think and behave, adapt or sustain themselves under uncertainty and operational stress. From a long diversity of doctrines, theoretical perspectives, and contemporary cases on conflict, a single pattern emerges as readiness is not just some function regarding headcount, available equipment, or completed training cycles, but that collective cultural capacity which helps military organizations transform material resources into actual, effective, and sustained fighting power. The five identified cultural drivers work as an interdependent system to generate psychological, operational, and institutional forms of readiness across discipline, esprit de corps, trust & cohesion, mission command, and learning orientation. It explains at a very basic level why forces similarly materially prepared can perform so radically differently when engaged for real in combat situations. On the other hand, armed forces without such cultural attributes disintegrate rapidly under apparent conditions of readiness on paper once they come into contact with real pressure. A comparison emerging from recent conflicts ensures this conclusion: trust, a shared sense of belonging between members and leaders at all levels within an organization's culture; internalization by command structures down through every rank to the lowest soldier in ethical behavior that learns dynamically. These factors strongly condition success or failure for battlefield outcomes.

Theoretically, this study integrates six major perspectives (RBV, HRO, SIT and SET, Mission Command doctrine, and Organizational Learning Theory) into a unified

Culture–Readiness Framework. This is the first theory to overcome fragmented literature and position culture as a strategic capability: durable, path-dependent, and difficult to replicate. It also clearly specifies the mechanisms through which culture enables disciplined autonomy, social cohesion, and adaptive problem solving; hence reducing long-standing tension between hierarchy versus initiative in military organizations. Practically, it indicates that investment in organizational cultures should be considered equally important as investments made toward technology, logistics, force structure by military leaders or defense policymakers who must transform so-called “soft factors” of cohesion/trust/command climate/moral readiness/learning systems into hard measurable components of readiness. It also determines the level at which it becomes ready because readiness is a function of culture. Therefore, there can be no compensation for technological or numerical superiority over an enemy whose cultural foundation is strong, but that of its own forces is weak and brittle. By recognizing culture as a core readiness enabler and cultivating disciplined institutional cohesion, armed forces will attain preparedness to sustain them in discovery and victory over complex twenty-first-century conflicts.

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Privatization of Security Revisited: the Expansion of Private Security Companies in the Age of Hybrid Conflict (2013-2025)

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Abstract

We are witnessing the emergence of the “distributed state” : a governance model where sovereign responsibilities are networked rather than hierarchical. This article revisits the trajectory of private security companies (PSCs) over the last decade, identifying a structural transition from neoliberal outsourcing to “distributed sovereignty”. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Singer and McFate, the analysis reveals how the “market for force” has expanded into the cognitive and cyber domains , effectively outsourcing the definition of security itself. The article highlights the specific implications for governance, noting that private security is embedded in resilience plans at EU as well as in Romania at national level, this dependency creates new vulnerabilities regarding accountability and strategic autonomy. Ultimately, the article posits that the regulation of this distributed architecture will define the legitimacy of the twenty-first-century state.

Keywords:

Privatization of Security; Hybrid Warfare; Cyber Governance;
Private Military Companies; Security Governance; Durable Disorder.

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Introduction: From Liberal Peace to Strategic Disorder

When *Privatization of Security* was first published in 2013 (Babadac 2013), the expansion of private security companies (PSCs) appeared as a rational extension of neoliberal economic reform and state modernization. The logic of efficiency and flexibility – imported from corporate management – seemed to provide governments with a tool for maintaining global order at lower cost and higher responsiveness. That moment coincided with what many scholars then described as the “liberal peace paradigm”: a belief that global governance, international institutions, and open markets could together sustain a predictable security environment.

A decade later, that world has fractured. The erosion of multilateralism, the diffusion of technology, and the hybridization of warfare have produced what McFate (2019) terms an “age of durable disorder,” in which instability is not an exception but a systemic feature. The privatization of security no longer functions merely as a symptom of neoliberal outsourcing – it has become a structural mechanism for managing disorder. Private security companies, defense contractors, cyber firms, and risk consultancies now populate what Singer (2003) originally called the “market for force,” but that market has since evolved from the physical battlefield to the digital, information, and psychological domains.

This transformation reveals the paradox of twenty-first-century security: while states remain the principal legal authorities in war and peace, they depend increasingly on private actors to maintain both. The wars of Iraq and Afghanistan created a foundation for private military contracting; the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine have normalized it. The post-2014 hybrid confrontations between Russia and the West blurred traditional distinctions between state and non-state, military and commercial, legitimate and clandestine. As Petraeus and Roberts (Petraeus and Roberts 2022) demonstrate, the “character” of warfare evolves faster than its nature: technology, information, and privatization have changed the ways states exercise power, but not the political purposes for which power is used.

At the same time, the privatization of security exposes a deeper normative tension. Kilcullen (2009, 45) observed that modern conflicts occur “among the people,” where legitimacy and perception matter as much as firepower. The proliferation of private security actors within societies – guarding cities, ports, and data centers – blurs the line between citizen and client, protection and control. In this sense, privatization represents not simply a reconfiguration of military capacity but a redefinition of political authority.

By 2025, the global private security industry will encompass not only military contracting but also cyber defense, crisis logistics, satellite surveillance, and AI-based threat analysis. The phenomenon must therefore be analyzed not merely

through the lens of economics, but through the frameworks of security governance, technological acceleration, and political legitimacy. As the following sections argue, the privatization of security now constitutes a central component of what might be called the “distributed state”: a system in which power is networked, responsibilities are outsourced, and security has become both a commodity and a governance function.

Theoretical Framework: Security Governance in the Market for Force

The privatization of security erodes the Weberian concept of the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence, replacing it with polycentric governance networks. These networks merge state institutions, corporate entities, and non-state actors into complex systems of contractual control. As Avant (2016) argues, private security markets embody neoliberal governance itself: authority becomes distributed, and accountability becomes transactional.

Singer’s model (Singer 2003) of the market for force remains instructive. It describes a world where private firms compete to offer military expertise, logistics, and technology in the same way global corporations offer financial or transport services. However, the 2020s have extended this logic far beyond physical combat: private actors now guard data, algorithms, and infrastructure as much as territory or personnel.

McFate’s notion of “durable disorder” (McFate 2019) usefully frames the coexistence of permanent instability and commercialized security. Yet, it must now be understood alongside a resurgence of great-power competition. Petraeus and Roberts show how modern conflict spans from high-intensity mechanized warfare to irregular insurgencies and digital campaigns (Petraeus and Roberts 2022). Ryan identifies this as the fusion battlefield – a multidimensional environment in which conventional, cyber, and informational operations intertwine (Ryan 2022, 58).

Within this system, privatization represents a form of strategic adaptation. States increasingly rely on private partners for flexibility, deniability, and innovation. As Brose warns, reliance on slow, state-owned defense bureaucracies has rendered Western militaries vulnerable to faster, cheaper, and decentralized technologies—precisely the space in which private companies excel (Brose 2020).

The Transformation of Warfare and the New Drivers of Privatization

The hybridization of warfare – where conventional, irregular, information, and economic instruments converge – has elevated the private sector from subcontractor to co-producer of power. The Russian Federation’s use of private military companies

such as the Wagner Group exemplifies this evolution. Wagner's operations across Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and several African states revealed how private entities could extend state influence while maintaining plausible deniability. Wagner combined mercenary tactics with corporate organization, functioning simultaneously as a geopolitical instrument and a commercial venture securing mining, logistics, and infrastructure contracts ([Sukhankin 2019](#)).

In liberal democracies, the logic differs, but the effect converges. The United States and its allies increasingly rely on private partners not only for logistics and protection, but for intelligence, cyber operations, and weapons systems integration. Companies like Constellis and Aegis manage complex security portfolios; Palantir Technologies, meanwhile, provides real-time battlefield analytics and AI-driven targeting support that underpin modern command architectures. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the indispensability of private data, satellite, and software providers to contemporary defense. Starlink's communications systems and Maxar's satellite imagery illustrate how private assets have become operational components of state warfighting capacity.

Singer's ([2003](#)) early observation – that corporations would one day rival states as military providers – has materialized. Today, the boundaries between defense contractors, information firms, and military actors are fluid. What Kilcullen described as “wars among the people” now occur through networks managed as much by engineers and coders as by soldiers ([Kilcullen 2009](#)).

The cyber domain has become the most dynamic arena of privatized security. Since 2013, the explosion of ransomware, espionage, and hybrid cyber-operations has pushed states to outsource both defensive and offensive capabilities to private entities. Firms such as CrowdStrike, FireEye, and Palo Alto Networks have evolved into quasi-sovereign defenders of national infrastructure. Their operations – attributing attacks, restoring compromised systems, or neutralizing malware – represent functions traditionally associated with intelligence and defense agencies ([Deibert 2020](#)).

This digital privatization introduces profound strategic implications. Brose emphasizes that the future of warfare will hinge not on superior firepower, but on control of the “kill chain” – the integration of sensors, data, and decisions across distributed networks ([Brose 2020](#)). Private technology companies now dominate this chain. Their algorithms determine how states perceive threats, allocate responses, and manage escalation. The speed at which data flows through these networks gives private actors a form of temporal power: the ability to shape not only the way conflicts are fought, but also when and why they occur.

Furthermore, the cybersecurity industry functions as a market of deterrence. Corporations sell “resilience” as a subscription service – protecting critical

infrastructure, financial systems, and even democratic processes. This model transforms security from a collective good into a privatized commodity. The same firms that defend against cyber threats often conduct post-incident consultancy, risk assessment, and narrative control, blurring lines between defense, information management, and reputation protection.

Ryan (2022) and Petraeus & Roberts (2022) both argue that the next decade of conflict will be defined by the integration of artificial intelligence and autonomous systems into every level of warfare. The private sector leads this transformation. Companies like Anduril, Shield AI, and Helsing in Europe develop autonomous reconnaissance and targeting platforms for both commercial and military clients. The result is a new military-industrial ecology, in which innovation cycles are driven by venture capital and dual-use technology rather than state procurement.

This ecology erodes the traditional separation between public defense and private enterprise. As Ryan notes, the “fusion battlefield” combines physical and digital domains through continuous data exchange. The private sector’s dominance in AI and machine learning ensures that states must either collaborate or risk obsolescence. The privatization of autonomy extends beyond hardware into the algorithms that prioritize threats and allocate force – effectively delegating elements of command to code.

Privatization also reflects economic adaptation. Global defense spending has increasingly flowed through private channels; by 2025, private security and defense firms will constitute one of the fastest-growing sectors in transnational capital markets. This growth corresponds to what McFate calls the “endless demand for security” in a world of enduring instability (McFate 2019). Yet it also reinforces structural dependency: states outsource risk but not responsibility, while corporations acquire influence without accountability.

Petraeus and Roberts stress that even in Ukraine – a conflict marked by traditional attrition – private actors play decisive roles in logistics, information, and precision support (Petraeus and Roberts 2022). The trend suggests a return not to total war but to total mobilization, in which the entire society, including its private sector, becomes a participant in conflict. In this environment, privatization is not a deviation from the state’s function but a constitutive element of its resilience strategy.

Political Economy, Law, and Ethics of Privatized Security

Privatization of security must be situated within a broader political-economic and legal framework. It is not simply an operational convenience but an expression of neoliberal governance – the extension of market rationality into domains once reserved for sovereign authority. As Avant (2016) and Krahmman (2017) note, private security embodies a shift from hierarchy to network, from rule-based administration to contract-based management.

Economically, this transformation creates powerful incentives for perpetual insecurity. Security becomes a growth industry. McFate cautions that in a world of durable disorder, peace may no longer be profitable (Avant 2016). When stability threatens revenue, actors – whether corporations or states – may prefer managed instability. This dynamic mirrors what Kilcullen observed in counterinsurgency: the presence of external contractors often sustains the conflict ecosystems they claim to resolve (Kilcullen 2009).

Legally, privatization challenges the foundations of accountability. International humanitarian law presupposes clear chains of command and state responsibility. Yet private entities operate in contractual rather than hierarchical relationships, complicating liability for violations. The Montreux Document and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers represent attempts to regulate the industry, but both remain voluntary. As Petraeus and Roberts remark, “war has outpaced law”. (Petraeus and Roberts 2022)

Ethically, the privatization of security raises fundamental questions of legitimacy. Who authorizes the use of force when private actors are both providers and beneficiaries of insecurity? Can a corporation claim moral neutrality while shaping the conditions of conflict? Brose (2020) and Deibert (2020) highlight parallel dilemmas in the digital sphere: algorithmic decision-making and data monopolies concentrate enormous coercive power in non-state hands.

The privatized security sector thus occupies an ambiguous moral terrain. It enables states to act more efficiently, yet undermines the collective control that defines legitimate authority. Its normalization – across military, cyber, and information domains – represents the quiet privatization of sovereignty itself.

The European and Romanian Context: Integration, Regulation, and Strategic Autonomy

The European experience provides an illuminating case of how privatization, once treated as a pragmatic response to shrinking defense budgets, has matured into a pillar of continental resilience. Within the European Union (EU), the evolution of private security has been shaped not only by market forces but also by normative frameworks that embed private actors in hybrid governance.

Following the 2015 migration crisis, a series of terrorist attacks, and the acceleration of Russian hybrid operations, the EU has pursued a comprehensive strategy of resilience. The EU Security Union Strategy 2020-2025 formalized what was already occurring in practice: the outsourcing of critical security functions to private entities operating under EU-wide standards. Private firms now manage cybersecurity for financial systems, surveillance of transport nodes, and logistics for humanitarian operations. The European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation

(PESCO) have also opened the defense innovation ecosystem to private consortia, aligning commercial innovation with collective defense objectives.

This institutionalization of privatized security has altered the balance between regulation and competition. The International Code of Conduct Association (ICoCA) and ISO 18788:2015 standards have established operational benchmarks, but enforcement remains fragmented across national jurisdictions. Some member states – such as France, the Netherlands, and Romania – maintain rigorous licensing regimes, while others adopt a lighter regulatory touch to encourage competitiveness. The result is a semi-harmonized market in which private actors operate under a patchwork of overlapping but non-binding rules.

The paradox for the EU is evident. On the one hand, privatization advances efficiency and innovation; on the other, it complicates accountability and coherence. The emergence of strategic autonomy as an EU goal reinforces this duality: autonomy requires both technological independence and regulatory unity. Yet, the EU's reliance on private cyber-defense and logistics contractors means that strategic autonomy itself now depends on the coordination of public and private capabilities rather than on purely state capacity.

Within NATO, privatization has become structurally embedded. The Alliance's Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) and NATO Innovation Fund explicitly link private firms with military innovation pipelines. Cyber resilience, satellite surveillance, and unmanned systems development increasingly occur through public-private ecosystems. While this collaboration enhances adaptability, it also produces dependence: the defense of critical digital infrastructure, for instance, now rests on contracts with corporations headquartered in a handful of Western economies.

Petraeus and Roberts argue that modern warfare's tempo leaves no alternative; state bureaucracies cannot innovate at market speed (Petraeus and Roberts 2022). Yet this logic raises questions about sovereignty and interoperability. If deterrence is underwritten by private code and cloud services, who ensures its continuity in a crisis? The Article 5 guarantee, traditionally grounded in state capacity, now requires the participation of firms that are neither bound by alliance treaties nor accountable to electorates.

Romania's security sector illustrates how a national market can evolve from reactive service provision to strategic partnership. In the early 2000s, private security primarily addressed domestic protection of banks, malls, and critical facilities. By the 2020s, the industry had diversified into cyber defense, energy-infrastructure security, and intelligence consultancy. Successive amendments to Law 333/2003 modernized licensing and oversight, while EU accession facilitated integration into continental standards.

Romania's geopolitical position – bordering Ukraine and the Black Sea – has made it a frontline state in the European hybrid-threat landscape. Private Romanian firms now participate in NATO logistics, maritime security, and EU cyber-resilience initiatives. Several companies provide AI-based surveillance and maritime situational awareness for the Danube–Black Sea corridor, supported by EU funding mechanisms. The private sector's involvement in critical-infrastructure protection and civil-military preparedness demonstrates how privatization, properly integrated, can enhance state resilience rather than undermine it.

Yet, vulnerabilities persist. Oversight mechanisms remain under-resourced, and coordination between ministries and corporate actors is inconsistent. Romania's experience thus mirrors the continental challenge: privatization strengthens operational capacity, but demands equally robust governance to safeguard legitimacy.

Accountability, Ethics, and the Human Security Dilemma

The growing entanglement of private actors in security functions raises enduring normative questions about accountability, transparency, and human rights. The diffusion of coercive authority across contracts and algorithms erodes traditional notions of public responsibility.

International law still assumes clear chains of command. The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols were drafted for state militaries, not corporate contractors. The Montreux Document remains the principal soft-law instrument, emphasizing state obligations to regulate PMSCs ([International Committee of the Red Cross and Swiss Government 2008](#)). Yet, its voluntary nature limits its reach. ICoCA has created a framework for compliance and grievance mechanisms, but its jurisdiction is neither global nor binding.

This gap is compounded in cyberspace. Private cybersecurity firms operate transnationally, frequently crossing legal boundaries to investigate or counter intrusions. Attribution – the act of identifying a culprit – has strategic implications: when a private company publicly attributes a cyberattack to a foreign state, it can escalate diplomatic tensions. Deibert notes that such “narrative authority” constitutes a new form of soft power exercised by corporate actors. Thus, privatization extends beyond security delivery to security definition – deciding who is a threat and what constitutes aggression ([Deibert 2020](#)).

The ethical dilemma centers on motive. In the classical social contract, protection was a public duty; in the privatized model, it is a service sold under profit motives. McFate warns that in a marketized security order, peace becomes unprofitable. The economic incentives driving private actors may diverge from the humanitarian imperatives of stability ([McFate 2019](#)).

Brose's account of U.S. defense procurement illustrates how entrenched interests resist disruption even when innovation is vital. Similarly, in the global security

market, large firms thrive on continual demand (Brose 2020). This structural dependency risks transforming security into an endless commodity cycle: threat inflation feeds contract renewal, and crisis becomes a business model.

Human-security advocates argue that this commodification undermines universality. When protection depends on the ability to pay, inequalities deepen. The privatization of border control, for instance, often results in harsh enforcement practices outsourced to companies shielded from public scrutiny. Likewise, private surveillance networks in urban environments generate data asymmetries that reinforce social stratification.

To reconcile efficiency with ethics, governance must evolve. Three principles are essential:

1. Transparency – public disclosure of contracts, operational mandates, and risk assessments.
2. Accountability – legal mechanisms that attach responsibility for misconduct both to firms and to the states that employ them.
3. Human-centric design – embedding human rights due diligence into technological and operational planning.

These principles resonate with Ryan's vision of a "values-based adaptation" in future warfare: states and corporations must integrate ethical foresight into innovation cycles (Ryan 2022). Only through such integration can privatization serve collective security rather than narrow interest.

Privatization, Technology

The decade ahead promises an even deeper convergence of technology, markets, and security. Petraeus and Roberts foresee an era of simultaneous competition across land, sea, space, and cyberspace – a "multi-domain continuum" (Petraeus and Roberts 2022). Privatization will be central to that continuum, not peripheral.

Autonomous systems – drones, sensors, and robotic platforms – are increasingly produced by private firms. The integration of AI into command systems will extend the delegation of decision-making from humans to algorithms. Ryan predicts that the next revolution in military affairs will be cognitive, defined by the struggle to shape perception and information flows. Private tech companies, social-media platforms, and data-analytics firms already play decisive roles in that domain (Ryan 2022).

The implication is profound: control of cognition becomes control of conflict. When algorithmic systems determine threat priorities or disseminate narratives, they effectively wield strategic influence. Unless constrained by transparent governance, this cognitive privatization may distort democratic decision-making and blur truth itself as a weapon.

Global defense-technology markets link security to financialization. Venture-capital investment in dual-use technologies – from autonomous drones to quantum encryption – creates a transnational web of dependency. States compete for innovation while relying on globalized supply chains vulnerable to disruption. The line between strategic partner and commercial supplier becomes indistinct.

McFate’s concept of “durable disorder” applies here: the security economy thrives on volatility (McFate 2019). Yet, as Brose observes, technological disruption can also empower smaller states and non-state actors, democratizing power but amplifying instability (Brose 2020). The challenge for governance lies in balancing innovation’s benefits against its centrifugal effects on authority.

A gradual counter-trend is emerging: states and international bodies are revisiting regulation. Proposals for an updated Montreux 2.0 framework and the EU’s Artificial Intelligence Act aim to extend accountability into algorithmic security. The goal is not to reverse privatization, but to civilize it – to create what might be termed ethical sovereignty, where private capability operates under public norms.

Such efforts will face resistance from both corporate lobbies and great-power rivalry. Nevertheless, they mark an acknowledgment that the future of security cannot rest solely on efficiency; legitimacy must anchor capability.

Governing the New Security Order

Privatization of security has matured into one of the defining structural transformations of the early twenty-first century. The process that began as fiscal outsourcing has evolved into a system of distributed sovereignty, where public and private actors co-produce security, intelligence, and deterrence. This new order reflects both continuity and rupture: continuity with the state’s enduring need to monopolize organized violence, and rupture in the means through which that monopoly is exercised.

The preceding analysis suggests that privatization has moved through three overlapping phases. The first, identified by Singer, was the corporate phase—the rise of private military companies performing tactical tasks for states (Singer 2003). The second, corresponding roughly to 2010–2020, was the technological phase, in which cybersecurity, information warfare, and AI-driven analytics became privatized. The third, emerging today, may be termed the governance phase: private actors now participate directly in shaping strategic environments and global norms.

This trajectory has profound implications for statehood and international order. As McFate argues, the traditional distinction between war and peace has dissolved into a continuum of durable disorder (McFate 2019). Yet, this disorder is not chaotic; it is organized through contracts, algorithms, and economic interdependence.

Privatization provides structure to instability – it commercializes uncertainty and institutionalizes flexibility.

At the same time, thinkers such as Petraeus and Roberts remind us that warfare remains fundamentally political. States cannot delegate legitimacy, even when they outsource capability (Petraeus and Roberts 2022). The challenge, therefore, is not to resist privatization, but to regulate it – embedding ethical and legal standards into the architecture of hybrid governance.

The implications extend beyond conflict. The privatization of cyber and AI security signifies a deeper societal shift toward algorithmic authority. Decisions about surveillance, risk assessment, and even deterrence are increasingly automated and corporatized. As Brose (2020) and Deibert (2020) warn, such concentration of digital power risks undermining democratic accountability. The emerging frontier of “defense tech capitalism” fuses national security with venture investment, creating a geopolitical economy in which code becomes a strategic asset and sovereignty is expressed through data ownership.

Ultimately, the evolution of privatized security represents a reconfiguration of the social contract. In classical political thought, citizens granted the state the right to use force in exchange for protection. In the privatized order, that exchange becomes transactional: protection is purchased, not guaranteed. This commodification of safety alters the moral foundation of governance. The question is no longer merely who controls the means of violence but who controls the platforms that define security itself.

Looking toward 2035, three outcomes appear plausible. First, a pragmatic consolidation: states will integrate private partners through licensing, joint command systems, and data-sharing frameworks – what might be called “regulated hybridity.” Second, a normative backlash: demands for transparency and human rights accountability will generate new global standards akin to a Montreux 2.0. Third, a dystopian drift: if left unchecked, privatization could entrench inequality, where protection is stratified by wealth and access to technology.

The choice among these futures will depend on governance. As Singer warned two decades ago, the privatization of force is irreversible once institutionalized. The task before policymakers and scholars is therefore to ensure that private power operates within democratic bounds, not beyond them. The next frontier of security governance will not be defined by the weapons we wield but by the contracts, codes, and ethical commitments that determine who wields them, for whom, and at what cost.

The privatization of security has evolved from post-Cold War outsourcing into a defining feature of twenty-first-century warfare and governance. This article revisits and expands the 2013 analysis of private security companies in light of

the transformations brought by hybrid warfare, digitalization, and geopolitical realignment. Drawing on contemporary perspectives from Singer, McFate, Petraeus, Ryan, and others, it situates private security within a broader framework of security governance and durable disorder. The study examines how private actors now operate across kinetic, cyber, and cognitive domains – reshaping sovereignty, accountability, and the political economy of conflict. It argues that privatization no longer supplements state power, but constitutes one of its structural components, demanding new ethical and regulatory approaches. The article concludes that effective governance of privatized security will determine whether it strengthens collective resilience or deepens global inequality.

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West Africa's Quest for Regional Stability: A Study of the Efficacy of Operation Gama Aiki's Military Joint Task Force

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Abstract

Since the Boko Haram insurgency evolved into a full-blown terrorist operation, it has caused unprecedented damage to both domestic and international relations, particularly in Niger and neighboring countries. While some critics argue that the armed forces were initially unprepared and under-equipped, states in the Lake Chad Basin have taken decisive steps to combat the insurgency through kinetic and strategic measures. This study assesses the effectiveness of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), focusing specifically on Operation Gama Aiki, in tackling the ongoing challenges posed by terrorism and insurgency in the region from 2019 to 2024. By examining key operational outcomes such as the reduction in insurgent attacks, fatalities, territorial gains, and the weakening of insurgent logistics and command structures, the research combines qualitative and quantitative data, including MNJTF situation reports, UN Security Council briefings, and reports from the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC). The findings reveal notable progress in diminishing the strength of insurgent forces. However, challenges like logistical issues, limited intelligence-sharing, and the complex political dynamics of member states continue to affect the MNJTF's effectiveness. The study also delves into the wider regional and international implications of these efforts, emphasizing the importance of sustained cooperation among member states and global partners. These insights contribute significantly to understanding the role of multinational military operations in counter-terrorism and the broader regional security context in West Africa.

Keywords:

Counterinsurgency; Joint Taskforce; Terrorism; Lake Chad; Security.

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Introduction

Terrorism and insurgency are now major global threats, reshaping the manner in which countries approach national security and driving international efforts to end these conflicts. As security threats are increasingly interlinked, countries, along with international organizations, have had to work more closely together to combat terrorism (Onuoha 2016). In Africa, the fallout from the Arab Spring and the disintegration of Libya in 2011 created a power vacuum that resulted in the spread of small arms and light weapons throughout the Sahel and West Africa, which aggravated regional insecurity (Osimen et al. 2020). The spread of these weapons has empowered non-state armed actors, making it easier for terrorist groups to expand.

West Africa, in retrospect, has been faced with rising terrorism, insurgency, organized crime, and political instability. At the heart of this crisis is the insurgency of Boko Haram and its breakaway faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). They have unleashed massive violence, displaced millions, devastated local economies, and weakened state institutions in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (Araziua 2023). The porous borders of the Lake Chad Basin, coupled with poor governance and socio-economic conditions, have also heightened these security threats, giving insurgent groups more room to attack and flee military counterattacks.

The changing face of conflict on the African continent, from one that is predominantly state-centered to one that is transnational in nature, has witnessed changes in responses to insecurity by various actors. Part of this development has been the rise of Ad-hoc Security Initiatives (ASIs), which enable regional solutions to conflict. One of the earliest and most successful instances of ASIs on the African continent is the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). It was first developed in 1994 as a Nigerian force to combat cross-border criminality in the Lake Chad region and was expanded in 1998 to include Chadian and Nigerien troops. Its mandate was broadened in 2012 to include counterterrorism operations because of the increasing threat from Boko Haram in North-East Nigeria. In January 2015, Boko Haram took over the MNJTF Headquarters in Baga, Nigeria. The African Union (AU) later endorsed the MNJTF as a regional security mechanism of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and developed a new Concept of Operations (CONOPS) for the Force. As contained in the AU mandate, the MNJTF is now directly under the political guidance of the Executive Secretary of the Lake Chad Basin Commission, who is also the Head of Mission. The military command is under the Force Commander, appointed by Nigeria.

As a reaction to these evolving threats, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) was re-established in 2015 with the support of the African Union (AU) and regional partners, including the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the Benin Republic. The MNJTF is a multilateral military operation designed to harmonize

cross-border operations to counter terrorism, close borders to insurgents' movements, and restore stability in the Lake Chad Basin ([Agbiboa 2020](#)). One of its priority operations, Operation Gama Aiki (OGA), was launched to degrade Boko Haram and ISWAP by combining military operations with civil-military cooperation and humanitarian interventions to address both the symptoms and root causes of terrorism ([Akintoye 2016](#)).

Terrorism in the area is transnational, implying that there has to be a concerted response. Terror organizations have taken advantage of porous borders, moving easily from one country to another to set up bases and evade military personnel after carrying out attacks. This necessitates multinational military cooperation and intelligence sharing to respond effectively to such threats ([Uduo 2025](#)). Between 2019 and 2024, Operation Gama Aiki played an important role in counterinsurgency efforts in the area. While the operation achieved successes such as recapturing territory, dismantling insurgent safe havens, and disrupting terrorist logistics ([Nigerian Air Force 2020](#); [Gabkwet 2021](#)), it also faced challenges. These include inadequate funding, poor intelligence sharing, logistical problems, and socio-political issues among participating countries. These challenges have, at times, slowed the operation's momentum toward its broader goals.

Terrorism and insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin remain among the most pressing security challenges in West Africa, despite efforts by regional and international bodies to stem their tide. The Boko Haram insurgency, which commenced in 2009, and its breakaway faction, ISWAP, have kept the region unstable, causing loss of lives, massive displacement, economic decline, and political instability. By 2023, over 35,000 people were dead and more than 2 million displaced across Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon ([Associated Press 2024](#); [Osasona 2025](#)). These numbers reflect the human cost and the continuing failure of regional and local powers to address the drivers and strategies of these insurgent groups holistically. The research, therefore, seeks to evaluate the performance of Operation Gama Aiki in combating terrorism and insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin region from 2019 to 2024.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Conceptualization of Terrorism

Terrorism is an intricate and controversial term with multiple divergent definitions in academic, political, and policy circles. However, most definitions agree on some fundamental elements: the use of violence, political motivations, and the intention to inspire fear. The United Nations (1994) defines terrorism as "criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons, or particular persons for political purposes." The key observation here is the presence of fear and political motives.

Schmid and Jongman (1988) describe terrorism as a tactic of repeated use of violence by groups or individuals for political or criminal objectives. Their definition highlights that terrorism aims to create fear, not merely to harm its direct victims. From an African perspective, Aghedo and Osumah (2012) argue that terrorism originates from past injustices, weak state institutions, and socio-economic marginalization, especially in fragile states like those in the Lake Chad Basin. These conditions provide fertile ground for violent extremist organizations, typically motivated by ethnic grievances and border conflicts.

Terrorism has evolved from a local issue to a global threat, driven by technological advancements, global networks, and the spread of extremist ideologies. Groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, and ISWAP connect local insurgencies to global jihadist movements, further complicating the nature of terrorism (Zenn 2018). For this study, terrorism is defined as a deliberate act involving the use or threat of violence by non-state actors to instill fear, destabilize public order, and achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives.

Counterterrorism as a Concept

Counterterrorism refers to practices and activities employed by states, international organizations, and regional institutions to prevent, counter, and respond to terrorism. Wilkinson (2006) defines it as “all the practices, tactics, and strategies adopted by governments, militaries, and security agencies to counter or deter terrorism.” This definition includes both proactive and reactive measures. Counterterrorism, therefore, involves concerted military, political, legal, and socio-economic actions aimed at preventing, disrupting, and responding to terrorism while addressing the roots of radicalization.

The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006) outlines four pillars: addressing conditions conducive to extremism, countering terrorism, strengthening state capacity to prevent terrorism, and promoting human rights and the rule of law in counterterrorism efforts. This represents an integrated strategy rather than the mere use of force; it also emphasizes capacity building and tackling the root causes of extremism.

Regional security structures in Africa have also aligned with counterterrorism objectives. The AU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (2002) emphasizes regional collaboration, information exchange, and capacity building. One such example is the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad region, established to combat Boko Haram’s insurgency as a joint military endeavor. Over time, counterterrorism in Africa has moved beyond a strictly military response to include civil-military coordination, deradicalization programs, and efforts to address the socio-political roots of extremism (Onuoha 2014). However, excessive reliance on military measures remains a major challenge.

Concept of Joint Task Force (JTF)

A Joint Task Force (JTF) is a multi-agency or multinational military unit formed to address a specific security threat through coordinated efforts. According to Baylis and Smith (2017), a JTF involves military units from different branches or nations working together under a unified command to achieve strategic objectives. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defines a JTF as “a force composed of military assets from multiple nations or services, brought together temporarily to achieve specific operational objectives.” This definition underscores the task-oriented and temporary nature of a JTF.

In Africa, JTFs are often formed in response to insurgencies or terrorism. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), involving Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and the Benin Republic, serves as an example. JTFs have evolved to include not only military operations but also humanitarian assistance, civil-military coordination, and intelligence sharing. Despite challenges such as poor coordination and resource constraints, JTFs have been relatively effective in addressing security threats (Onuoha, Yaw and Zabala 2023).



Figure 1 Map of Lake Chad Region Showing Member Nations

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chad_Basin#/media/File:Chad_River_Basin_relief_2.png

MNJTF Framework and Challenges

The MNJTF operates through a combination of regional and international mechanisms aimed at combating security threats in the Lake Chad Basin, particularly those posed by Boko Haram and ISWAP. It draws on guidelines from the African Union Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), and United Nations Security Council Resolutions. Established in 2002, APSA promotes cooperation among African states and regional organizations

to prevent conflicts and combat terrorism (Lake Chad Basin Commission 2018). It provides a platform for military and peacekeeping interventions, enabling multinational operations like the MNJTF. The LCBC, established in 1964, plays an important role in mobilizing resources and political will for concerted military action against insurgents in the region (Onuoha, Yaw, and Zabala 2023). LCBC activities promote inter-regional coordination, while the MNJTF positions itself as a central mechanism for confronting Boko Haram and ISWAP.

Resolutions of the UN Security Council (2178, 2195, and 2349) provide the MNJTF with legal backing and operational leadership, emphasizing the importance of information sharing, harmonization, and cross-border collaboration (United Nations Security Council 2017). The MNJTF's agenda includes military missions, humanitarian operations, and peace-building initiatives that support the restoration of peaceful living. Despite this strong framework, challenges such as overlapping mandates, logistical limitations, and political tensions among member states undermine its effectiveness (Onuoha, Yaw and Zabala 2023). In conclusion, while the MNJTF operates within strong frameworks, challenges, including political disunity, resource constraints, and evolving terrorist strategies, continue to hamper its success. Overcoming these impediments is essential to achieving long-term peace and stability in the Lake Chad Basin.

The MNJTF represents a cooperative effort among the Lake Chad Basin countries (Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria) to pool resources against jihadists operating across their borders. The force has carried out joint operations, often involving troops from one country fighting in another. These offensives have secured key victories and helped to build esprit de corps among participating troops. However, highly mobile insurgent forces, coupled with uncertainty in strategic priorities, the reluctance of the four states to cede control to the joint command, and delays in procurement and funding, have weakened the MNJTF's effectiveness.

A successful counter to militancy in the Lake Chad area will depend not only on the combined force but also on member states' commitment to improving the welfare and confidence of affected communities. A more effective MNJTF could help achieve this objective. Countries around Lake Chad must improve planning, communication capacity, information sharing, respect for human rights, and coordination with civilians. They must also negotiate effectively with donors on financing.

The Lake Chad countries, along with Benin, established the MNJTF in its current form between late 2014 and early 2015, contributing about 8,000 troops to the combined force. The African Union formally mandated the force on 3 March 2015 and expected the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) to exercise civilian oversight. The MNJTF thus created a much-needed multilateral platform to combat Boko Haram insurgents, whose growing cross-border attacks had destabilized the region.

Empirical Review

The reviewed literature provides a comprehensive evaluation of the achievements and limitations of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in its counter-Boko Haram operations in the Lake Chad Basin. Onuoha, Yaw and Zabala (2023) noted that while the MNJTF has weakened the operational capabilities of Boko Haram, logistical problems, inadequate funding, and poor intelligence sharing have limited its long-term success. Uduo (2025) also observed conflicting national interests and uncoordinated military strategies, which tend to undermine operational coordination among member states.

Aniekwe and Brooks (2023) observed that although the MNJTF has promoted greater military cooperation among the participating countries, diplomatic disagreements have often undermined coordination and overall effectiveness. Ibekwe and Nosiri (2023) also argued that political fragmentation and differences in military doctrines have complicated cross-border cooperation and reduced the MNJTF's ability to operate effectively.

Shittu, Hamza, and Kitabu (2023) indicated that regional political dynamics, with varying levels of commitment to counterinsurgency, have impeded the task force's efforts at coordinating operations. Adebayo and Adedayo (2019) found that while the MNJTF has contributed to the stabilization of parts of the region, its humanitarian interventions were constrained by security concerns and weak civil-military coordination. In addition, Olawoyin, Akinrinde, and Irabor (2021) highlighted the fact that addressing the root causes of terrorism, such as poverty and unemployment, through socio-economic interventions is imperative for the long-term success of the MNJTF.

Onuoha, Yaw, and Zabala (2023) recently evaluated the success of the MNJTF in achieving its mandates. They indicated that the MNJTF had made significant advances in achieving the first of its mandates, having succeeded in degrading the capability of terrorist organizations in the region and creating an environment conducive to the return of refugees and IDPs to their communities. They also found that the MNJTF was meeting expectations on its second mandate by facilitating the return of IDPs, implementing quick-impact projects, and assisting stabilization actors. However, concerns were raised about the inability of non-military forces (e.g., police) to hold territories freed from Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs). The authors also noted that projects initiated with MNJTF support are not always sustained. Finally, their research concluded that the MNJTF was performing well despite limited capacity and interaction with local populations, although challenges in coordination and interpretation of mandates persist.

Ayandele (2021) and Assanvo et al. (2016) examined how international and regional legal frameworks have shaped MNJTF activities. They observed a lack of effective

enforcement mechanisms and inconsistent cooperation among member states, which limits the task force's operational efficiency. Bassey (2020) and Danladi and Sani (2021) underscored the importance of intelligence sharing for MNJTF success but observed that bureaucratic bottlenecks and language barriers have hampered effective collaboration.

Williams (2016) and Ezeanyika et al. (2025) argued that counterterrorism interventions must go beyond the use of military force and include community-based strategies such as de-radicalization programs to address the root causes of radicalization. These studies imply that while the MNJTF has achieved considerable success, its overall effectiveness depends not only on military operations but also on regional cooperation, humanitarian engagement, and community participation in counterterrorism efforts. In general, the MNJTF has made significant strides in degrading Boko Haram's capability, but its operational gains are offset by logistical, political, and humanitarian challenges. To ensure long-term success, a more integrated approach emphasizing better coordination, improved intelligence sharing, and stronger attention to socio-economic drivers of terrorism is required.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Collective Security

This theory is primarily associated with Immanuel Kant (1795), who philosophically conceptualized collective security in his idea of perpetual peace, which states that cooperation among states deters war. It has since been developed in modern international relations through organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Collective security rests on the premise that peace is maintained through the cooperation of states, based on the belief that an attack on one is an attack on all. The theory emphasizes collective diplomatic, military, and economic action against violent conflict. Such conflicts are to be managed through negotiation and joint intervention by states or organizations.

This theory aptly explains the regional coordination model of the MNJTF, as the task force represents a collaborative effort among states to counter a shared security threat, ensuring collective action for the restoration of peace. However, the weakness of the theory lies in the fact that collective security faces major challenges due to divergent national interests and the preservation of political sovereignty among member states.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design aimed at gaining deeper insight into the structural operations, strategies, and challenges of the MNJTF in combating terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin. The design enables the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data to explore stakeholders' experiences in MNJTF operations. The descriptive aspect focuses on documenting and analyzing

the current situation of MNJTF operations, whereas the exploratory component seeks to identify the factors affecting its efficiency.

The research area covers the Lake Chad Basin, a Central African region shared by Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. The area has suffered greatly from the activities of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP.

Data Presentation and Analysis

A. Security Impact Indicators (2019-2024)

TABLE no. 1. Number of Terrorist Attacks by Boko Haram and ISWAP (2019–2024)

Year	Nigeria (Borno, Yobe)	Niger (Diffa)	Chad (Lac)	Cameroon (Far North)	Total Attacks
2019	240	75	50	88	453
2020	198	60	43	72	373
2021	165	49	37	65	316
2022	120	38	29	58	245
2023	92	30	22	45	189
2024	75 (estimated)	25 (estimated)	18 (estimated)	36 (estimated)	154 (estimated)

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Global Terrorism Database (GTD), Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), and MNJTF/AU Reports

TABLE no. 2. Fatalities from Terrorist Incidents (2019–2024)

Year	Nigeria	Niger	Chad	Cameroon	Total Fatalities
2019	2,340	620	480	710	4,150
2020	1,985	500	410	620	3,515
2021	1,620	430	370	540	2,960
2022	1,150	310	280	470	2,210
2023	950	250	220	400	1,820
2024	800 (est.)	210 (est.)	190 (est.)	350 (est.)	1,550 (est.)

Source: Researchers' survey across various sites and bodies

B. Data Interpretation and Insights

1. Downward Trend in Insurgent Attacks and Fatalities

The data across Tables 1 and 2 reveal a pronounced and consistent downward trend in both the number of insurgent attacks and fatalities in the Lake Chad Basin from 2019 through 2024. Total attacks declined from 453 in 2019 to a projected

154 in 2024, representing a 66% decrease. Fatalities also dropped from 4,150 in 2019 to 1,550 in 2024, marking a 62.6% decline. This regression in violence is not coincidental but reflects the growing operational effectiveness of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), particularly through its flagship Operation Gama Aiki (OGA), which intensified its tempo between 2020 and 2022.

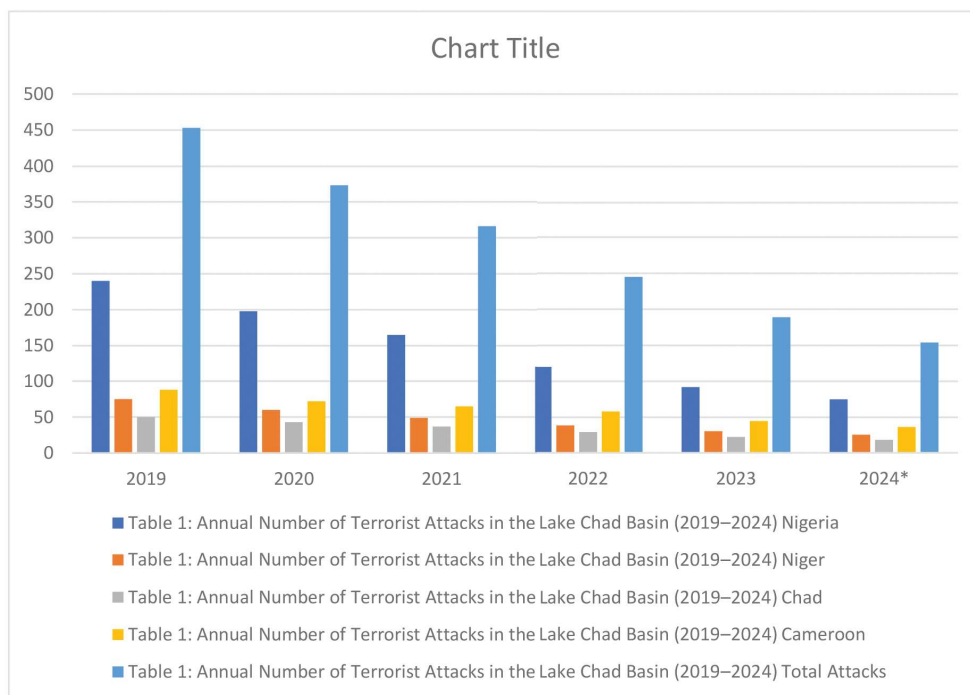


Figure 2 Annual Number of Terrorist Attacks in the Lake Chad Basin (2019-2024)

Source: Researchers Survey 2025

The data presented in Graph 1 were compiled from secondary sources, including reports from the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), and United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) between 2019 and 2024. These sources provided verified records of terrorist incidents, cross-border raids, and insurgent attacks across Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon within the Lake Chad Basin.

This period (2020–2022) coincided with the operational restructuring of MNJTF sectors and the introduction of more coordinated multi-country raids. For instance, in May 2020, Operation YANCIN TAFKI under the MNJTF framework cleared several Boko Haram camps around Lake Chad’s southern flanks (Onuoha, Yaw, and Zabala 2023). Furthermore, the operation employed combined air-ground offensives, leveraging joint drone surveillance and embedded human intelligence, leading to the dismantling of insurgent logistics corridors, especially in Baga, Doron-Baga, and Kukawa regions of Borno State, Nigeria. The Nigerian Air Force, in synergy with Chadian and Nigerien battalions, executed targeted strikes against ISWAP commanders, notably reducing their ability to launch coordinated mass attacks (Osakwe and Audu 2017).

The outcome of these intensified operations was visible. Fatalities in Nigeria the epicenter of Boko Haram's activities fell from 2,340 in 2019 to a projected 800 in 2024. Notably, the death of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau in May 2021, following clashes with ISWAP factions in the Sambisa Forest, disrupted Boko Haram's leadership structure and created fractures within insurgent ranks. As reported by the Dan-Azumi (2025), this vacuum weakened Boko Haram's offensive posture, reduced inter-factional cohesion, and contributed to localized surrenders. The MNJTF capitalized on this by intensifying community engagement, leveraging defectors for actionable intelligence.

Niger, Chad, and Cameroon showed similar declines. For instance, Niger's attack figures dropped from 75 (2019) to 25 (2024), and fatalities from 620 to 210 in the same period. The reduction aligns with Niger's renewed border security operations in Diffa Region and its cooperation with French-led Operation Barkhane in intercepting insurgent spillovers from Mali. Cameroon also strengthened its Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) deployments in the Far North, collaborating with MNJTF Sector 1 (based in Mora) to dismantle smuggling networks that fueled insurgent supply lines (MNJTF 2024).

Scholarly corroboration of this trend can be found in the work of Assanvo et al. (2016), who observed that the synchronized border control, intelligence fusion centers, and cross-national patrols under the MNJTF framework led to a notable geographic contraction of insurgent operating space. According to ACLED data (2023), ISWAP and Boko Haram now operate in smaller cells, with reduced capacity for large-scale assaults—a significant departure from the 2014–2017 era of mass abductions and town seizures.

However, this success remains fragile. While kinetic operations explain much of the reduction, the persistence of attacks in isolated pockets—such as the Mandara Mountains in Cameroon or the Lake Chad islets—suggests that insurgents have adapted by retreating to harder-to-reach terrains. Also, as observed by Agbiboa (2020), unless these military gains are reinforced by post-conflict stabilization, deradicalization, and livelihood reconstruction programs, gains could be reversed. Notably, MNJTF's civil-military components under OGA (e.g., distribution of relief materials and medical outreaches) have had limited reach due to funding gaps and logistical barriers (Onuoha, Yaw, and Zabala 2023).

In sum, the observed decline in attacks and fatalities can be strongly attributed to the evolving tactics and operational coordination of Operation Gama Aiki between 2019 and 2024. The initiative has shifted the operational balance against insurgents, leading to fewer attacks, less territory under insurgent control, and reduced lethality of incidents. This validates the theoretical framing of collective security that multilateral defense arrangements, when well-coordinated, can restore regional stability in the face of transnational threats.

Territorial Reclamation

Between 2020 and 2023, the MNJTF recorded significant territorial gains, reclaiming an estimated 3,500 km² from Boko Haram and ISWAP across critical zones in the Lake Chad Basin. These include the strategic Sambisa Forest fringes, island clusters in Lake Chad, and the Kouserri-Diffa corridor, which had long served as strongholds and transit routes for insurgents (UNDP 2022). These gains are both symbolic and strategic, as the reclaimed areas were once under the de facto control of non-state armed groups, used for recruitment, taxation, logistics, and operations.

Operational Milestones

1. Sambisa Forest Operations (Nigeria):

In May 2021, following the death of Abubakar Shekau, MNJTF and Nigerian troops moved swiftly to capture key areas around the Sambisa Forest. Operation Tura Takai Bango led to the clearance of insurgent enclaves in Yale, Arege, and Kirta Wulgo, dislodging dozens of camps (MNJTF 2022). More so, according to the Nigerian Defence Headquarters, over 17 camps were neutralized, and hundreds of women and children were rescued, further weakening the insurgents' base population.

2. Lake Chad Island Clearance (Chad-Nigeria-Niger border zone):

In Q1 2022, MNJTF Sectors 2 and 3 conducted synchronized amphibious operations along the Tumbun Gini-Tumbun Rago belt. This was historically a Boko Haram safe haven due to the complexity of its terrain and weak surveillance (Onuoha, Yaw, and Zabala 2023). Also, over 300 km² of islets were reclaimed, and logistical pathways between Baga (Nigeria) and Baga-Sola (Chad) were severed, disrupting the insurgents' arms trafficking and food supply chains.

3. Kouserri-Diffa Axis Stabilization (Cameroon-Niger):

MNJTF Sector 1 (Mora, Cameroon), in partnership with Niger's forces in Diffa, carried out multiple joint clearance patrols from 2020 to 2023. By mid-2022, the Kouserri and Komadougou-Yobe River line had been cleared, allowing for the re-establishment of civil authority and resettlement of displaced populations (Onuoha, Yaw, and Zabala 2023).

TABLE no. 3. Data Indicators Supporting Territorial Reclamation

Year	Territory Reclaimed (km ²)	No. of Cleared Insurgent Camps	No. of Communities Resettled
2020	650	18	10
2021	1,300	25	22
2022	950	17	18
2023	600	12	16
TOTAL	3,500	72	66

Sources: MNJTF Situation Reports (2021–2023); AU Peace and Security Council (2022); UNHCR Displacement Monitoring (2023)

Territorial control is a key metric of insurgent strength, as highlighted by Kalyvas (2006), who argued that insurgents derive legitimacy, resources, and operational depth from physical spaces they dominate. In the context of the Lake Chad Basin, territorial reclamation represents a critical turning point in state reassertion and the rollback of terrorist governance structures. Prior to 2019, Boko Haram factions operated quasi-administrative control in parts of Borno, Chad Basin islands, and along the Yobe River, imposing taxes and issuing justice (Zenn 2020).

The strategic importance of the Lake Chad islets cannot be overstated. According to Thurston (2022), these islands had become the insurgents' equivalent of a "mobile state"—difficult to access, rich in concealment, and crucial for regrouping after counter-offensives. By flushing insurgents out of these hideouts, the MNJTF denied them safe havens, reduced their ability to conduct cross-border raids, and improved regional surveillance.

Moreover, the resettlement of over 66 communities between 2020 and 2023 (Akanni et al. 2025) indicates not only territorial control but also restoration of civil governance and humanitarian access, key indicators of long-term stability. The re-opening of the Baga market in 2022 and the return of IDPs to Kukawa LGA are practical markers of this trend. These successes are in line with the findings of Valters et al. (2014), who assert that security stabilization must precede sustainable development in post-conflict areas.

Despite these gains, some reclaimed areas remain vulnerable to re-infiltration due to the limited footprint of government services, slow pace of stabilization programs, and overstretched military presence. For instance, Araziua (2023) reported sporadic ISWAP attacks in reclaimed areas of Marte and Damasak in 2023, indicating persistent threats. Additionally, the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in reclaimed rural roads poses a major barrier to civilian return and aid access.

The operations described above reflect the practical manifestation of the theory of collective security, which posits that the security of one state is the concern of all, and that peace can be maintained through joint action against threats to international or regional stability (Kvartalnov 2021). In the context of the Lake Chad Basin, the establishment and coordinated actions of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) exemplify this principle. The MNJTF (comprising forces from Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon) operates on the collective understanding that insurgency and terrorism in one member state pose direct threats to the security and sovereignty of all. Thus, the Sambisa Forest operations, the Lake Chad Island clearance, and the Kousserri–Diffa axis stabilization efforts demonstrate how collective military cooperation under a shared security framework enhances regional stability and mitigates transnational threats. These operations also underscore the relevance of collective security in modern asymmetric warfare, where cooperation, intelligence sharing, and joint operations become essential tools in countering non-state actors that exploit porous borders and weak governance structures.

Degradation of Insurgent Command and Logistics (2019–2023)

Between 2019 and 2023, one of the most decisive impacts of Operation Gama Aiki and broader MNJTF campaigns was the systematic dismantling of insurgent command structures and their logistical lifelines. This degradation was not incidental as it was achieved through over 225 coordinated cross-border operations (Amani Africa 2025), advanced aerial surveillance, and tactical integration between Nigerian, Chadian, Nigerien, and Cameroonian forces.

1. Disruption of Strategic Nodes and Safe Havens:

Toumour, Niger (2021): Aerial and ground offensives launched by MNJTF's Sector 4 (Diffa) in May 2021 destroyed major ISWAP staging posts and fuel depots. According to Tossell (2020), this operation crippled a key node used for cross-border movement and arms inflow from Libya via southern Fezzan. Kirenowa and Abadam Axis, Nigeria (2021): Nigeria's Alpha Company, with support from the Nigerian Air Force, executed heavy bombardments in July 2021, neutralizing dozens of insurgents, destroying their training facilities, and seizing caches of ammunition and IEDs (Abogonye 2025).

2. Targeted Elimination of Mid- and Top-Level Commanders:

Over 70 commanders and sub-commanders were reported killed between 2020 and 2023, including high-profile figures such as Abu Musab al-Barnawi (ISWAP's de facto leader), who was reportedly eliminated in 2021 under uncertain conditions shortly after intensified MNJTF offensives in Lake Chad (Al Jazeera 2021). MNJTF's intelligence-led raids also captured or eliminated logistics coordinators operating in border towns such as Banki (Nigeria), Ngouboua (Chad), and Komadougou (Niger), thereby disrupting weapon deliveries, fuel distribution, and food supply.

3. Supply Chain Interdiction and Arms Flow Suppression:

The Libya–Sahel–Lake Chad corridor was a major source of arms trafficking, as highlighted in the UN Panel of Experts on Libya (2022). Through joint operations, MNJTF forces severed connections between southern Libyan arms merchants and ISWAP logistics networks via Agadez, Madama (Niger), and into the Diffa region. From 2020 to 2023, over 2,700 AK-pattern rifles, 900 RPGs, and over 800,000 rounds of ammunition were seized in coordinated MNJTF sweeps (Omonobi 2025). This material loss significantly limited the insurgents' operational depth.

The destruction of insurgent logistics mirrors classical counterinsurgency doctrine: without the ability to move arms, coordinate across cells, or replenish supplies, even ideologically driven actors face severe degradation (Galula 2006; Kilcullen 2009). In the case of Boko Haram/ISWAP, their operational advantage historically derived from high mobility and informal logistics, often aided by porous borders and corrupt networks (Zenn 2020).

TABLE no. 4. Tactical Impact of Operations on Logistics and Command (2019–2023)

Year	Major Operations	Commanders Eliminated	Arms/IEDs Seized	Supply Routes Disrupted
2019	32	11	420 weapons	Baga–Ngouboua corridor
2020	45	16	600 weapons	Komadougou–Toumour route
2021	58	21	950 weapons	Kirenowa–Fezzan–Agadez chain
2022	52	13	430 weapons	Banki–Mandara Mountains axis
2023	38	9	300 weapons	Marte–Kangalowa–Islands path
TOTAL	225	70	2,700+	At least 5 strategic corridors

Sources: MNJTF Situation Briefs (2019–2023), UN Security Council Reports (2022), Nigerian Army Archives

The effectiveness of MNJTF’s interdiction strategy also aligns with regional security prescriptions advocated by the African Union and the Lake Chad Basin Commission—namely, that cross-border insurgency must be met with cross-border governance and force integration. Indeed, MNJTF’s Sector-Based Command Model allowed for synchronized logistics disruption without violating state sovereignty, a key limitation of earlier single-state operations.

Though insurgent operational capability has been weakened, residual cells continue to adapt. According to Crisis Group (2023), ISWAP has shifted towards micro-logistics, relying on civilian supply chains and mobile money transfers for sustenance. This implies a need to upgrade not just the physical interdiction but also the financial and digital dimensions of counterinsurgency. Furthermore, while kinetic operations have been effective, without simultaneous post-operational stabilization, cleared areas may experience temporary occupation rather than long-term peace—a point also made in the AU Peace and Security Council communique (2022). Hence, the degradation of command and logistics must be matched with institutional consolidation to prevent resurgence.

Conclusion

The empirical analysis of Operation Gama Aiki (2019–2024) reveals that the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has achieved measurable success in degrading insurgent capacity across three critical dimensions, which are security, territory, and logistics. Firstly, there is a clear downward trend in both attacks and fatalities, particularly between 2020 and 2023, correlating with intensified cross-border operations and intelligence-led raids. Secondly, territorial reclamation has shifted the insurgency from territorial control to asymmetric harassment, especially following the reclamation of Sambisa fringes, Lake Chad islands, and the Kousserri–Diffa corridor. Finally, the systematic breakdown of insurgent supply chains and

command infrastructure has disrupted the transnational arms flow from Libya and reduced the operational reach of Boko Haram and ISWAP. However, while the kinetic and tactical dimensions of the mission have largely succeeded, the strategic consolidation of peace remains fragile, particularly in reclaimed areas where state presence, development, and trust-building are lagging.

Recommendations

There are some actions the government and military in consonance need to take in order to consolidate peace, as follows:

1. Develop joint ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) platforms among MNJTF member states for real-time threat tracking, focusing on the Toumour–Kirenowa–Banki triangle.
2. Establish a regional watch center under ECOWAS or LCBC to monitor transnational arms trade and movement patterns, especially from the Sahel–Fezzan corridor.
3. Target insurgent adaptation via mobile money networks, cryptocurrencies, and informal transfers by working with regional financial intelligence units (e.g., Nigeria’s NFIU, Niger’s CENTIF).
4. Implement counter-financing operations alongside kinetic missions, modeled on Kenya’s financial disruption of Al-Shabaab affiliates.
5. Establish a mutual legal assistance mechanism among MNJTF states to ensure effective prosecution of captured insurgents, arms smugglers, and financiers.
6. Encourage harmonized extradition agreements and border security pacts, particularly among Nigeria, Chad, and Niger, where insurgents often escape jurisdiction.

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Political Christianity in Contemporary Romania

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Abstract

The electoral campaign for the Romanian presidential elections at the end of 2024 exposed vulnerabilities in the national security system that were successfully exploited by state and non-state actors. In the present paper, I will argue that, in addition to the technical and organizational gaps that favored the influence of a significant percentage of voters, the human factor played a special role, as propaganda in the physical and cyberspace attracted the majority of the vulnerable electorate by promoting common values that were shaped in accordance with the psychological needs of voters. The most important factor in this context was the promotion of Christianity, which, in reality, proved to be a political agenda disguised as a religious one. This approach on the part of politicians is not innovative in the context of international security, given the fact that, for example, in the modern era, the Islamist discourse resonated in the Islamic world, and the Zionist discourse is promoted among Jewish individuals.

Keywords:

Religion; Propaganda; Politics; Political Religion; Mass Psychology;
Exploitation of Vulnerabilities; Cyberspace; Security.

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Introduction

The involvement of religion in political matters, especially when used to influence the results of electoral campaigns, is a common practice in territories inhabited by Muslim and Jewish voters. However, the elements exploited in such societies to achieve electoral success have proven to be equally effective in a European society that is predominantly Christian-Orthodox. Therefore, in the present paper, we will consider relevant political and social aspects and concepts that have been documented in Romania's eastern proximity and which have directly or indirectly influenced the decision-making capacity of Romanian voters during the presidential election campaigns of 2024 and 2025. In the following pages, we will observe general analyses regarding the importance of including faith in a political position, religious and traditional values, and subsequently, we will observe this approach applied in a rhetoric formulated in accordance with the expectations and validation of the fears of the target audience.

Eastern examples: political Islam (Islamism) and political Judaism (Zionism)

Islam is the religion that has been most visibly manipulated to conform to and serve political aims. In this sense, the concept that we call "Islamism" in Romanian and English was developed, which claims to promote a political order inspired by the will of God, opposing popular sovereignty (Tibi 2012, 1). In publications written in Arabic, the name *al-'islām as-syāsīy* ("the political Islam") is used to highlight the religious pretexts imposed on political actions and speeches.

Regarding Judaism, the political implications that have been attributed to it since the end of the 19th century have contributed to defining the Zionist movement. It envisages the creation and expansion of a Jewish state, but without being based on the values promoted by the Jewish religion (Moskowitz 1917, 3) and which, paradoxically, are used to justify military and governmental actions on the occupation of the Palestinian territories (Saleem 2025).

However, Christianity has not been assigned a distinct term that would distinguish its political attribution from its religious connotation, which is why we will use the name political Christianity in the following analysis.

Russell Kirk (1953) proposes the idea that conservatism involves spiritual and moral regeneration together with the reconfiguration of the ethical system and religious sanctions. However, the author distinguishes this definition from political Christianity, arguing that such reform cannot be social or included in a government program (Kirk 1953, 539). David McLellan (1997) resumes this observation, adding that simplistic political solutions are avoided by 20th century's conservatism, which specifically aims to restore a just government defined by respect, discipline and

social order, redefines the phenomenon of the proletariat, opposes “armed doctrine” and ideologies by means of the restoration of traditionalist political philosophy and mentality and “territorial democracy” ([McLellan 1997](#), 168-70).

A contemporary view belongs to Jonathan Leeman ([2016](#)), according to which political success depends on demonstrating high levels of belief; it is expected that such rhetoric will be exposed to contradictions and even failure, but the main purpose of such an approach in political contexts is to convince the receiving audience of the resilience with which the “truth” is promoted and uttered ([Leeman 2016](#), 384).

Therefore, in the context of a socio-political landscape where voters are unfetteredly exposed to digital content with a political substratum or that may acquire a political, respectively electoral, character, political Christianity represents the shaping of political discourse and approach in accordance with the religious, spiritual, and ethical expectations of the electorate.

Russia in the modern Eastern geopolitical context

In a psychological analysis applied to the political discourses of Russian leaders, Andrei P. Tsygankov ([2014](#)) compares the relationship between Russia and the West to that between brothers, in which emotions such as fear, hope, and frustration are involved. These emotions are identified by the author in the speeches of state leaders, reflecting the ways in which Russia relates to the West and the support it expects in its offensive foreign policy approach. However, tensions between brothers can escalate to severe conflicts and even fratricidal ones, and the author considers the attack on Ukraine to be such an illustration of the tensions between Russia and the West ([Tsygankov 2014](#)).

From the Western perspective, Russia falls more into the Eastern space, which is in turn perceived as dominated by extremism, conservatism, and totalitarian regimes, all of which represent serious issues for the West, especially for the United States of America. After the violent events of the “Arab Spring”, Russia’s actions to arm radical regimes in the Middle East in order to combat the USA’s presence in this space subsequently led to the reduction of Russia’s influence in the Eastern space and contributed to Russia’s conviction that the USA, together with its allies, supports Islamist expansion in the Middle East ([Rafique, Farooq and Amin 2021](#), 171-4). Geographical proximity may, in turn, be a favorable aspect for Russia’s continued involvement in Middle Eastern political and military affairs ([Rumer 2019](#), 2-3), while the position it speculates is that of a supporter of Islam and an ally of the Middle East against the USA ([Blank 2015](#), 73).

Although the central subject of this paper is not Islam, I consider its progressive popularity among Russian citizens oriented towards Islamist concepts relevant, in

order to interpret the promotion of extremist ideologies that are meant to attract numerous followers.

One of the categories that sociologist Andrey Ignatyev identifies among Russian Christians converted to Islam is that of “white Muslims”, in which elements of Islam are combined with Russian nationalism, neo-paganism, racism, and/or radical leftist doctrines (Goble 2009). In addition to the opportunity to adopt new attitudes, individuals converted to Islam may also have financial motivations; in a state threatened by poverty and unemployment, Salafist Islam offers financial assistance, jobs, and protection, and conversions often take place even in prisons (Ibrahimov 2015).

These examples reveal the consequences of distrusting the rhetoric, vision, and usual values that citizens may find inadequate, becoming attracted to new perspectives that either seem to be more relevant to pre-existing beliefs or offer the opportunity for targeted individuals to contribute to achieving a supposed justice. Social background can be a decisive factor in shaping vulnerabilities that can then be exploited through an approach in which undeniable elements – such as those of a religious nature – are used to achieve major political goals.

Regarding the tense relationship with Romania, a declassified report by the Foreign Intelligence Service mentions Russia’s perception according to which Romania “provokes and threatens Russia’s security through its hosting of NATO and American military potential, wants to solve its economic problems at the expense of Russia and represents a direct competitor in the Republic of Moldova” (Serviciul de Informații Externe 2024).

Orthodox Christianity, nationalism, or political extremism?

In contrast to the offensive purposes of political religions described above, the ideology that I call political Christianity in this paper is more of a tool that amounts to psychological manipulation.

It is therefore relevant to emphasize the boundaries between religion and politics, taking into account, in the first phase, observations identified in international contexts. Firstly, we will consider Robert Wuthnow’s (1994) view that the sacred represents a fundamental concept that exceeds all human capabilities and is distinct from religion, which, in turn, represents a human product favorable to institutions, organizations, professional roles, and finances (Wuthnow 1994, 2). Thus, Marcela Cristi (2001) identifies “civil religion” as a determining factor in generating influential symbols of national solidarity that encourage American citizens to achieve national goals and aspirations (Cristi 2001, 2).

Secondly, the involvement of the sacred as an argument in support of issues related to the good organization of the state is notable. In this sense, Wuthnow (1994)

defines civil religion as “the use of the language of God in reference to the nation” (Wuthnow 1994, 130). Cristi (2001) complements this point of view by adding that, like other secular ideologies, civil religion may attempt to impose a collective identity and legitimize an already existing political order (Cristi 2001, 3). This concept, in which divinity plays a decisive role in formulating arguments and approaches, is present even in the rhetoric of contemporary Romanian politicians, and this factor is joined by other psychological and sociolinguistic elements to concretize the strategy of acquiring the attention and trust of the target audience.

However, this analogy is not new for the Romanian socio-political reality; thus, in 1930, Nae Ionescu considered that, in order to be able to call oneself Romanian, an individual must place himself in a relationship of “belonging and participation at the same time, towards a collective reality, the nation; which surpasses you, but which constitutes the very sufficient reason for your existence as a Romanian, Turk or Englishman. This collective reality is, by its nature, a spiritual unity; and by its organic structure, a community of love”. In addition, the author considers that the attitude towards divinity “is an integral part of the intimate structure of the nation” (Ionescu 1990, 199-200).

The analogies between religions and viruses that some researchers formulate, such as D. C. Dennett (2006), R. Dawkins (1976), and S. Blackmore (1999; 2010), are supported by Jonathan Haidt (2012), who concludes that religion gives rise to illusions that can significantly affect cognitive abilities, including the justification of certain actions or membership in various groups to which believers belong (Haidt 2012, 276-80).

In his study of American politicians’ discourse, Robert Harvey notes the observation that the quality of being a patriot is the opposite of the status of a terrorist (Harvey 2025, 32). Therefore, the fact that individuals who do not have the obvious quality of patriots are classified as terrorists represents, for the first category, a confirmation that the direction they have chosen is the right one.

This reference to patriotism also seems to be included in Nae Ionescu’s statement that “to be Romanian, not a good Romanian, but simply Romanian, means to be Orthodox as well” (Ionescu 1990, 201). Such a belief, whether or not it is explicitly communicated to the population, implies the reverse, according to which not promoting Orthodox values means not having the quality of being Romanian. Therefore, by repeatedly including in an electoral discourse the importance of the attributes of being Romanian and Orthodox, there is a risk of triggering the fear of non-conformity and even betrayal of secular and family values.

This approach reveals the involvement of the culture of fear, which, according to the explanation of David L. Altheide (2006), is concretized by political actors in order to achieve various objectives, among which are political power and symbolic

domination (Altheide 2006, 18). As a result, a political discourse built around national and religious values not only satisfies the need to guarantee the involvement of these familiar elements in an electoral scenario but also proposes the guarantee of an ethical, fair, and patriotic choice.

According to another conclusion presented in Haidt's study (2012), an important aspect that religion and politics have in common is the ability to arouse the broad concern of individuals with concepts that exceed their understanding and, consequently, to unite them in groups where they can cooperate to discover and approve often convenient conclusions (Haidt 2012, 299).

Addressing a disappointed and connected people

Fear of the unknown represents one of the specific elements of crowd psychology, according to Elias Canetti's conclusions (1960, 15). This human characteristic, seen as a vulnerability, can justify the target audience's tendency to resonate with a discourse in which familiar aspects and values are highlighted.

Therefore, the repetitive mention and emphasis of concepts, events, or periods in history can be introduced into a discursive context in order to concretize the conviction of the possibility of returning to a past often admired with nostalgia and admiration by the target audience. In combination with a calm and apparently empathetic approach, such a possibility of regaining the supposed glory of the past can end up being perceived as a mission by the target community and, in addition, gives the speaker in question a particularly powerful, righteous and – as it is called in the Romanian press reports from the end of 2024 – “messianic” allure (Guță 2024). Consequently, the invalidation of such a character by a collective majority can be perceived as a particular injustice by his followers.

The attractive image that a candidate can thus form during an electoral campaign not only creates a picture of the future that voters consider possible, but also manages to remedy, apparently, errors or other aspects of the political class that have aroused dissatisfaction and frustration over time among the target audience.

The impact of the calm tone and the emotions provoked by the discursive content has been analyzed since before our era by ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero. The passage reproduced below is taken from the treatise published by Marcus Tullius Cicero in 55 BCE and includes observations of some of the most important elements for the persuasive character of a speech, which are valid even in the current era:

“But the most important thing in advising on matters of state is a knowledge of the constitution of the state, while the essential thing in persuasive speech is a knowledge of the national character; and as this frequently changes, it is often necessary to modify the style of speech also; and although the fundamental

nature of eloquence practically does not vary, yet, considering the exalted dignity of the nation, the supreme importance of politics, and the violent passions of the multitude, it would seem that an oratorical style of a grandeur and brilliance above the average is necessary; and the greater part of a speech must sometimes be directed to stirring the emotions of the audience, by exhortation or by some form of reminder, either to hope, or fear, or desire, or ambition, and often also to bringing them back to folly, anger, or hope, and to injustice, envy, or cruelty” (Cicero 1947, 453-455).

In order to build a profile that attracts the admiration and trust of the public from the first contact, the persuasive attitude must follow aspects such as those listed by Cicero (1947) and, in the case of an electoral competition, it is necessary to know the patterns of the speeches and approaches of the opposing candidates, in order to identify the points that they have not emphasized and which, in the appropriate context, may constitute an advantage. For example, belonging to various political parties, presenting intentions to carry out important projects, and offering goods or food during electoral campaigns represent three of the aspects present in the approach of the most voted candidates in democratic Romania.

Applying the concept that Cicero (1947) calls “knowledge of the national character”, a candidate can have an innovative approach both through the form and content of the speech, and the environment in which it manifests itself. In this sense, it is relevant that changes in society and the ever-growing access to technology and social networks require an approach adapted to current reality, in such a way as not to insist on novel elements that could intimidate the audience, but at the same time to select only favorable aspects from the past.

In rhetorical approaches, the discursive element that is meant to arouse various emotions among the receiving audience is called *pathos*. The other two means by which the affective dimension of an audience can be influenced are called by Aristotle, *ethos* and *logos*.

According to Aristotle’s observation, the trust that a speaker inspires “must come from the discourse itself and not from any preconceived idea about the speaker’s character”, thus outlining the definition of the concept of *ethos*, while *pathos* has the role of “transposing the listener into a certain mental state”, and *logos* constitutes the discourse itself along with “what it demonstrates or seems to demonstrate” (Aristotel n.d., 1356a).

Displaying an empathetic temperament conveys the appearance of an intention to listen and understand the needs behind “challenging” behaviors, transforming the tension in communication into compassion. This approach helps people feel understood, encouraging cooperation and calm, and creating a more positive atmosphere. Over time, this builds trust and mutual respect for future interactions (Hourihan 2023). Empathy can play an important role in creating a charismatic

image that helps gain the trust of interlocutors due to their natural need to feel listened to (Sadik 2023, 24-69).

Therefore, gaining the trust of the target audience is one of the goals that a candidate needs to achieve in order to develop his or her number of supporters. Such a strategy can be especially effective in a society where empathetic communication is generally deficient. This is among the consequences of the communist regime in Romania on the collective mentality, given the lack of trust and constant skepticism felt by citizens, contributing to the formation of a legacy that favors tradition, religion, resistance to change, conformism, and emotional conservatism to the detriment of self-determination and civic involvement (Şimon, Fărcaşiu and Dragomir 2022).

In turn, the redefinition of identity is part of what Lucian Boia (2011) calls “communist psychology”. This involves the abandonment of individualism in favor of a collective identity whose major advantage is the assumption of a personality “stronger and richer than that of the old man” (Boia 2011, 135).

Wuthnow (1994) endorses such a perspective in his study of “public religion”, considering that the public represents an entity without a developed sense of self and which denotes openness and accessibility (Wuthnow 1994, 9). A relevant example analyzed in Haidt’s study (2012) concerns the demonstrations of American football fans, whose role is more to create and strengthen communities than to express their support for a team (Haidt 2012, 272). Furthermore, as Canetti (1960) concludes, the fear of not being reached can be diminished only by joining a crowd, especially if it shares similar values to those of the individual in question (Canetti 1960, 15). Last but not least, Emile Durkheim (2008) notes that collective representations reveal the result of extensive cooperation in space and time, in which numerous minds unite to join their ideas and feelings (Durkheim 2008, 16).

Therefore, for an electoral discourse that on the surface supports traditional and traditionalist values, the target audience will be made up of individuals who can be convinced that they are understood and that they will be united in a majority community governed by the only correct values and beliefs.

Human vulnerability in cyberspace: the case of Romanian users

Exploiting the sensitive points of Romanian users did not require bot farms that violated the operating policies of the platforms involved, but rather relied on human interventions, following an efficiently calculated strategy (Serviciul Român de Informații 2024). The constant expression of preferences for content with nationalist, patriotic, or Christian-Orthodox themes has favored the natural popularization of malicious accounts.

Social engineering tactics can also be effective in electoral campaigns, which Christopher Hadnagy (2010) summarizes as “the actions of manipulating a person to take an action that may or may not be in the interest of the target. This may include obtaining information, access, or determining the target to take a certain action” (Hadnagy 2011, 10).

Cyberspace and especially social networks offer unrestricted freedom of expression, which is why materials intended to promote false information can spread quickly and, especially if they have intriguing, conspiratorial, or convenient content from the users’ point of view, can attract them to a virtual community that is easily manipulated by those who organize it and who may have political interests. However, in addition to controlled disinformation, another danger is represented by the lack of information among users, together with the lack of skepticism or curiosity about the information that is offered to them.

Beyond the psychological aspects that underlie this type of behavior, the very fact of receiving information without effort represents a potential risk factor. In this regard, it is important to remember that social networks have the role of offering unlimited and effortless entertainment to users. In addition, content created with the help of deepfake technologies and artificial intelligence can contribute decisively to the propagation of disinformation, in the absence of effective filters both from the online environment and from the critical capacities of users. In the absence of other long-term intellectual activities or consistent discipline, social networks can go beyond their status as an entertainment tool, becoming a means – sometimes unique – of informing and even influencing decisions in everyday life, including during electoral campaigns.

A consequence of this reality is demonstrated by the support for anti-European discourse among a significant segment of Romanian citizens, which is influenced by their disagreement with helping Ukraine in the context of the conflict with Russia (GlobalFocus 2024). Nevertheless, the politicization of the issue of support for Ukraine may serve as an indicator of Russia’s involvement in disinformation campaigns within Romanian cyberspace, thereby illustrating the depth, sophistication, and strategic orientation of Russian hybrid operations (Neagu 2024). An important element exploited through such rhetoric is fear – “of invasion, of insufficient stocks, of inflation, of economic instability” –, the indicated solution, consequently, being the normalization of radical narratives and ultra-conservatism (GlobalFocus 2024), which constitutes an approach that is meant to trigger, acquire, and redirect collective anger.

In his study on social engineering, Hadnagy (2011) specifies several elements of target manipulation, which may be relevant in this paper and which will be summarized below:

- Controlling the environment by limiting and directing the information to which the target has access, including by monitoring and influencing

communications on social networks. The attacker thus manages to filter the reality perceived by the target and influence their decisions;

- Inducing doubt by subtly undermining the target's beliefs, rules, or values to weaken their ability to make clear decisions. Repeated questions and ambiguous suggestions can gradually affect their confidence in their own judgment.
- Feeling helpless as a result of creating a perception of lack of control by invoking "facts" from sources with a supposed authority. Over time, in this way, the target can be determined to passively accept the indications received, without having the ability or instinct to question them.
- Triggering strong emotions, especially invoking fear, guilt, or other intense emotions to change the target's behavior and beliefs. Well-directed emotions can block critical thinking and accelerate compliance ([Hadnagy 2011](#), 233-4).

Inducing and exploiting fear can also be elements of manipulation or social engineering, especially in the conduct of an electoral campaign. Firstly, if a community of voters is explicitly encouraged to believe that the election of another candidate or political direction will have catastrophic consequences for the country and their value system, the candidate whose rhetoric promotes such a perspective can gain remarkable popularity. Secondly, from a psychological point of view, fear diminishes the ability to discern the magnitude of threats ([Bader-Saye 2007](#), 54) and can even lead to the failure to verify their existence. Last but not least, the "politics of fear" provides that "others" or "they" are to blame for the disappointments, frustrations, and failures of citizens, thus condemning the current system and authorities ([Furedi 2019](#)).

Therefore, access to massive and uncontrolled content in the digital environment constitutes a risk factor among Romanian social media users. This vulnerability in the information sphere has been proven to be exploited by Russia during the 2024 presidential elections in Romania ([Administrația Prezidențială 2024](#)), thus affecting its foreign policy objectives and relations ([Rebegea 2017](#)).

This electoral campaign, together with the one in 2025, constitutes the most remarkable contemporary context that denotes the influence of political Christianity in Romania. For example, after analyzing political discourses published on social networks, Paula Rațiu and Sandu Frunză ([2025](#)) observed the strategic tendency of candidates to suggest the relationship with religion in "natural contexts", such as in videos during visits to crowds of voters where formulations such as "God bless us" or declarations of faith were included, so as to highlight the common aspect of candidates and voters in terms of religious beliefs ([Rațiu and Frunză 2025](#), 40). Additionally, the fact that for most Romanians, faith is placed at the level of identity rather than practice, as Cezar Manu's analysis of the Russian propaganda narrative in Romania's 2024 electoral campaign on the website veridica.ro shows – facilitates the favorable impact of messages that invoke the "millenarian faith of the Romanian

people” on a public called conservative and reluctant to change their approach to religion. As a result, according to the aforementioned publication, “Romania becomes a favorable terrain for false narratives that claim the existence of attacks against Christianity — themes exploited in Russian anti-Western propaganda, which describes the EU and NATO as morally decadent and opposed to the Christian-Orthodox values that Russia claims to defend” (Manu 2024).

Conclusions

Russia’s involvement in the electoral campaign in Romania at the end of 2024 represented a threat to national security not only from a technical point of view, but also from a humanistic point of view.

The interest of a significant percentage of voters in a controversial candidate should draw the attention of Romanian politicians and authorities to the grievances and needs of citizens who, according to electoral statistics, would have wanted a radical change in the political class, even if the way in which this objective could have been achieved was part of a complex campaign of disinformation and manipulation. The trust and admiration of voters were therefore won through a formally consistent discourse, revealing the prevalent impact of the manner of expression over the content of the discourse.

Voter opinions during the presidential elections at the end of 2024 revealed, therefore, that the modeling of a well-calculated political discourse adapted to the current social reality, which would provide the feeling of closeness to the people, and effective communication were lacking in previous electoral campaigns, where there were no candidates who dominated the election results before they had become known to all citizens entitled with the right to vote.

The approach of a discursive strategy that satisfies the needs of the target audience and that validates and calms collective fears in a tense geopolitical context represents, in the case presented in this paper, a crucial element in achieving political and electoral success, especially to the extent that the rhetoric involved consistently promotes the most important values for the target audience.

This episode in Romania’s contemporary history revealed vulnerabilities in society that, not being diminished in a timely manner, were exploited offensively by external state actors. In this sense, Romanian society needs to demarcate religious, traditional, and cultural values, which are deeply rooted in the collective psyche, from the contemporary, constantly evolving political sphere. In the absence of the development of such critical skills among voters, the opportunity to conveniently sensitize them during electoral campaigns will continue to represent a risk of manipulation, both by candidates to secure the support of the electorate and by external actors in the process of exploiting potential vulnerabilities that would grant them the opportunity to influence and unbalance the Romanian state.

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Faith-Based and Community Organizations as Human Security Actors: Bridging Governance Gaps in Kwara North

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of faith-based and community organizations in advancing human security through poverty alleviation initiatives in Kwara North, Nigeria. Situated within the broader discourse on non-state actors and governance, it examines how these organizations bridge state capacity gaps in three critical human security dimensions: health as protection from disease insecurity, education as protection from radicalization and exclusion, and livelihoods as protection from economic shocks. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines structured community surveys, key informant interviews, and field observations across selected Local Government Areas, the study develops sectoral indices and analyzes community perception data to measure impact and sustainability. The findings demonstrate that non-state actors provide frontline protection where state presence is weak, reducing vulnerabilities and enhancing resilience, though their interventions remain constrained by funding fragility, weak coordination, and limited policy integration. By framing poverty alleviation as a human security imperative, the study highlights the potential of non-state actors not merely as gap-fillers but as co-architects of local security and development systems in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords:

Local Government; Rural Development; Non-State Actors; Social Services; Welfare.

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Introduction

Poverty remains one of the most persistent development challenges in northern Nigeria, where structural inequalities, limited state capacity, and weak social infrastructure intersect to deepen human insecurity (Igbuzor 2016; World Bank 2022). In Kwara North, a largely agrarian region marked by dispersed settlements and chronic underinvestment, poverty is not merely an economic condition but a multidimensional threat to human security, manifesting in limited access to food, health, education, and safe livelihoods (NBS 2020). The multidimensional poverty rate in Kwara North exceeds 70 percent, with rural areas experiencing higher deprivation in education, sanitation, and healthcare, thereby compounding risks of disease, youth exclusion, and social vulnerability (NBS 2022). In contexts where deprivation is this severe, poverty translates into heightened exposure to insecurity, whether in the form of ill-health, hunger, unemployment, or susceptibility to crime and conflict (UNDP 1994; Adebajo 2021).

Within this vacuum, non-state actors, particularly faith-based and community-rooted organizations, have emerged as frontline providers of human security by addressing pressing social and economic needs (Abdulraheem and Olanrewaju 2015). Often operating where formal institutions are absent or overstretched, these organizations deploy locally informed strategies to safeguard people's welfare through educational support, basic healthcare delivery, and livelihood empowerment initiatives (Lewis and Kanji 2009). What distinguishes them is not simply their presence but the security-enhancing functions they perform: fostering trust where government legitimacy is weak, stabilizing households through social support, and reducing vulnerabilities that might otherwise escalate into community-level insecurity (Ezeocha 2021).

Yet, despite their visibility, there remains a limited systematic understanding of how these actors function across different sectors and what impact they have had on human security outcomes at the grassroots level. Much of the existing literature still portrays non-state interventions in northern Nigeria as reactive or ad hoc, with little attention to their operational models, sustainability, or embeddedness within local governance and security ecologies (Agba, Ochimana and Abubakar 2013; Meagher 2017).

Similar dynamics can be observed across other African rural contexts where weak state capacity has opened space for non-state interventions in human security. In Northern Ghana, for example, faith-based groups and farmer cooperatives have played a pivotal role in supplementing state education and agricultural programs, thereby reducing youth vulnerability to extremist recruitment in border communities (Yaro 2013; Debrah 2021). Likewise, in Kenya's arid counties, community-rooted NGOs have provided mobile health services and micro-credit schemes that cushion pastoral households against drought-related economic shocks and disease insecurity (Mkutu 2019). These comparative cases illustrate that the role of faith-based and

community organizations in Kwara North is not unique but part of a wider African pattern where non-state actors bridge governance gaps by embedding human security approaches within their development work.

In aligning sectoral interventions with the broader human security framework, three domains stand out. Education-focused initiatives by non-state actors not only expand literacy and learning opportunities but also function as protective mechanisms against youth radicalization, social exclusion, and intergenerational poverty traps, thereby reinforcing both economic and political security (UNESCO 2015; Olanrewaju 2019). Health interventions, such as medical outreaches and vaccination programs, directly mitigate disease insecurity by improving access to basic care in underserved rural areas, reducing preventable deaths, and enhancing community resilience to health shocks like epidemics (WHO 2021). Livelihood empowerment schemes, including vocational training, agricultural support, and micro-credit provision, strengthen economic security by reducing households' vulnerability to shocks, diversifying income streams, and curbing the structural drivers of rural poverty and migration (Ellis and Freeman 2004). Taken together, these interventions demonstrate that the contributions of faith-based and community organizations in Kwara North extend beyond poverty reduction into the consolidation of human security, by addressing the economic, health, and social vulnerabilities that shape local insecurities.

Research Objectives

To identify the strategies and operational models employed by faith-based and community organizations in addressing poverty and enhancing human security across Kwara North.

To assess the scope and sectoral reach of interventions carried out by these non-state actors in education, health, and livelihood empowerment, paying attention to their contribution to local stability and resilience.

Conceptual Review

Poverty, as experienced in rural Nigeria, transcends income deprivation. It is embedded in historical patterns of marginalization, weak institutional presence, and social exclusion. Scholars such as Alubo (2006) and Olayemi (1995) have consistently argued that poverty in Nigeria is multidimensional, manifesting through poor access to health services, low educational attainment, and limited livelihood opportunities. In regions like Kwara North, these manifestations are compounded by infrastructural neglect and inconsistent government policy execution, making poverty both structural and generational.

In this context, non-state actors (NSAs), a term encompassing faith-based organizations, community development associations, philanthropic foundations, and informal grassroots networks, have increasingly taken on roles traditionally

assigned to the state. Their work often cuts across three key domains: education support, health outreach, and livelihood empowerment. The growing influence of these actors is rooted in their local embeddedness, trust-based community relations, and agility in navigating complex local dynamics, especially where government interventions are episodic or absent (Ibrahim and Hulme 2010).

The concept of poverty eradication in this study does not imply the complete removal of poverty, but refers instead to measurable reductions in the severity of deprivation across essential human development indicators. It draws on Sen's (1999) notion of "capability expansion," that is, empowering people to live lives they have reason to value. In this framework, education is not just schooling but an avenue for agency; health interventions are a means to social dignity; and livelihood empowerment initiatives are both economic tools and vehicles for restoring communal resilience.

The idea of governance gaps is also central to this review. A governance gap occurs when state institutions fail to provide basic services or uphold civic obligations, creating a void in which other actors operate. In Kwara North, the gap is not simply a lack of government, but a misalignment between state policies and rural realities. This misalignment has opened a space for NSAs to act as substitute duty-bearers, stepping in where government presence is symbolic or inconsistent (Oluwatayo and Ojo 2018).

Finally, the concept of community perception is crucial in evaluating the relevance of NSA interventions. Local trust, cultural legitimacy, and the perceived sincerity of service delivery all shape how residents view and participate in externally driven poverty interventions. As such, perception is not a passive reaction but an active measure of accountability, influencing the long-term viability of non-state efforts.

Taken together, these concepts – poverty, non-state actors, governance gaps, and community perception – provide the analytical lens through which this study interrogates the strategies and effectiveness of NSAs in poverty reduction across Kwara North.

Empirical Review

Empirical scholarship in Nigeria has increasingly recognized the expanding footprint of non-state actors in filling service delivery gaps, particularly in underdeveloped rural communities. Studies by Olowu and Chukwuma (2014) found that community-based organizations (CBOs) in Niger and Kogi States were instrumental in rural water access initiatives, often operating with limited resources but grounded in high community participation. Their study revealed that the sustainability of such interventions was directly linked to the level of community trust and ownership cultivated by these actors.

In the domain of education, research by Ajayi and Adebayo (2018) on Oyo and Ekiti States showed that faith-based organizations such as the Christian Missionary Society and Ansar-ud-Deen significantly supported educational access through the provision of tuition-free schools and learning materials. Their model was described as semi-autonomous, operating outside the formal bureaucracy, but with clear accountability to local religious communities. The study found that students from NSA-supported schools demonstrated higher retention and attendance rates than their counterparts in public schools.

Similarly, health sector engagement by NSAs has been widely documented. Adebisi et al. (2020) studied the intervention of Islamic-based health missions in Northern Nigeria, showing how mobile clinics funded by zakat (charitable Islamic giving) filled maternal care gaps in remote communities. These interventions were most effective in contexts where cultural barriers discouraged interactions with state facilities. In Plateau and Nasarawa, NGOs such as the Centre for Integrated Health Programs (CIHP) were found to outperform government primary health care schemes in immunization campaigns and HIV awareness outreach (Oche and Gana 2019).

On livelihood empowerment, empirical work by Yusuf and Oloruntoba (2017) in parts of North-Central Nigeria revealed that community development associations (CDAs) initiated seed capital rotations and training programs in agriculture and tailoring. Their study highlighted that these localized economic programs, although small-scale, generated significant household income increases over a three-year window. Importantly, the authors noted that such efforts were most effective when paired with monitoring and mentorship from community elders and faith leaders.

A cross-country comparison by Tostensen et al. (2001) in Uganda and Tanzania equally underscores that NSAs often succeed not due to superior funding but because of cultural proximity and flexible operations. Their embedded presence allows for real-time adaptation to local needs, an advantage large state agencies typically lack. This comparative lesson resonates with the situation in Kwara North, where NGOs like the Global Hope Initiative and the Kwara North Development Foundation reportedly enjoy stronger community ties than state-sponsored poverty alleviation programs.

However, some empirical studies highlight challenges. For instance, Ojo and Akinleye (2021) observed in Kwara and Kebbi States that while NSA-led livelihood projects initially had high uptake, their medium-term effectiveness was undermined by poor documentation, elite capture of benefits, and lack of coordination with state development plans. This calls attention to a critical issue: the informality of many NSA interventions can undermine scale and sustainability if not better integrated into public policy frameworks.

Overall, evidence suggests that while non-state actors play a critical role in poverty reduction across education, health, and livelihoods in rural Nigeria, their impact is shaped by local legitimacy, community participation, and alignment (or lack thereof) with state institutions. These studies offer strong justification for further localized investigations, such as this current study in Kwara North, to uncover how these dynamics play out within specific cultural and governance environments.

Theoretical Framework

Participatory Development Theory

This theory posits that meaningful and sustainable development is best achieved when local populations are actively involved in shaping and implementing interventions that affect their lives. Rooted in the works of Paulo Freire (1970) and later expanded by Chambers (1997), participatory development shifts focus from top-down, state-led development approaches to community-embedded, inclusive models.

Non-state actors, particularly NGOs, CBOs, and faith-based organizations, operationalize this theory by:

- Empowering local populations through education, skills acquisition, and livelihoods support;
- Building horizontal accountability mechanisms within communities;
- Designing interventions that reflect local needs, cultural values, and indigenous knowledge.

In rural regions like Kwara North, where state presence is often limited or bureaucratically detached, NSAs gain traction precisely because they align with the participatory ethos. Their success often depends on how deeply rooted they are in the local social fabric and their capacity to mobilize grassroots agency.

Institutional Pluralism

This complementary framework emphasizes the coexistence of multiple formal and informal institutions in delivering social goods. Derived from Ostrom's (1990) work on common-pool resource governance, it argues that it is not necessary for effective governance to rely solely on state actors, but it can emerge through hybrid arrangements between formal (state) and informal (non-state) institutions.

In the Nigerian context, where weak state capacity frequently leaves service gaps, institutional pluralism helps explain the following aspects: why communities often trust NSAs more than governmental bodies; how NSAs develop parallel delivery systems in education, health, and livelihoods; and the tensions and synergies between public and private service ecosystems.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods approach, drawing from both quantitative and qualitative strategies to examine how non-state actors engage with poverty

eradication in Kwara North. The choice of a convergent parallel design is deliberate, allowing statistical trends and lived realities to be explored side-by-side, thus offering a more comprehensive understanding of non-state interventions in the region.

Kwara North, comprising Baruten, Edu, Kaiama, Moro, and Patigi Local Government Areas, presents a unique case for this inquiry. These areas are predominantly rural, characterized by low infrastructure, under-resourced public services, and a long-standing reliance on informal and community-based actors for support. The visibility of NGOs, faith-based groups, and community-based organizations has steadily increased in the region, especially in domains such as healthcare, education, and livelihoods.

The study population includes rural households that have either benefited from or are aware of non-state development projects, as well as representatives of organizations operating within these LGAs. Drawing from population estimates, approximately 312,000 rural households across the five LGAs, a total of 400 households were sampled. The sample size was determined using Yamane's statistical formula, ensuring a reasonable margin of error while maintaining representativeness.

To achieve a balanced and inclusive dataset, a multi-stage sampling process was used. The five LGAs were purposively selected for being the primary geography of Kwara North. Within each LGA, two rural communities were chosen to reflect variation in NSA presence and impact. From these ten communities, households were systematically selected to complete the questionnaire. Each community contributed forty households to the total sample.

In parallel, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with key informants. These included staff from NGOs, program officers, community leaders, and local development officers. Their insights were sought to understand the strategic and operational models that guide interventions, as well as the institutional and contextual factors shaping implementation.

For data collection, household questionnaires focused on capturing resident experiences with poverty, access to basic services, and involvement in NSA programs. Meanwhile, the interview guide explored themes such as intervention design, coordination with government structures, sustainability, and community ownership. Secondary data complemented these findings, including project documents, NGO reports, and planning records from relevant ministries and donor agencies.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential techniques to map patterns of reach and impact. SPSS was employed to explore relationships between demographic profiles and household experiences of NSA interventions. Qualitative data were transcribed and coded using NVivo, enabling a thematic analysis that preserved local voice and context.

To ensure rigor, all instruments underwent pretesting in a non-study LGA, Ifelodun, in Kwara Central, where similar demographic characteristics exist. Reliability tests confirmed that survey scales met acceptable thresholds, and the interview guide was reviewed by academic and development experts for contextual clarity. This methodological framework provides the foundation for a rigorous and context-sensitive investigation of how non-state actors contribute to poverty alleviation across Kwara North.

Data Presentation

TABLE. Perception of NSA Interventions in Poverty Alleviation

Item Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. NSA programs have improved access to education in my community	145	170	40	30	15	3.85	1.05
2. The health outreach by NGOs meets basic medical needs	112	158	50	55	25	3.57	1.14
3. Vocational skills from NGOs enhanced my household income	121	136	60	52	31	3.48	1.22
4. NSA programs are better coordinated than government initiatives	98	144	68	56	34	3.35	1.19
5. There is clear information about NSA activities in my area	84	127	72	70	47	3.11	1.28
6. NSA interventions reach the most vulnerable in my community	106	151	55	49	39	3.44	1.20
7. NSA efforts have reduced youth unemployment	130	142	48	44	36	3.55	1.18
8. Community members are consulted before programs are introduced	95	110	76	65	54	3.01	1.30
9. NSA presence has fostered greater social trust in our LGA	119	137	55	52	37	3.44	1.21
10. NSA interventions are consistent and long-term	88	121	69	70	52	3.04	1.31

Source: Researcher's Survey, 2025

The table presents respondents' perceptions of non-state actors (NSA) interventions in poverty alleviation across ten key indicators. Overall, the data show generally positive responses, with the highest-rated areas being access to education (Mean = 3.85) and youth unemployment reduction (Mean = 3.55), while the lowest ratings

were recorded on community consultation (Mean = 3.01) and program consistency (Mean = 3.04), indicating moderate satisfaction with NSA efforts but concerns about sustainability and inclusivity.

PANEL DATA: NSA Intervention Indices Across Selected LGAs in Kwara North (2020-2024)

Year	LGA	NSA Presence Index (NPI)	Education Support Index (ESI)	Health Outreach Index (HOI)	Livelihood Empowerment Index (LEI)	Community Perception Score (CPS)*
2020	Baruten	0.45	0.38	0.42	0.36	3.02
2020	Edu	0.48	0.41	0.44	0.39	3.15
2020	Patigi	0.42	0.34	0.40	0.33	2.95
2021	Baruten	0.52	0.46	0.49	0.41	3.25
2021	Edu	0.55	0.49	0.53	0.45	3.36
2021	Patigi	0.50	0.44	0.47	0.40	3.18
2022	Baruten	0.58	0.53	0.55	0.49	3.48
2022	Edu	0.62	0.57	0.59	0.52	3.63
2022	Patigi	0.55	0.50	0.54	0.47	3.42
2023	Baruten	0.63	0.59	0.62	0.56	3.66
2023	Edu	0.68	0.63	0.66	0.60	3.75
2023	Patigi	0.60	0.56	0.61	0.53	3.58
2024	Baruten	0.67	0.64	0.68	0.61	3.81
2024	Edu	0.72	0.69	0.72	0.65	3.92
2024	Patigi	0.65	0.61	0.67	0.59	3.71

Source: Researchers' computation, 2025

The panel data presents annualized indices of non-state actor (NSA) interventions across Baruten, Edu, and Patigi LGAs in Kwara North from 2020 to 2024. The figures show a steady year-on-year improvement in all intervention dimensions, NSA presence, education, health, and livelihood across the three LGAs, with Edu consistently outperforming others, culminating in the highest Community Perception Score of 3.92 in 2024, indicating growing public confidence in NSA-led development efforts.

Discussion of the Findings

Theme 1: Institutional Presence of Non-State Actors in Kwara North

In recent years, the institutional presence of non-state actors (NSAs) in Kwara North has witnessed steady growth, a trend that reflects broader shifts in grassroots governance across Nigeria's marginal zones. Between 2020 and 2024, data drawn from the NSA Presence Index (NPI) indicates a clear upward trajectory in all three local government areas of the region, Edu, Baruten, and Patigi. Edu recorded the

most significant rise, from 0.48 in 2020 to 0.72 in 2024, followed by Baruten (0.45 to 0.67) and Patigi (0.42 to 0.65). These index values, though abstract on their own, capture the growing density of programmatic activities, operational offices, and community linkages formed by NGOs, civil society groups, faith-based initiatives, and international organizations within the region.

What these figures suggest is not merely the proliferation of NGO offices but a deeper institutional rooting of NSAs in advancing human security at the grassroots level. In Edu, for instance, the relatively higher index reflects the LGA's infrastructural advantage and ease of access, which facilitates program implementation and monitoring. Interviews with local officials confirm that several organizations, particularly those focusing on women's empowerment, basic education, and food security, now operate full-time offices with community-based staff and established liaisons with traditional councils. This shift aligns with Hilhorst's (2003) argument that "organizational anchoring" tends to occur in zones with lower implementation risk and stronger authority cooperation. In human security terms, these patterns demonstrate how NSAs reinforce economic and community security by embedding their interventions in local institutions and building community trust.

In Baruten, NSA expansion appears to be shaped by both development and humanitarian logics. As a border LGA, Baruten faces risks linked to personal and health security, including cross-border migration, trafficking, and transnational disease exposure. This makes it a hub for interventions by organizations such as IOM and UNICEF's West Africa programs, which have piloted maternal health and cash transfer schemes as part of broader resilience-building efforts. This confirms Arowosegbe's (2020) framing of border zones as hybrid arenas where state and non-state governance intersect, with NSAs playing critical roles in preventing disease spread and stabilizing livelihoods. In this way, NSA presence in Baruten advances health and personal security, while also mitigating potential cross-border insecurities that can easily spill into community fragility.

Patigi, though recording the lowest NSA Presence Index among the three LGAs, reflects how even modest institutional footprints can contribute to social and community security. Since 2022, several small to mid-size NGOs have launched programs on community health education, women's cooperative financing, and peacebuilding through religious platforms. While poor road infrastructure and weak communications continue to limit scalability, these initiatives are locally valued. For example, a respondent noted how two faith-based groups shifted from distributing sanitary kits to establishing adult literacy classes after consultations with Imams and youth leaders. This demonstrates the adaptive capacity of NSAs to protect against knowledge insecurity, thereby linking education to broader strategies for resilience against poverty, marginalization, and radicalization.

Taken together, the institutional spread of NSAs across Edu, Baruten, and Patigi underscores their role in bridging critical governance gaps in human security

provision. They not only improve access to services in health, education, and livelihoods but also create buffers against broader insecurities, such as economic shocks, disease outbreaks, and youth vulnerability to radicalization. Yet, as Banks, Hulme, and Edwards (2015) caution, this proliferation risks creating “islands of efficiency in a sea of exclusion” if not embedded into state plans and accountability mechanisms. Testimonies from Edu and Baruten highlight this tension. In Edu, quarterly coordination meetings between local councils and six NGOs have improved youth empowerment and school feeding schemes. In Baruten, maternal health outreach evolved into livelihood support following consultations with chiefs and religious authorities. Such adaptability illustrates Ferguson and Gupta’s (2002) notion of “transnational governmentality,” whereby non-state actors extend governance logics into spaces where the state is either absent or distrusted.

Ultimately, the expansion of NSAs in Kwara North strengthens human security outcomes across education (knowledge security), health (disease protection), and livelihoods (economic security). However, the reliance on non-state systems raises critical questions about accountability, dependency, and the long-term implications for state legitimacy in peripheral zones. These findings lay the foundation for the next theme, Educational Support and Human Security, where the analysis turns to how NSA contributions in schools not only improve learning outcomes but also act as safeguards against exclusion, marginalization, and insecurity.

Theme 2: Educational Support and Intervention by Non-State Actors in Kwara North

The educational landscape in Kwara North has long reflected patterns of structural neglect, infrastructural decay, and systemic underperformance, realities which have rendered the region dependent on the interventions of non-state actors (NSAs) to supplement formal state efforts. Beyond issues of learning outcomes, weak education systems in this region represent a critical dimension of human security, as limited access to schooling reinforces cycles of poverty, heightens vulnerability to extremist recruitment, and undermines opportunities for civic participation (UNDP 1994; Nwagwu 2020). This theme, therefore, captures not only the scope of NSA interventions in education but also their broader implications for safeguarding human security.

Between 2020 and 2024, the Education Support Index (ESI), derived from composite indicators such as school enrollment drives, scholarship distribution, teacher support, and educational material provision, rose from 0.37 to 0.68 across Kwara North, reflecting significant growth in NSA-led efforts. Edu LGA recorded the highest index growth (0.40 to 0.72), followed by Baruten (0.35 to 0.66) and Patigi (0.36 to 0.64). These figures signal not only an expansion in educational access but also a strengthening of knowledge security, understood here as the protection of individuals and communities from marginalization through literacy and skills development.

Edu's trajectory offers a particularly vivid example. The "Alkali Foundation," which began as a scholarship scheme for orphans, has grown into a fully-fledged educational support body, constructing learning centres, offering teacher training, and running school feeding programs. In Lafiagi, parents reported a 20 percent rise in school enrollment between 2021 and 2023, attributed to NGO-led mentorship programs and material donations. Such efforts echo Bray's (2001) argument that culturally grounded, community-driven schooling interventions not only improve literacy but also foster community security by strengthening local participation and reducing the alienation that often breeds conflict.

Baruten's educational interventions highlight another facet of human security: identity and cultural security. Owing to its proximity to the Benin Republic, NGOs there have collaborated with UNICEF regional teams to establish dual-language classrooms, enabling migrant and nomadic children to study in Fulfulde, Hausa, and French. A Baruten school administrator remarked: "For the first time, our pupils now have textbooks in their mother tongue... some even in French." By ensuring that language does not become a barrier, these interventions reduce risks of exclusion, protecting minority children from the insecurity of identity loss and ensuring that border populations are not structurally disadvantaged.

Patigi presents a different, though equally instructive, picture. Local NGOs have introduced mobile literacy programs and Qur'anic literacy hybrids targeted at girls, helping to reverse entrenched gendered patterns of educational deprivation. This has significant human security implications: access to girl-child education reduces early marriage risks, improves maternal health outcomes, and strengthens women's economic resilience. As Commins (1997) and Stromquist (2015) argue, expanding girls' education is one of the most durable investments in social and economic security, particularly in fragile regions.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Some NSA interventions are limited by short funding cycles, weak integration with state curricula, and low teacher retention. For example, while Edu benefitted from five classroom blocks built by an international NGO in 2022, bureaucratic delays in posting teachers stalled their functionality, reflecting Rose's (2009) concern that parallel systems of provision, if detached from state policy frameworks, may fragment rather than consolidate service delivery. Moreover, sustainability often depends on volunteerism, which varies across communities: Patigi's literacy classes thrived because elders served as informal teachers, while Edu's equivalent project stalled due to limited local ownership. This aligns with Mansuri and Rao's (2013) caution that participatory development outcomes are uneven, shaped by power hierarchies and elite capture.

Despite these constraints, community perceptions remain overwhelmingly positive. Data from the Community Perception Score (CPS) indicate that 73 percent of respondents rated NSA education interventions as "very satisfactory" or

“satisfactory.” Parents in Edu noted improvements not just in attendance but in their own engagement with their children’s schooling: “Before, we did not even know when our children went to school. But now, the NGO even gives us report cards to see their progress.”

In sum, educational interventions by NSAs in Kwara North extend beyond filling state service gaps; they are vital mechanisms for reinforcing human security. By expanding literacy, reducing the number of out-of-school children, and empowering girls, these actors contribute to resilience against economic shocks, radicalization, and social exclusion. Education here becomes a frontline of security, a protective shield against the insecurities that thrive in contexts of neglect. As we move to the next theme, Livelihood Empowerment and Human Security, the discussion will explore how NSAs address economic marginalization and unemployment, thereby reducing vulnerabilities to poverty-driven insecurity.

Theme 3: Livelihood Empowerment Initiatives and Economic Inclusion by Non-State Actors in Kwara North

Livelihood empowerment has emerged as a critical domain for non-state actor (NSA) intervention in Kwara North, where poverty levels remain among the highest in Nigeria. With limited industrial presence, fragile agricultural productivity, and weak state welfare support, communities across Edu, Baruten, and Patigi LGAs have come to rely heavily on NSAs to access income-generating opportunities and basic economic resilience tools.

According to the Livelihood Empowerment Index (LEI) derived in this study based on frequency and coverage of vocational training, entrepreneurship programmes, micro-credit schemes, and cooperative support, there has been a notable but uneven rise in NSA activities. Between 2020 and 2024, Edu LGA recorded the sharpest increase in LEI (from 0.42 to 0.71), driven by aggressive skills acquisition programmes supported by faith-based networks. Baruten followed with growth from 0.40 to 0.66, while Patigi rose from 0.38 to 0.59. The disparity largely reflects the level of donor penetration, pre-existing NGO networks, and community openness to market-based livelihood solutions.

In Edu, the “Tafida Foundation” runs a rotating micro-credit scheme targeted at women, with loans ranging from ₦20,000 to ₦100,000, often repaid in kind during harvest season. A local beneficiary in Shonga stated, “Before this loan, I had no business. Now I fry yam and fish and send two of my children to school.” Vocational centres in Tsaragi and Lafiagi, often established by youth-based CSOs, offer training in tailoring, leatherwork, solar installation, and ICT basics. This approach mirrors what Ellis and Biggs (2001) described as “multi-enterprise livelihood strategies,” particularly relevant in rural African contexts where households diversify income sources to manage risk and scarcity.

In Baruten, NSAs have adopted a cross-border model of economic integration, leveraging trade routes and shared ethnic ties between Nigerian and Beninese communities. One notable initiative is a joint cooperative development programme supported by a West African NGO, which trains youth in shea butter processing and exports. Interviews with cooperative leaders show that such interventions are not only empowering individuals economically but also fostering social cohesion among historically fragmented communities. These findings align with Scoones (1998), who emphasized that sustainable livelihoods are anchored in assets, capabilities, and activities that are both resilient and adaptable to the local context.

Patigi, on the other hand, has shown slower uptake of such initiatives, primarily due to the weaker institutional presence of NSAs and more conservative socio-cultural norms regarding women's economic roles. Despite this, a few Islamic charities have introduced market-based empowerment for widows and internally displaced persons (IDPs), using zakat funds to establish community poultry projects. These interventions are typically informal and community-monitored, echoing Chambers and Conway's (1992) assertion that bottom-up livelihood efforts often succeed where external models fail so long as they are culturally embedded and socially accountable.

Yet challenges persist. Many NSA programmes are short-lived due to donor fatigue, staff turnover, and poor monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Additionally, the lack of integration with state-level agricultural extension services and vocational education curricula limits scale and standardization. A youth leader from Patigi lamented: "We trained over 50 girls in bead-making, but they had nowhere to sell their products." This reveals a critical implementation gap as interventions may be technically sound but economically isolated without linkages to value chains, digital markets, or cooperative networks.

Community perception remains generally positive. CPS results indicate that over 68% of respondents across the three LGAs view NSA-led livelihood programmes as either "very effective" or "moderately effective," citing tangible income improvement, reduced dependence on state handouts, and a growing sense of local entrepreneurship. However, the same respondents expressed concern over the sustainability of these interventions, particularly in cases where they hinge on foreign donor cycles or charismatic individual founders.

In essence, livelihood empowerment initiatives led by non-state actors have filled a vacuum created by decades of economic neglect and policy failure. Their success in Kwara North, while still emerging, points to a broader trend in development practice where state weakness necessitates civic innovation. However, for these gains to be sustained, there must be greater policy alignment, institutional partnership, and investment in local capacity building.

Theme 4: Health Outreach and Community Well-being by Non-State Actors in Kwara North

Health outreach interventions by non-state actors in Kwara North have become essential buffers in a region historically underserved by public health infrastructure. In many remote parts of Edu, Baruten, and Patigi LGAs, access to primary healthcare remains constrained by distance, cost, personnel shortage, and weak institutional presence. Against this backdrop, non-state actors, especially faith-based organizations, international development agencies, and community-based groups, have emerged as critical players in enhancing health outcomes.

Using the Health Outreach Index (HOI) derived from frequency, coverage, and thematic diversity of NSA-led medical programs, the study observed a steady increase across the three LGAs between 2020 and 2024. Edu showed the highest outreach frequency (HOI = 0.72 by 2024), followed by Baruten (0.67) and Patigi (0.63). Programmes range from mobile clinics, vaccination drives, antenatal services, eye camps, deworming exercises, to HIV/AIDS and malaria education.

Edu's strong performance stems in part from the sustained engagement of international actors such as Doctors Worldwide and UNICEF, often in partnership with local Islamic medical charities. In Tsaragi and Lafagi, biannual community health days offer integrated services including blood pressure checks, free medications, and maternal health counselling directly in town halls or schools. A female respondent noted, "These visits are our only chance to see a doctor. Government hospitals are too far or empty."

Baruten benefits from a unique cross-border dynamic. NGOs leverage their proximity to the Benin Republic to implement region-wide health programmes across Fulani and Bariba settlements. For example, the "Sahel Medical Initiative" has stationed trilingual health workers in border clinics who provide weekly maternal and child health support. These interventions reinforce what Adebajo referred to as the transnational logic of humanitarian aid in West Africa, where the artificiality of borders demands flexible, people-centered healthcare strategies.

In Patigi, Christian health missions have historically dominated NSA interventions. The Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) runs semi-permanent clinics in rural areas, focusing on malaria, typhoid, and reproductive health. However, challenges in funding, maintenance, and staff retention remain prominent. A youth coordinator complained, "The clinic is open only twice a month now. We feel abandoned." This mirrors concerns raised in the work of Eze and Nwankwo, who documented the lifecycle fatigue of faith-based health services in rural Nigeria.

Quantitative data from the community perception survey shows that 71.4% of respondents rated NSA health outreach as "important" or "very important" to their household. However, issues of continuity and integration were flagged. Only 28% felt

that these services were consistent enough to replace formal health systems. Additionally, only 15% could identify a referral mechanism from outreach centres to hospitals, a clear sign of the fragmentation between NSA interventions and state systems.

Furthermore, health outreach sometimes faces cultural barriers. In conservative Muslim communities in Edu and Baruten, female health workers have been refused access or mobility during specific religious observances. In response, some NSAs have begun training local women as health educators and peer mobilizers. Another success story involves community health insurance pilot schemes introduced by development NGOs in Lafiagi and Ilesha Baruba. These schemes allow smallholder farmers to pay seasonal premiums in kind (e.g., sacks of grain) and receive basic outpatient care year-round. Though still small in scale, this model illustrates the potential for inclusive health financing, rooted in local realities and resource cycles, a principle consistent with WHO's push for Universal Health Coverage through "contextualized innovation" in low-income settings.

In conclusion, NSA-led health outreach in Kwara North is filling a critical service gap. These actors have expanded access, promoted preventive care, and supported maternal and child health in extremely marginalized communities. Yet, without stronger collaboration with government institutions, improved data-sharing, and embedded referral systems, the gains remain fragile. Sustainability will require an intentional convergence of donor support, local ownership, and policy recognition of NSA health contributions.

Conclusion

This study has examined the operational models and impacts of non-state actors (NSAs) in poverty alleviation and community development across Kwara North, with a particular focus on their interventions in education, health, and livelihood empowerment. The evidence demonstrates that NSAs have become central to safeguarding human security in peripheral regions where the state's presence is limited. By expanding access to schooling, providing healthcare outreach, and sustaining livelihoods, these actors have mitigated insecurities that manifest as vulnerability to radicalization, disease burdens, and economic shocks.

However, the findings also reveal that NSA interventions are constrained by sustainability gaps, fragmented coordination, and dependence on external funding. While their activities enhance protection against immediate threats to survival and dignity, weak institutional integration undermines their ability to consolidate long-term human security. If such systemic limitations persist, NSAs risk creating pockets of temporary relief rather than sustained resilience. Conversely, when their activities are formally integrated into state planning and grounded in local ownership, NSAs can serve as catalytic actors that bridge governance gaps, strengthen social cohesion, and expand the protective capacity of communities against human insecurities.

Recommendations

1. Institutional Synergy for Human Security

The government should establish a formal NSA–government coordination framework to embed its interventions within state human security policies. A state-level Human Security and NSA Desk in the Ministry of Planning would reduce duplication and align interventions with broader development-security priorities.

2. Sustainability through Local Human Security Anchoring

NSAs should integrate traditional councils, women’s groups, and youth associations into program design and monitoring. Local ownership not only enhances sustainability but also ensures that interventions respond to community-defined insecurities, such as exclusion of girls from schooling or pastoralist-farmer livelihood tensions.

3. Human Security Data Systems

Annual Community Perception Surveys (CPS) should be institutionalized to monitor how interventions reduce vulnerabilities in health, education, and livelihoods. Such data-driven monitoring would enable early warning of emerging insecurities (e.g., rising dropout rates or food insecurity) and guide adaptive responses.

4. Diversified and Protective Funding Models

To reduce donor dependency and ensure continuity, NSAs should adopt blended finance strategies that combine international support, local philanthropy, cooperative savings schemes, and state-matching grants. Such resource pooling strengthens economic security by ensuring uninterrupted access to essential services during funding cycles.

5. Capacity Building for Conflict-Sensitive Human Security Delivery

NSA personnel should receive training in conflict sensitivity, peacebuilding, and community negotiation to better address insecurities at the intersection of livelihoods and identity. This is especially critical in border LGAs like Baruten, where cross-border dynamics heighten vulnerability to trafficking, displacement, and radicalization.

6. Legal and Policy Recognition of NSAs as Human Security Actors

The Kwara State legislature should enact a regulatory framework that formally recognizes NSAs as contributors to human security. Such legislation should establish accountability standards, provide legal backing for their operations, and offer tax incentives for investments in community-based human security initiatives.

In sum, the study shows that NSAs in Kwara North are not just service providers; they are frontline actors of human security governance. Their ability to transform temporary interventions into long-term protective capacities depends on whether the state, local communities, and external donors can jointly reposition them as co-architects of inclusive human security strategies.

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GEOMETOC Assessment of the Littoral Environment Using Maritime Unmanned Systems

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Abstract

In naval operations, a detailed understanding of the operational environment is essential for mission success. At present, environmental assessments within the geospatial, meteorological, and oceanographic (GEOMETOC) domains are significantly improved through the employment of maritime unmanned systems (MUS). These systems are advancing rapidly, delivering information faster while maintaining, or even improving the data quality. However, effective use of these technologies requires not only proficiency in their operation, but also a comprehensive understanding of the characteristic limitations of these systems. This article examines the main systems employed for environmental surveys and outlines the advantages and constraints associated with these platforms and their sensors.

This study is derived from observations regarding the utilisation of MUS during a series of experimental activities conducted within the framework of the operational experimentation exercise known as the Robotic Experimentation and Prototyping using Maritime Unmanned Systems (REPMUS) series, covering the period from 2021 to 2025. This exercise, recognised as the largest multinational experimentation initiative, is organised by the Portuguese Navy in collaboration with NATO Center for Marine research and Experimentation (CMRE), Faculty of Porto (FEUP), and European Defence Agency.

Keywords:

Geospatial; Meteorology; Oceanography; Hydrography; Maritime Unmanned Systems; Environmental Assessment; Naval Operations.

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1. Introduction

Armed forces conduct operations across multiple environments and geographical regions, relying on an in-depth understanding of both current and forecasted physical conditions to enhance the effectiveness of sensors, weapons and multi-domain operations (Zakiev and Kozhakhmetov 2020).

Serving as a vital element in the decision-making process, GEOMETOC information (data, products, and services) provide commanders and planning staffs with critical situational awareness of the physical environment, enabling them to anticipate and exploit optimal windows for the planning, execution, and sustainment of operations and missions. Furthermore, accurate, timely, relevant, consistent, and reliable GEOMETOC support is essential to achieving decision superiority, ensuring the optimal employment of military capabilities in pursuit of safe, effective, and successful operations (NATO 2018).

Moreover, the ability to maintain an advantage in rapid decision-making is increasingly dependent on the availability of accurate, detailed, and timely environmental information. A foundational element of any operational picture, regardless of the military operation or Allied mission, is the comprehensive understanding of the environmental information of the Theater of Operations (TO), delivered in the correct format at the appropriate time.

GEOMETOC information encompasses geospatial, meteorological, hydrographic and oceanographic data, products, and services, which are vital for anticipating or identifying optimal windows of opportunity for planning, executing, and sustaining operations. This information also plays a critical role in optimizing the deployment of sensors, weapons, logistics, equipment, and personnel in a manner that maximizes efficiency, safety, and mission success. Both current and forecasted GEOMETOC information significantly contribute to the creation of an enhanced Common Operational Picture (COP) and provide real-time situational awareness. This is essential for improving decision-making processes for commanders, as well as for enabling planners and operators to effectively exploit, plan, and execute military operations or tasks.

These operational environments have compelled NATO and nations to enhance its capabilities, including in non-permissive theaters, and to develop new capabilities to complement conventional military assets, such as the employment of unmanned systems.

From a military perspective, the main objective for assessing GEOMETOC parameters is to gain tactical advantage over an adversary by exploiting environmental and ocean conditions. To do so, it is important to have detailed knowledge of what these conditions are and how they are likely to vary in space and time. It is also essential to know how such conditions are likely to affect sensors and weapons, and those likely to be used by the adversary.

Evaluating and leveraging the effects of GEOMETOC conditions on both friendly and adversary military capabilities across all operational domains—including air, land, maritime, space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum—enables military forces to secure and sustain informational superiority over the enemy. This asymmetric advantage provided by METOC should be systematically integrated and utilized across all joint operational functions ([Joint Staff 2024](#)).

Rapid Environmental Assessment (REA) delivers environmental information to forces operating in littoral waters within tactically relevant timeframes. REA data collection can be performed using a diverse array of platforms and sensors, including those not specifically designed for REA, such as magnetometers and thermal infrared cameras. This process can range from a basic hydrographic sweep using a dinghy, to the deployment of advanced drones equipped with innovative sensors that simultaneously gather environmental and monitoring information.

Unmanned systems have become very popular in environmental surveys, both in military and civilian applications, due to their ability to be used in various fields of activity, such as: data acquisition operations in remote areas, transporting objects in critical zones, search and rescue, video recording and aerial photography, journalism, scientific research, agriculture and crops monitoring, national parks and wildlife surveillance, hydrography, oceanography, topography, critical underwater infrastructure monitoring ([Tănase\(Măxineanu\) and Scipanov 2025, 36-39](#)), border control, industry and construction for monitoring aqueducts and dams, or for inspecting high-voltage power lines, among others.

Environmental monitoring has become a key function of MUS, enabling routine and continuous coverage in a cost-effective and real-time manner. Therefore, the practical steps for employing MUS in environmental monitoring, encompassing technical considerations, scientific foundations, and valuable recommendations, are of critical importance.

This research is based upon experimental results from the annual Portuguese multinational REPMUS exercise, which facilitates collaboration among operational communities, academia, and industry to advance and assess innovative concepts, interoperability, and technological developments in maritime unmanned systems. The REA Working Group, one of the main groups in the organization of the REPMUS exercise, has been under the leadership of the NATO Maritime Geometoc Centre of Excellence for the past five years. This experimentation has been exercised in close collaboration with international industry, and Portuguese Academia with the objective to assess the use of MUS for environmental monitoring within a military operational scenario.

2. Challenges of traditional REA survey missions

Traditional methods of conducting Rapid Environmental Assessment surveys rely on manned assets such as submarines, vessels, aircraft, and helicopters, as well as the deployment of personnel within the operational theatre. Special forces continue to be assigned reconnaissance missions in challenging or contested areas. However, the conventional approach to REA involves a significant logistic and financial burden, in addition to exposing personnel to risks in conflict zones ([Leder and Leder 2018](#)). Furthermore, conventional vessels present high hydrodynamic resistance, which limits their range and autonomy, and generate elevated noise levels that can significantly interfere with onboard monitoring equipment ([Zaghi, et.al. 2016](#)).

Regarding the utilisation of legacy aerial platforms for environmental surveys, this approach has become significantly more costly compared to drone-based surveys and is increasingly falling out of use, except in cases involving large areas or regions with adverse weather conditions where aerial drones are unable to operate.

3. Advancements in Maritime Unmanned Systems for Environmental survey

MUS have increasingly become integral to modern conflicts, demonstrating significant potential across a wide spectrum of operational functions. The development of autonomous capabilities represents a natural progression of innovation, with NATO, its partners, and civilian society collaborating to integrate these systems into military operations. As a result, the technologies and operational concepts surrounding the employment of MUS in support of Alliance operations continue to present challenges, through which NATO is enhancing combat systems and platforms, increasing operational effectiveness, while simultaneously reducing human risks in theater and associated costs.

The utilisation of MUS for environmental surveys has experienced a significant increase in recent years. This growth is attributable to their numerous advantages, including high accuracy, cost-effectiveness, ease of operation, adaptability to various sensors, seamless integration with different software tools, and the facilitation of data processing through Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) techniques ([Slingsby, et.al. 2023](#)).

The methodology used for assessing the unmanned systems relied upon multiple criteria, concerning the characteristics of the platform itself, the sensors utilised and the data gathered by these systems. Regarding the assessment of the platform, the assessment was directed upon factors such as endurance, autonomy, stability, precision and accuracy of the positioning system, payload capacity, ease of use and the time required for minimal operator training. Concerning the sensors, the evaluation focused on the quality of the data collected, accuracy and precision,

speed of data collection and processing, capability for real time processing, the format of the delivered data, and the assessment of the final products. The systems were evaluated under various scenarios according to their capabilities—including shallow and deep waters, long-endurance surveys vs. short and rapid surveys—and the resulting products were compared with data obtained from traditional, manned assets. Furthermore, to evaluate the interoperability of the MUS, the various platforms were assigned to conduct surveys within the same operational scenario. This approach enabled the systems to complement one another and facilitated the creation of a comprehensive environmental picture, utilising data collected from different platforms and sensors.

MUS can be categorised in 3 main categories for naval missions, based on the operating environment: underwater, surface and aerial. Underwater MUS can be generally split into 3 categories: Remotely Operated Vehicles (ROVs), Autonomous Underwater Vehicles (AUVs) and gliders. Regarding the surface vehicles, they are generally called Unmanned Surface Vehicles (USVs), and the aerial ones Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV – referring to the platform only) or Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS – referring to the system composed of platform and sensors).

3.1. Underwater MUS

Underwater conditions significantly influence the anti-submarine warfare (ASW) battlefield, where the functionality of most weapons and sensors depends on sound propagation. A thorough understanding of oceanographic parameters within the underwater domain is crucial to the support provided by a REA survey. However, there is an increasing need for a deeper comprehension of oceanographic factors, as military operations involving advanced platforms, weapons, and sensors are progressively impacted by environmental conditions in ways that were not previously foreseen.

Over the past several years, the autonomous underwater vehicles have been regarded as the preferred tool for specific underwater applications. However, with increasing acceptance, the use of AUVs has now become a well-established solution within the subsea survey community ([Tena 2013](#)).

AUVs have become indispensable tools for inspecting offshore structures, owing to their capacity to carry extensive equipment while maintaining relatively low operational costs ([Palomer, Ridao and Romagos 2019](#)).

During the operation of Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs), the positioning system serves as a critical component, ensuring both operational efficiency and safety. Recently, with the growing emphasis on enhancing UUV automation and optimizing operational efficiency, positioning systems are required to deliver higher levels of accuracy, with an expected error margin of less than 0.1 meters ([Yang, Zhizun and Jia 2022](#)).

There are a multitude of typical sensors that underwater vehicles hold for seabed survey or environmental survey, like:

- multibeam echosounders (typically used to provide bathymetric information of the seafloor and object detection);
- sidescan sonars and synthetic aperture sonars (used to provide a high-fidelity image of the seafloor, primarily used in object detection, such as Unexploded Ordnance and geology) (Frey, Wehner and Keller 2021);
- magnetometers (used to detect anomalies in the magnetic field of the seabed, meaning ferrous object detection on or below the seabed);
- photographic, stereographic and video cameras for identification of objects and possible sea mines;
- oceanographic sensors such as conductivity, temperature, depth (CTD) and sound velocity probes.

Nevertheless, underwater systems continue to face limitations regarding their ability to accurately determine their position while submerged, as they primarily rely on inertial navigation (Miller, Miller and Miller 2021).

Although contemporary solutions exist for underwater positioning using underwater buoys or relay systems, these platforms must still surface to obtain precise coordinates via their Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) receivers. This requirement increases their visibility and vulnerability during covert operations.

Currently, underwater gliders are routinely deployed by several nations primarily for scientific or governmental activities related to the study of marine life and the underwater environment, as well as for everyday societal activities such as fisheries monitoring and control. Navies have begun experimenting with the use of gliders equipped with hydrophones in passive mode to support ASW operations and wide-area surveillance, considering them as potential solutions and force multipliers (Constantinoiu, Quaresma and Rusu 2022). These systems are generally regarded as capable of reliable performance over extended periods, sometimes achieving continuous operation for two to three months, thereby providing a dependable solution to existing operational challenges with the integration of passive sensors and associated equipment.

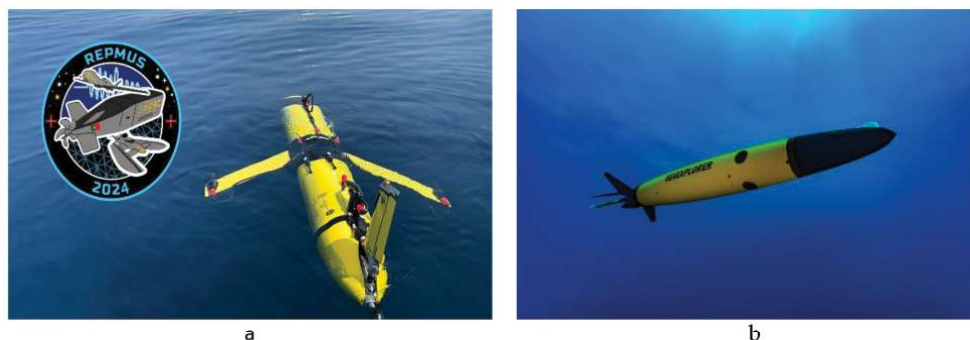


Figure 1 Underwater gliders used in REPMUS exercise series

Sources: a: <https://www.jasco.com/news/2024/repmus-24>,

b: <https://www.alseamar-alcen.com>

Glider launch and recovery can be conducted by small Rigid Hull Inflatable Boats (RHIBs) organic to surface units. Tests have also been conducted for air launch and surface recovery. These systems can be equipped with hemi-directional or omnidirectional hydrophones. Typically, the array of a glider consists of four hydrophones (placed at the front, wings, and tail of the glider) at small distances. This array configuration results in greater sensitivity and increased directionality of detections ([Marine 2025](#)).

While the routine employment of gliders in ASW operations is not yet established, Nations and research institutes continue to evaluate their potential, and industry is developing new technical capabilities. Advancements in autonomy, energy efficiency, data storage, computing capacity, and the miniaturization of sensors and systems are expected to impact the functionality of gliders. These platforms could potentially support existing manned platforms or conduct surveillance missions independently.

Nonetheless, gliders demonstrate certain operational constraints that must be thoroughly understood to enable effective mission planning. The operating speed of gliders does not exceed 1-1.5 knots. Some models are equipped with a small electric motor to increase speed up to 3 knots for short periods. Consequently, gliders may not operate effectively in areas with strong currents, and a glider barrier would function more as a semi-static passive barrier than a moving one. The estimated endurance of gliders can reach two to three months of continuous operation, with reduced endurance when additional speed is required.

The information obtained from the gliders and underwater unmanned systems was compared with data sourced from fixed oceanographic buoys within the exercise area, as well as with data collected by survey ships operating in the same region. The results were noteworthy, as the data provided by the gliders demonstrated equivalent accuracy and precision to that of traditional systems.

3.2. Surface maritime unmanned systems for REA

In the maritime battlespace, the ocean surface serves as the interface between the underwater and above-water domains. This boundary is utilized by various manned and unmanned systems to remotely monitor and observe the respective domains.

The utilisation of USVs for environmental surveys has significantly advanced in recent years, due to their numerous advantages. USVs have emerged as the preferred method for conducting surveys in lakes, ports, and enclosed waters due to their compact size, capability to integrate sensors equivalent to those used on manned vessels, and superior navigational accuracy, which ensures the collection of precise and reliable data.

Furthermore, several surface unmanned systems are now available that can autonomously deploy and recover underwater unmanned systems, enabling the execution of diverse missions such as Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), Mine

TABLE no. 1. Typical underwater MUS for REA

Model	Sensors	REA Products	Common applications
ROV	Optical camera	Images	Port assessment Objects identification Wreck surveys
	Oceanographic sensors (CTD, etc.)	Oceanographic Information of the water column	Environmental monitoring Water column information Antisubmarine Warfare forecasts
	Bathymetric sonar	Digital model of the seabed Objects on the seafloor or in the water column	Environmental monitoring Digital charting of the seabed
	Magnetic sensors	Chart of Magnetic anomalies	Wrecks and metallic objects detection
AUV	Sidescan sonar/ synthetic aperture sonar	Image of the seafloor	Object detection Seafloor
	Oceanographic sensors (CTD, ADCP, fluorescence, etc.)	Sound velocity measurements, Underwater currents, biological information	Characterization of the water column Environmental monitoring
	Bathymetric sonar	Digital model of the seabed Objects on the seafloor or in the water column	Environmental monitoring Digital charting of the seabed
	Optical camera	Optical Images	Port assessment Underwater objects identification Wreck surveys
	Hydrophones	Underwater noise maps Underwater sound detections	ASW Mammal monitoring Environmental survey
Glider	Hydrophones	Underwater noise maps Underwater sound detections	ASW Mammal monitoring Environmental survey
	Oceanographic sensors (CTD, ADCP, fluorescence, dissolved oxygen, etc.)	Sound velocity measurements, Underwater currents, biological information	Characterization of the water column, Environmental monitoring

Countermeasures (MCM), and environmental monitoring. A key advantage of USVs is their ability to operate in shallow waters and confined areas where conventional vessels are unable to move, reducing the risk to personnel.

The main scenarios for the utilisation of USVs included conducting hydrographic surveys in both shallow and deep waters, evaluating the autonomy and endurance of the systems, as well as assessing the accuracy and precision of the data collected. The data obtained from the unmanned surveys was compared with reference data from

the Portuguese Hydrographic Office, collected prior to the exercise. The results were predominantly positive, attributable to the state-of-the-art sensors installed on the unmanned platforms. However, in some smaller USVs, data corruption occurred, mainly in offshore areas affected by swell and waves, due to the movement of the platform itself. Conversely, larger USVs were assigned to long-endurance surveys, the longest lasting 72 hours, with real-time data monitoring conducted from the shore.

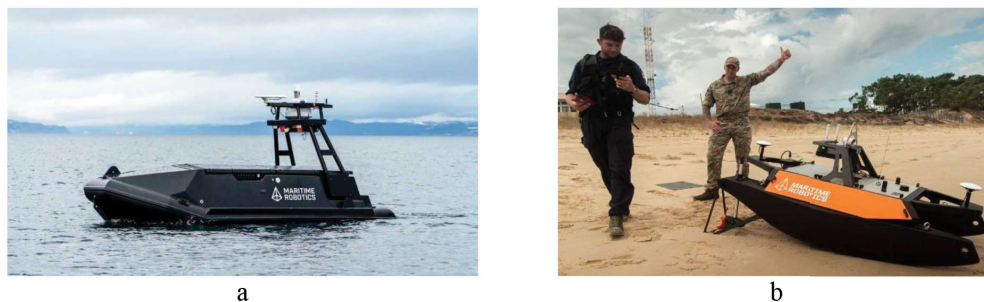


Figure 2 Unmanned surface vehicles used in REPMUS exercise series

Sources: a: <https://www.maritimerobotics.com/news/maritime-robotics-showcases-sea-drone-capabilities-nato-repmus-2025>,
 b: <https://www.joint-forces.com/exercise-news/47080-repmus-21-nato-tests-unmanned-vehicles>

TABLE no. 2. Typical surface MUS for REA

Model	Sensors	REA Products	Common applications
USVs	Bathymetric sonar	Digital model of the seabed Objects on the seafloor or in the water column	Environmental monitoring Digital charting of the seabed
	Oceanographic sensors (CTD, ADCP, fluorescence, etc.)	Sound velocity measurements, Underwater currents, biological information	Characterization of the water column, Environmental monitoring
	Hydrophones -towed	Underwater noise maps Underwater sound detections	Mammal monitoring Environmental survey
	Sidescan sonar/ synthetic aperture sonar	Image of the seafloor	Object detection Seafloor - for shallow water survey

3.3. Aerial maritime unmanned systems for REA

In the maritime battlespace, the above-water domain is utilized for various observations of shallow water regions, the intertidal zone, and adjacent land areas. These tasks are primarily accomplished through remote sensing via sensors operated by Unmanned Aerial Systems (UASs). These systems are commonly employed for Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) missions and serve as communication relays in support of Command, Control, and Communications (C3).

In the maritime domain, the integration of UAS into naval forces offers significant advantages, enhancing the range of military capabilities across both the above-water and land domains.

UAS can be equipped with a wide array of sensors and payloads. For ISR operations, the typical payload includes high-resolution video and thermal infrared cameras, though additional sensors are being used to produce Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT) products, such as georeferenced orthorectified images, Digital Elevation Models (DEM), bathymetric models, and seabed sediment classification maps. These systems are equipped with photogrammetric cameras, multispectral cameras, and miniaturized Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) systems, enabling comprehensive environmental and geospatial analysis.



Figure 3 Unmanned aerial vehicles used in REPMUS exercise series

Sources: a: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/10/schiebel-camcopter-s-100-uas-demonstrates-multi-mission-capabilities-at-repmus-2024/>,
b: <https://www.joint-forces.com/exercise-news/47080-repmus-21-nato-tests-unmanned-vehicles>

Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) share several limitations with manned aircraft, including dependence on datalinks and susceptibility to adverse atmospheric conditions such as wind, turbulence, and icing.

Additional factors such as fog, smoke, heavy precipitation, low ceilings, thermal cross-over, extreme heat, high altitude, high humidity, and sea state may also impact various UAS components.

All UAS components are, to varying degrees, affected by METOC conditions. The aircraft itself, along with its payload/sensors and data link, are particularly vulnerable, while other systems can typically be safeguarded on the ground or aboard ships.

During the REPMUS exercise series, multiple UASs were evaluated to determine their operational performance, their integration with naval vessels and units, the time required for data processing, and the extent of their year-on-year improvements. The systems were evaluated in both bathymetric and topographic surveys. For the bathymetric assessments, the UAS equipped with advanced LiDAR sensors, were tested in different scenarios upon several parameters, including penetration depth, accuracy, and precision of the data, in comparison with traditional multibeam

sonar surveys. The results were comparable, with the notable advantage that the UAS survey required less than half the time of a conventional multibeam survey. However, some experimental LiDAR sensors exhibited misalignments, which were subsequently corrected during post-processing. For instance, in highly transparent waters such as those of the Atlantic Ocean, a topo-bathymetric LiDAR system can achieve penetration depths of up to 30 meters (Constantinoiu, et al. 2024), whereas in the Black Sea the same sensor is typically limited to approximately 7–8 meters.

TABLE no. 3. Typical aerial MUS for REA

Model	Sensors	REA Products	Common applications
UAS	Topographic camera	Digital terrain models Digital surface models	Environmental survey Topographic measurements
	LiDAR	Digital surface models Digital model of the seabed Objects on the seafloor or in the water column	Topographic and bathymetric measurements
	Optical and I/R camera	Optical and infrared Images	ISR, environmental monitoring Surface objects identification
	Hyperspectral camera	Digital terrain models Topographic models Terrain roughness	Environmental survey Topographic measurements

4. Environmental information for operational use

A substantial range of environmental products may be generated through the utilisation of maritime unmanned systems. Within the underwater domain, oceanographic information is essential for the antisubmarine community, as it enables the determination of sonar propagation conditions and facilitates the monitoring of critical underwater infrastructure.

Regarding the surface domain, bathymetric maps constitute the principal output of USVs, while in the aerial domain, the topographic characterization of the terrain is of strategic importance.

Using aerial unmanned systems, the hydrographic and topographic information can be collected much faster than the traditional methods, with the same quality of the data, and in non-permissive environments.

A significant challenge over the past five years has been achieving interoperability among the systems, particularly regarding their integration into naval Command and Control (C2) systems and the diversity of their output data formats. Important progress has been made in integrating these systems onboard naval vessels and in familiarizing military personnel with their operational use. With respect to

data interoperability, the NATO Maritime Geometoc Centre of Excellence has played a leading role in promoting the adoption of standardized data formats for GEOMETOC information—such as the netCDF format, which is now utilized within NATO for environmental data exchange.

The true value emerges when a product, such as the Amphibious Operations Graphic (AOG), integrates data from all categories of maritime unmanned systems—underwater, surface, and aerial—resulting in a comprehensive resource. This complete product is employed by the Amphibious Operational Commander to plan the landing exercise, providing precise information on beach terrain, water depths, obstacles, meteorological and oceanographic conditions.

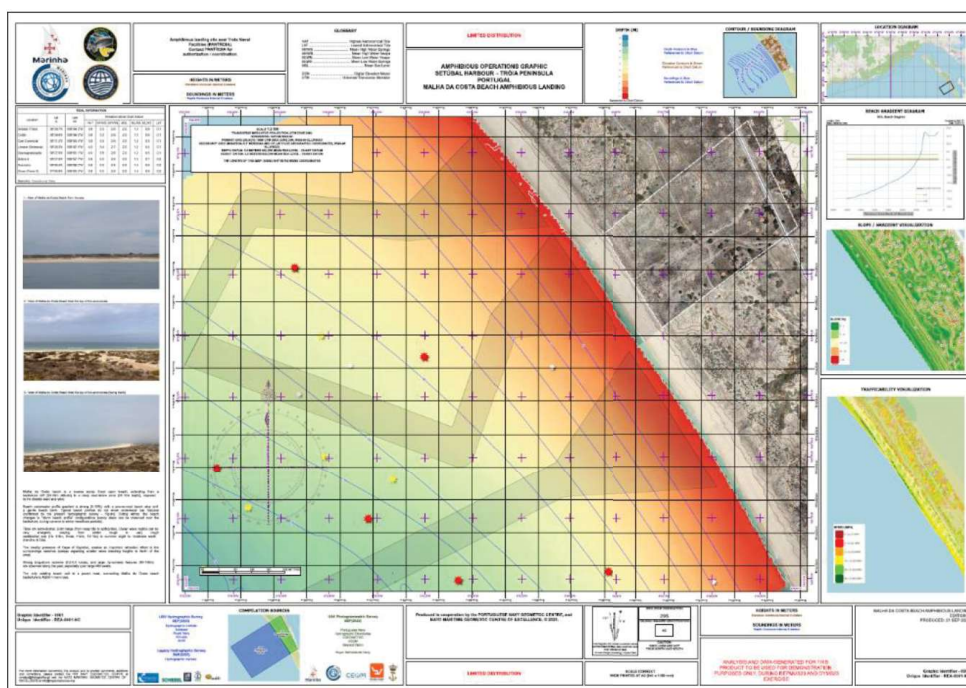


Figure 4 AOG from REPMUS 2023 exercise
Source: NATO Maritime GEOMETOC Centre of Excellence)

Conclusions

As a Naval Operation approaches the coast, the bottom topography and shallow water, waves and currents become critical to support the Commander's decisions. MUS are of great value to be employed in these areas to remotely survey littoral bathymetry and ocean currents. Wave buoys and drifters can complement the environmental assessment to support Amphibious Operations and Mine Countermeasures missions.

Emerging technology offers us the opportunity to address the challenges posed by new methods of high-resolution information. However, we cannot overlook or

ignore the inherent limitations of the unmanned systems and the uncertainties in our survey data. These techniques allow us to estimate and exploit data uncertainty, creating new GEOMETOC products and services while fulfilling critical missions of maintaining navigation safety.

When employing sensors based on acoustic transmission principles (singlebeam and multibeam echosounders, sidescan and synthetic aperture sonars), it is essential to determine the approximate depth of the area and clearly define the survey objectives — whether it involves a large-area assessment or a detailed examination of a specific location. This information is critical for selecting the appropriate frequencies and configuring optimal altitude and depth settings for the vehicle to ensure the highest quality results.

Surface survey systems are commonly employed in confined environments, such as ports and coastal areas, due to their shallow draft and greater efficiency compared to manned platforms. However, they are susceptible to adverse weather conditions and communication challenges.

To support the force projection planning, from sea to shore, UAS may be used by Naval Forces to extend their environmental observation range into very shallow water and shore domains. For aerial vehicles, sensor selection is determined by the platform's capabilities — such as payload capacity, endurance, and level of autonomy — as well as by the pilot's expertise and the specifics of the flight plan.

It is crucial, during every environmental assessment operation, that the commander should rely on technical specialists to provide guidance on the appropriate sensors and platforms to meet the survey objectives.

The use of unmanned systems in naval operations is no longer a concept of the future. It is imperative to develop proficiency in employing these systems efficiently to complement traditional methods of environmental monitoring. A thorough understanding of both the advantages and limitations of this emerging technology is essential, as is its application across diverse scenarios to mitigate human risk and conduct rapid environmental assessment. Recent conflicts, such as the War in Ukraine, have demonstrated that these systems can exert a significant impact on adversaries and enable smaller armed forces to counter global powers. Looking ahead, it is crucial to integrate advanced artificial intelligence capabilities into unmanned systems to facilitate real-time operational environmental products. Nevertheless, it remains vital to preserve the human element, ensuring that final decisions regarding product assessment and courses of action rest with human operators.

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DECLARATION on AI use (if applicable)

The author confirms that AI tools, including language models such as Copilot, were used solely to enhance the writing process, improve readability, and assist with grammar and formatting. All intellectual content, analysis, and critical arguments are the result of the author’s original work. The AI tools were not used to generate research findings or substitute independent scholarly work.

Critical Infrastructure through a Securitization Theory Lens

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Abstract

Critical infrastructure has become a central focus of European security governance amid increasingly complex physical, digital, and hybrid threats. This article applies securitization theory, drawing on both the classical Copenhagen School and its sociological developments, to analyse how the EU constructs and governs critical infrastructure through the CER Directive and the NIS2 Directive. The comparison shows that these instruments articulate distinct, yet complementary, referent objects: the CER Directive securitizes the continuity of essential services in the physical and organisational domain, while the NIS2 Directive securitizes the security and reliability of network and information systems underpinning the internal market. Together, they reveal a dual securitization logic, physical operational continuity, and digital systemic integrity, embedded in a multi-level EU security architecture that operates through legal instruments, regulatory practices, and technical standards. By linking securitization theory with the material politics of infrastructure governance, the article demonstrates that critical infrastructure is not merely a technical domain, but a key arena through which contemporary European security is defined and enacted.

Keywords:

Securitization Theory; Critical Infrastructure; Resilience; Cybersecurity;
CER Directive; NIS2 Directive; European Union Governance; Essential Services;
Network and Information Systems.

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Introduction

The governance of critical infrastructure has become a central concern of contemporary security policy, driven by the increasing interdependence of European societies and the expansion of hybrid, cyber, and systemic risks (e.g., ransomware attacks, the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines (2022), and the disruption of satellite communications). While early approaches to critical infrastructure protection relied primarily on risk management and technical standards, recent European Union (EU) legislation reveals a profound restructuring of the way “criticality” is politically constructed and governed. The adoption of the Directive on the resilience of critical entities (CER Directive) and the Directive on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity (NIS2 Directive) marks a decisive shift from sectoral vulnerability assessments to a broader framework in which essential services, digital dependencies, and socio-technical systems are elevated to matters of existential importance.

Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School and subsequently expanded through sociological and material-discursive perspectives, provides a robust conceptual lens to understand this transformation. Rather than treating infrastructures as neutral objects of technical management, securitization theory highlights the way in which political and regulatory actors construct essential services, digital infrastructures, and networked systems as existentially threatened entities whose protection justifies extraordinary governance arrangements. In this context, critical infrastructure is not merely a set of assets but a referent object produced through legal, institutional, and discursive practices that assign it a privileged status in the hierarchy of societal priorities. Applying securitization theory, therefore, enables a deeper understanding of how EU legislation mobilizes narratives of vulnerability, interdependence, and societal risk to expand regulatory authority and reshape the responsibilities of both states and operators.

The CER Directive and the NIS2 Directive offer a compelling basis for comparative analysis because they represent two distinct but interconnected forms of securitization. The CER Directive constructs the continuity of essential services, such as energy, transport, water, healthcare, and public administration, as indispensable to vital societal functions and economic stability. By contrast, the NIS2 Directive securitizes the reliability and integrity of network and information systems that underpin these functions, framing cybersecurity not as a technical domain but as a condition for the functioning of the internal market and the resilience of digitally dependent services. Despite substantial sectoral overlap, the two directives posit different referent objects, mobilize distinct threat imaginaries, and deploy separate governance mechanisms. Their comparison thus reveals how the EU articulates physical, organisational, and digital vulnerabilities across multiple layers of the socio-technical system.

This article uses securitization theory to analyse how critical infrastructure is constructed as an object of protection in EU law and to compare the CER and NIS2 Directives as complementary, yet conceptually distinct, frameworks. The analysis demonstrates that the EU now operates with a dual securitization logic: one centred on critical resilience and the uninterrupted provision of essential services, and another centred on cybersecurity and the integrity of network and information systems.

From a methodological perspective, the conceptual framework of this article is grounded in securitization theory, which provides the analytical tools for conducting a legislative and comparative examination of two European Union legal instruments concerning critical infrastructure. In this regard, the study investigates how the CER Directive and the NIS2 Directive construct their respective referent objects, securitizing actors, audiences, and threat imaginaries. The analysis is structured through a three-layered analytical grid, the value layer, the stakeholder/operator layer, and the physical–technical layer, applied symmetrically to both directives to ensure conceptual consistency. The insights generated through this framework are then integrated into a comparative assessment that identifies convergences, divergences, and complementarities in the EU’s approach to governing critical infrastructure. The methodology adopted is therefore interpretive rather than empirical, focusing on how legislative instruments frame existential threats and authorize governance interventions within a multi-level European security architecture.

Nevertheless, this methodological approach carries certain inherent limitations. First, because it relies primarily on textual and conceptual analysis of EU legislation, the study does not capture the full diversity of national implementation practices or the sectoral variations across Member States.

Securitization Theory and Its Relevance for Critical Infrastructure

Securitization theory, first developed by the Copenhagen School, conceptualizes security as a performative and intersubjective process in which political actors construct certain issues as existential threats that justify extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998; Taureck 2006, 54–55). Central to this framework is the claim that security is a *speech act*: by declaring an issue to be a matter of survival, an authoritative actor transforms it into one treated outside the bounds of normal politics. Classical securitization theory thus emphasises the role of elite actors, the referent object framed as under threat, the audience whose acceptance is necessary for securitization to succeed, and the shift from routine governance to exceptional political measures (Taureck 2006, 55; Balzacq 2019, 3–4).

Balzacq (2011) reformulates the theory beyond its linguistic foundations by distinguishing between a philosophical approach and a sociological approach,

which embeds securitization in broader practices, institutional contexts, and power relations. For Balzacq, securitization succeeds not simply through rhetorical performance but through the alignment of audience expectations, contextual resonance, and what he calls a *dispositif* of practices, tools, and cultural dispositions that render certain threat constructions meaningful. Security utterances, therefore, derive their force from their embeddedness in social and historical conditions rather than from semantics alone. This sociological turn shifts the theory from a narrow focus on language to a more comprehensive account of how threats are produced, circulated, and stabilized within political environments.

A further refinement is offered by Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka (2016), who argue that securitization is best understood as a process that establishes the security character of public problems and shapes the policy options deemed legitimate in response. The authors reconceptualize securitization as a fusion of performativity and an “analytics of government,” in which security is enacted through bureaucratic routines, professional practices, data systems, and legal instruments, not merely via discursive acts. They highlight four re-theorized dimensions (audience, context, power relations, and practices) demonstrating that securitization has evolved into a flexible research programme concerned with how threats are constructed and institutionalized across diverse domains, from migration and health to energy and cybersecurity.

Balzacq (2019) further deepens this trajectory by addressing key tensions that persist in the field: whether securitization derives primarily from elite performance or from co-constitutive interactions with audiences, and whether securitization depoliticizes or intensifies political struggle. To reconcile these debates, he proposes the idea of regimes of practices, which integrates discursive and material mechanisms that shape how threats become socially “sticky.” Securitization, in this formulation, is inseparable from the politics of the extraordinary, a contest over legitimacy in which actors struggle to impose authoritative representations of danger. This approach situates securitization within the broader productive power of governance practices that structure visibility, expertise, and institutional responses to perceived threats.

Stritzel (2014) provides one of the most influential critiques of classical theory, arguing that the Copenhagen School’s conceptual architecture is under-theorized and internally inconsistent, particularly regarding the relationship between speech acts, audiences, context, and power. He shows that the theory oscillates between an Austinian view of securitization as illocution, a poststructuralist focus on indeterminacy, and a Bourdieusian account of fields of power, without reconciling these positions. Stritzel therefore advocates a discursive-pragmatic and context-sensitive approach, in which the meaning of security emerges from historically situated practices of translation, negotiation, and power.

Complementing this debate, Taureck (2006) clarifies the distinction between securitization theory as an analytical framework and securitization studies as a

broader normative critique. She argues that many critiques misinterpret the theory by faulting it for lacking moral guidance, even though its purpose is diagnostic: it seeks to explain *how* actors construct threats and mobilize exceptional measures, not to evaluate whether they should do so. By drawing this boundary, Taureck repositions securitization theory as a methodologically neutral tool for tracing processes of securitization and desecuritization.

Despite these advancements, the application of securitization theory to critical infrastructure remains underdeveloped. Aradau (2010) highlights that much of the literature treats infrastructures as passive objects rather than as material–discursive assemblages actively constituted as “critical” through engineering standards, legal classifications, and risk assessment practices. This challenges the dominant tendency to privilege linguistic acts and audience acceptance while neglecting the material agency of infrastructures and the socio-technical practices that underpin their governance. As a result, securitization analyses often reproduce a managerial and depoliticized framing, overlooking how infrastructures co-produce security logics and how “criticality” itself is fabricated through institutional and technical work. Aradau’s intervention, therefore, underscores the need for a more integrated perspective that bridges securitization theory with the material politics of infrastructure governance.

A Securitization Theory Approach to the Resilience of Critical Entities

Applying securitization theory to the Directive on the resilience of critical entities (CER Directive) demonstrates that the primary referent object is not the physical infrastructure itself, but the continuity of essential services that sustain vital societal functions and economic stability. The Directive explicitly positions critical entities as indispensable for “the maintenance of vital societal functions or economic activities,” establishing service continuity as the existential value at stake (European Union 2022b, Recitals 1–3). In securitization terms, it is the potential disruption of these essential services and the cascading societal and economic consequences that constitute the existential threat requiring exceptional governance measures.

This securitized framing is operationalized through a three-layered conception of the referent object: value, stakeholder, and physical layer. At the value layer, the Directive identifies essential services such as energy, transport, banking, healthcare, digital infrastructure, and water supply as the foundational societal functions whose uninterrupted provision must be safeguarded. These services underpin the stability of the internal market and public welfare and therefore justify harmonised EU intervention.

At the stakeholder or operator layer, the referent object comprises the critical entities, public and private operators, responsible for maintaining these essential services.

Article 1 asserts that the purpose of the Directive is to ensure the “resilience of critical entities, so that they can provide essential services “in an unobstructed manner,” even under disruptive conditions ([European Union 2022b](#), Art. 1). Operators thus become functional intermediaries whose failure would directly threaten the essential societal values securitized at the higher layer.

Finally, at the physical layer, the Directive encompasses the infrastructures, assets, and systems through which operators deliver essential services. These physical and digital components, networks, facilities, and technologies are framed as instrumental referent objects. Article 2 defines critical infrastructure as any asset or system “necessary for the provision of an essential service,” underscoring its supporting role relative to the operator and value layers ([European Union 2022b](#), Art. 2).

Viewed through securitization theory, the CER Directive therefore constructs a hierarchical referent object: the essential societal functions to be protected, the operators responsible for delivering them, and the infrastructures that enable their functioning. This multi-layered framing shifts attention away from traditional asset-based protection toward the safeguarding of service continuity as a matter of existential importance for the European Union, thereby legitimizing extensive regulatory and supervisory measures across Member States.

Applying securitization theory to the Directive on the resilience of critical entities (CER Directive) reveals a multi-layered and multi-level constellation of securitizing actors. Securitization unfolds both at the legal–institutional level, through authoritative legislative acts, and at the operational level, through the implementation and oversight practices that translate the Directive into everyday governance. Each layer operates simultaneously at the EU level and the national level, resulting in a complex architecture of distributed securitizing authority.

At the EU legal–institutional level, the primary securitizing actors are the European Parliament and the Council, acting on a proposal from the European Commission. Through the adoption of the Directive, these institutions perform the foundational securitizing move: they formally frame the continuity of essential services as indispensable to the functioning of vital societal and economic systems, identify a broad range of threats, from natural disasters and terrorism to hybrid attacks and interdependencies (threats such as the 2016 Italian earthquakes or cyber-enabled attacks on Ukraine’s electricity grid), and justify the imposition of harmonised resilience obligations across Member States. In securitization terms, the act of legislating constitutes the authoritative speech act that elevates essential service continuity to an existential priority for the Union ([European Union 2022b](#), Recitals 1–3).

At the national legal–institutional level, Member States and their designated competent authorities become secondary securitizing actors. They are required to adopt national strategies, conduct national risk assessments, and identify critical

entities whose disruption would have significant societal effects ([European Union 2022b](#), Arts. 3–6). Through these designations and the domestic translation of EU rules, national authorities reproduce and embed the EU-level securitizing move within their territorial governance structures, thereby extending its authority across multiple administrative and regulatory domains.

At the EU operational level, securitization is further enacted by bodies such as the Critical Entities Resilience Group, which coordinates implementation, develops guidance, and facilitates cross-border information exchange. Although these bodies do not produce binding law, they operationalize and stabilize the securitized framing by shaping how resilience obligations are interpreted, monitored, and integrated into ongoing administrative routines. Their work ensures that the exceptional framing introduced by the EU legislator is sustained through continuous practices of supervision and coordination.

At the national operational level, competent authorities, supervisory bodies, and the critical entities themselves enact securitization through day-to-day compliance activities. National authorities carry out inspections, impose corrective measures, and oversee adherence to resilience obligations, while critical entities implement risk assessments, adopt organisational and physical resilience measures, and report disruptive incidents ([European Union 2022b](#), Arts. 18–21). These practices embed the securitized logic in the routine operations of infrastructure operators, transforming the abstract framing of essential service continuity into concrete organisational and behavioural requirements.

Taken together, the CER Directive establishes a dual-layered securitizing architecture operating across the EU and national levels. The EU institutions initiate and institutionalize securitization through law and high-level coordination, while national authorities and critical entities concretize, implement, and enforce it through regulatory and operational practices. Through this distributed configuration of actors, essential service continuity becomes constructed and maintained as a matter of existential concern for the Union, thereby legitimizing extensive oversight and resilience-building interventions.

Applying securitization theory to the Directive on the resilience of critical entities (CER Directive) shows that the primary audience of the securitizing move is the Member States, which act as the principal legal and political authorities responsible for giving effect to the Directive. Formally, the Directive is “addressed to the Member States” ([European Union 2022b](#), Art. 29), requiring them to transpose its provisions, adopt the necessary national strategies, identify critical entities, and conduct national risk assessments. In securitization-theory terms, their acceptance is juridical and administrative: by incorporating these obligations into domestic law, Member States confirm that essential service continuity constitutes an existential concern that warrants harmonised and intrusive resilience measures.

A second key audience consists of the critical entities themselves, public and private operators directly subject to the obligations set out in Chapter III of the Directive. Article 1(b) stipulates that the Directive “lays down obligations for critical entities” to ensure their ability to provide essential services under all conditions, while Article 6 requires that designated entities be formally notified of their status and informed of the specific obligations applicable to them ([European Union 2022b](#), Arts. 1(b), 6). Operational securitization thus hinges on these entities’ acceptance of their elevated role: no longer ordinary service providers, they become actors whose performance is framed as crucial to societal stability, and whose failure could generate cascading and cross-border disruptions.

Finally, the Directive implicitly addresses a broader societal and economic audience, including investors, companies, and service users. Recital 6 emphasises that a resilient system of critical entities fosters “reliance and trust,” which are portrayed as essential for a well-functioning internal market. Although this audience does not bear direct obligations, the Directive seeks to reassure it by signalling that essential services are being protected through coordinated resilience measures. In this sense, securitization extends beyond regulatory actors and operators to encompass the wider public whose expectations of stable and reliable essential services underpin societal confidence.

Taken together, the CER Directive establishes a multi-layered audience structure. Member States form the primary legal-political audience responsible for institutionalizing the securitizing move; critical entities constitute the operational audience tasked with implementing resilience obligations; and a broader societal and economic audience represents the diffuse public whose trust the Directive aims to secure. This layered configuration reinforces the Directive’s framing of essential service continuity as a matter of existential importance for the European Union.

Applying securitization theory to the NIS2 Directive reveals that the primary referent object is the security and continuity of network and information systems (NIS) that underpin essential and important services across the European Union. Rather than treating cybersecurity as an end in itself, the Directive frames digital infrastructures as indispensable to the functioning of the internal market and to the stability of critical societal and economic activities. Thus, the existential threat is understood as the potential disruption, degradation, or compromise of digital systems whose failure would produce systemic and cross-border effects.

At the value layer, the Directive identifies the functioning of the internal market and the continuity of digitally dependent societal and economic activities as the foundational objects of protection. Article 1(1) explicitly states that the objective is to ensure “a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union, with a view to improving the functioning of the internal market” ([European Union 2022a](#), Art. 1(1)). These systemic values, market stability, economic resilience, and the reliability

of essential digital services, constitute the existential goods whose protection justifies harmonised cybersecurity obligations.

At the stakeholder or operator layer, the Directive designates essential entities as indirect referent objects. These include operators in sectors such as energy, transport, banking, digital infrastructure, health, drinking water, ICT services, and public administration ([European Union 2022a](#), Art. 3). Their operations are securitized because their digital dependence renders them pivotal to maintaining societal stability. The failure of these entities to protect or ensure the integrity of their digital systems is framed as a threat that could cascade across multiple sectors.

At the physical–technical layer, the Directive treats network and information systems themselves as the direct operational referent object. Article 6 defines NIS as interconnected digital and data-processing systems whose compromise can undermine confidentiality, integrity, authenticity, and availability ([European Union 2022a](#), Art. 6). The obligations imposed on operators, ranging from risk-management measures to incident reporting (Arts. 20–21), are intended to secure these digital infrastructures as the material substrate through which threats manifest. In securitization terms, it is the vulnerability of these systems that anchors the Directive’s logic of exceptional regulatory intervention.

Taken together, the NIS2 Directive constructs a layered referent object centred on the continuity and reliability of digital infrastructures that make essential services possible. At the macro level, the internal market and societal stability constitute the existential values to be safeguarded; at the meso level, essential entities function as operators whose cybersecurity posture is crucial to that protection; and at the micro level, network and information systems form the material basis of securitization. The Directive thus elevates digital continuity to a matter of existential importance for the European Union and legitimizes extensive cybersecurity governance as a necessary response.

Comparative Analysis of the Referent Object in the CER Directive and NIS2 Directives

A comparative analysis of the Directive on the resilience of critical entities (CER Directive) and the NIS2 Directive through the lens of securitization theory shows that, although both instruments aim to safeguard the continuity of essential societal and economic functions, they construct different referent objects at the core of their respective securitizing logics. In the CER Directive, the primary referent object is the continuity of essential services, including energy, transport, water, health, digital infrastructure, and public administration, whose uninterrupted provision is portrayed as indispensable for vital societal functions and the functioning of the internal market. These essential services constitute the existential values at stake, as their disruption is expected to generate cascading, cross-sectoral consequences.

Supporting this value layer is a secondary referent object: the critical entities responsible for delivering these services. Their organisational and operational resilience is framed as crucial to maintaining societal stability. At the operational level, the CER Directive treats the physical and organisational infrastructures used by these entities as instrumental referent objects, relevant insofar as they enable service continuity.

By contrast, the NIS2 Directive constructs its referent object within a digital and systemic register. Its primary concern is the security and reliability of network and information systems (NIS) that underpin essential and important services across the European Union. The value layer is therefore articulated around the functioning of the internal market and the stability of digitally dependent societal and economic activities, which are increasingly exposed to cyber threats. At the stakeholder layer, the Directive identifies essential entities whose cybersecurity posture directly shapes the integrity and trustworthiness of the wider digital ecosystem. At the operational level, NIS2 focuses on technical infrastructures, such as data-processing systems, electronic communications networks, and ICT platforms, that form the material foundation of digital continuity.

Taken together, the two directives reveal complementary but distinct securitization logics. The CER Directive securitizes the continuity of essential services within the physical and organisational domain, whereas the NIS2 Directive securitizes the digital conditions that enable those services to function. In the CER framework, criticality arises from the potential disruption of vital societal functions; in NIS2, it arises from the compromise of digital infrastructures essential to the internal market. Although both aim to protect the resilience of European society, they identify different layers of the socio-technical system as their core referent objects, producing two parallel yet interconnected forms of securitization: one grounded in physical operational continuity, the other in digital systemic reliability.

Comparative Analysis of Essential Service Sectors (CER) and Infrastructure Categories (NIS2)

The CER Delegated Regulation defines *essential services* as those necessary to maintain *vital societal functions, economic activity, public safety, and public health*. These essential services are grouped across eleven broad sectors, including energy, transport, digital infrastructure, banking, health, drinking water and wastewater, food, space, public administration, and environmental services such as waste management. The determining factor for inclusion is whether the interruption of these services would generate severe societal or economic consequences. Thus, the CER framework centres on service continuity as the core object of protection, and it identifies sectors according to their societal indispensability.

TABLE no. 1. Comparison of Essential Service Sectors under the CER Framework and Critical Digital Infrastructure Categories under NIS2

Sector/Category	CER Delegated Regulation: Essential Services	NIS2 Directive: Categories of Critical Digital Infrastructure
Energy	Electricity, district heating, oil, and gas are essential for society	Electricity, oil, and gas operators as digital-dependent entities; the network and information systems of energy operators
Transport	Rail, air, maritime, and road transport services	Transport operators where ICT systems are critical; digital systems supporting air traffic, rail signaling, maritime operations
Digital Infrastructure	Included as essential services (e.g., IXPs, DNS, cloud under CER list)	A core NIS2 sector: DNS, cloud, data centres, CDNs, trust services, electronic communications networks
Banking & Financial Markets	Treated as essential services due to economic indispensability	Treated as essential because of cyber risk to financial stability
Health	Hospitals, medical care, and pharmaceutical supply	Healthcare providers are cyber-dependent entities whose systems must be secured
Drinking Water & Wastewater	Essential for public health and survival	Included due to reliance on SCADA systems and digital process control
Food	Production and distribution of essential food products	Not explicitly a NIS2 core digital category unless part of manufacturing with critical ICT systems
Waste Management	Essential for environmental and public health protection	Covered in NIS2 only indirectly when digital systems are central to waste operations
Public Administration	Core societal governance functions	Central governments are explicitly included as essential digital entities
Space	Satellite operations supporting essential services	Included under NIS2 only when space services depend on critical ICT providers (e.g., ground stations)
Environmental & Chemical Sectors	Essential for safety, environment, and chemical handling	Included in NIS2 manufacturing sectors when cybersecurity risks are high

The NIS2 Directive, by contrast, identifies sectors not based on the essentiality of physical services, but on the criticality of digital infrastructures and ICT dependencies. The Directive’s Annex I (essential entities) and Annex II (important entities) categorize entities whose network and information systems are fundamental to the functioning of the internal market and the resilience of digital-dependent activities. These categories include digital infrastructure (DNS service providers, data centres, cloud computing, content delivery networks), ICT service management, electronic communications networks, as well as sectors such as energy, transport,

drinking water, wastewater, health, banking, financial market infrastructures, and public administration. While there is broad sectoral overlap with CER, NIS2 reframes these sectors through a cybersecurity prism: what becomes “critical” is not the service itself, but the network and information systems that support or operate these services.

The key difference lies in the logic of classification. CER protects *services essential for societal functioning*, regardless of their digital intensity, while NIS2 protects *digital infrastructures and ICT-dependent operators* whose disruption could compromise cybersecurity, market stability, and digital continuity. In many sectors, energy, transport, health, water, and public administration, the same entities appear in both frameworks, yet they are securitized for different reasons. Under CER, they are essential due to their physical and organisational importance for society; under NIS2, they are essential because they rely on digital infrastructures whose compromise can create systemic risks. Thus, while the sectoral scope partially overlaps, the referent objects and mechanisms of criticality differ: CER focuses on essential services as such, whereas NIS2 focuses on the digital networks and infrastructures enabling them.

Although both CER and NIS2 cover many of the same sectors, the rationale behind their inclusion diverges significantly.

This demonstrates that the two directives protect different layers of the European socio-technical system: CER guards the *physical and organisational continuity* of essential services, whereas NIS2 guards the *cybersecurity and integrity of the digital systems* that make those services possible.

Conclusion

This article examines how the European Union constructs and governs critical infrastructure through securitization processes embedded in two key legislative frameworks: the Directive on the resilience of critical entities (CER Directive) and the NIS2 Directive. Drawing on securitization theory, both in its classical and sociologically expanded forms, the analysis has shown that these instruments articulate distinct yet interconnected securitizing logics that operate across multiple institutional and operational layers.

The CER Directive establishes a securitization dynamic centred on the continuity of essential services, positioning vital societal functions as existential goods whose disruption necessitates harmonised and intrusive resilience measures. This construction foregrounds critical entities and their infrastructures as indispensable intermediaries in the protection of societal stability. In contrast, the NIS2 Directive securitizes the digital conditions underpinning essential services, identifying the security and reliability of network and information systems as the referent object.

Here, the internal market and digital-dependent activities are framed as existentially threatened by cyber incidents, motivating stringent cybersecurity obligations for essential and important entities.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that these directives enact parallel but complementary forms of securitization. The CER Directive addresses vulnerabilities within the physical and organisational domain of essential services, whereas NIS2 targets the digital infrastructures that enable those services to function. Together, the two instruments reveal a layered EU security architecture in which physical continuity and digital integrity are mutually reinforcing dimensions of critical infrastructure resilience. This dual governance structure illustrates how the EU increasingly governs risk not through isolated sectoral measures but through integrated, cross-sectoral frameworks that reflect the material and socio-technical complexity of contemporary infrastructure systems.

More broadly, the findings contribute to securitization theory by showing how security logics extend beyond discursive acts into regulatory practices, technical standards, and institutional routines. The directives illustrate how threats are constructed, circulated, and operationalized through legal instruments, administrative procedures, and requirements imposed on public and private operators. They also underscore the need for securitization scholarship to account for the material agency of infrastructures and the centrality of socio-technical systems in contemporary modes of governance.

The analysis of the CER and NIS2 Directives also carries important implications for the Member States, whose role is central in operationalizing the EU's dual securitization logic. At the practical level, Member States must translate the legal framing of essential service continuity and digital-system integrity into coherent national strategies, institutional reforms, and sector-specific regulatory measures. This requires strengthening national risk-assessment capacities, improving cooperation between civil, military, and private actors, and ensuring that competent authorities possess sufficient technical expertise and resources to supervise compliance.

In sum, the CER and NIS2 Directives demonstrate that the EU's approach to critical infrastructure is marked by a multi-layered, multi-level, and materially grounded securitization process. By differentiating yet interlocking the protection of essential services and digital infrastructures, the EU constructs resilience as both a physical and a cyber-systemic imperative. This analysis highlights not only the growing complexity of critical infrastructure governance but also the expanding scope of securitization as a framework for understanding how modern polities define, prioritise, and protect what they deem existential to their societal and economic order.

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Geopolitical Rivalry of Great Powers with Special Reference to Iran and Israel

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Abstract

After World War II, the United States established a geographical ring, extending from Scandinavia to the Far East, aiming to prevent any land power from reaching the high seas and challenging its global dominance. In 1979, Iran terminated its strategic partnership with the United States, creating an opening for the land powers to reach the high seas. This shift prompted the United States to influence regime change in Iran. However, this interest stands in conflict with the strategic objectives of Russia and the People's Republic of China. Their shared interest lies in maintaining stability in Iran and preserving the current regime, which warrants them access to the high seas and ensures energy security. In order to pursue its geopolitical objectives within the existing balance of power among the three major powers, the United States is unwilling to engage in a full-scale war with Iran but employs Israel for proxy wars instead, justifying those conflicts on the grounds of the perceived threat posed by Iran's nuclear program. This thesis was tested in the research, with the most recent conflict between Iran and Israel serving as evidence in favor of the thesis.

Keywords:

Geopolitics; Great Powers; Hartland; Rimland; the Middle East; Iran; Israel.

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Introduction

Iran and Israel are located in the Middle East (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel), a geopolitical region that “had become the second most important strategic zone in the struggle for world domination” (Spykman 1942, 184). After World War II, it became a site of geopolitical competition between the United States (the US) and the Soviet Union (the USSR). Through military alliances and political agreements, the US established a geographical ring, extending from Scandinavia to the Korean Peninsula, which prevented the USSR from reaching the high seas and challenging the naval dominance of the US.

An essential component of this geographical barrier in the Middle East was Iran, since it represented the closest and most favorable route to the high seas for the USSR. Also, both Iran and Israel were at some point major allies of the US, as they helped maintain the balance of power with the Arab states. The Arab states were largely dependent on military and political assistance from the USSR, while the US provided Iran and Israel with political, military, and economic assistance. Furthermore, to strengthen the position of its allies, the Eisenhower administration initiated the “Atoms for Peace” program in 1953, under which the first nuclear reactors were constructed in the Middle East. The program officially aimed at sharing the benefits of atomic energy for peaceful purposes (Eisenhower 1953).

The US closely monitored developments in Iran during 1978–1979. In the months leading up to the Revolution, US diplomacy sought to facilitate a transition of power from the Shah to a responsible civilian government that would not only meet the needs of the Iranian people but also fulfill the requirements of US policy (Ball 1978). This effort ultimately failed, and in 1979, the Iranian Revolution occurred, resulting in a fundamental shift in Iran’s socio-political system. The most significant consequence was that Iran severed its alliance with the US. This development created a gap in the US’s geographical ring and tilted the balance of power in the region. At the same time, Iran’s nuclear program raised concerns about the potential for nuclear weapons development. For this reason, since 1979, the US has been in favor of regime change in Tehran and/or dismantling of Iran’s nuclear program (Ball 1978); (Guardian 2003); (Chivvis 2025).

The regime in Tehran is aware of its security situation and is thus determined to maintain the nuclear program and potentially obtain nuclear weapons as a deterrent against any aggression. Additionally, Iran seeks to capitalize on this geopolitical struggle and the interests that Russia and the People’s Republic of China (China) have in Iran to achieve its objectives through a strategic partnership with these two powers. These facts reduced the possibility of a full-scale war against Iran, thereby leaving the US with limited options regarding the change of political regime in Tehran, ranging from sanctions to supporting proxy wars.

Methodology

Building upon the points outlined in the introduction, the following research subject was determined: the geopolitical interests of the Great Powers, particularly in the Middle East, where these interests intersect and create a framework that determines the strategic approaches and opportunities for regional states like Iran and Israel to achieve their national objectives. Within the research subject, the following research questions were determined:

1. Can classical geopolitical theories serve as a methodological framework for understanding conflicts in the Middle East?
2. What is the place and role of Iran and Israel within the geopolitical strategies of the Great Powers in the Middle East?
3. Is the conflict between Iran and Israel primarily driven by the geopolitical objectives of the Great Powers, or by Israel's existential fear of Iran's nuclear program?

In order to answer the first research question, fundamental geopolitical principles found in the classical geopolitical theories of Mahan, Lee, Mackinder, Spykman, Kjellén, and Brzezinski were described, and their applicability to contemporary relations in the Middle East was explained. To address the second research question, the geopolitical strategies of the US, Russia, and China were examined, placing particular focus on the position and role of Iran and Israel within those strategies. Finally, in addressing the third research question, it was essential to analyze the underlying causes of the hostility between Iran and Israel and to contextualize them within the broader geopolitical interests of the major powers in the Middle East.

To achieve the research objectives, we formulated and tested the following hypothesis: the hostility between Iran and Israel is an element of the protracted geopolitical conflict between the sea and land powers, while the short-term military conflict in June 2025 ("the Twelve-Day War") represents an armed escalation of that geopolitical conflict. This conflict began in 1979 when Iran severed its strategic partnership with the United States, thus creating an opening for the land powers to access the high seas and challenge the US's status as a sea power. Given the current balance of power among the Great Powers, the US is unwilling to engage in a full-scale war with Iran but instead employs Israel to wage a proxy war, using the perceived threat posed by Iran's nuclear program to justify the conflict.

To test the hypothesis, the following scientific methods were employed: content analysis, the deductive method, the historical-comparative method, and the inductive method.

By applying the content analysis method to the classical geopolitical theories of Mahan, Lee, Mackinder, Spykman, Kjellén, and Brzezinski, key geopolitical terms such as "Hartland", "Rimland", "the sea power", and "the land power" were conceptualized. Furthermore, by applying this method, key geopolitical principles that explain the political actions of land and sea powers were identified.

The deductive method was used to conclude the specific geopolitical objectives of the Great Powers, as well as those of Iran and Israel, in the Rimland and the Middle East, and about the nature of *the Twelve-Day War* between Iran and Israel.

The historical-comparative method was applied to determine the mutual and different geopolitical perspectives of classical geopolitical authors. Moreover, it was used to determine the historical and current dynamics of relations between the states that were encompassed by the analysis.

Finally, using the inductive method, we concluded the future development in the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East and the place of Iran's nuclear program in the regional security discourse.

Classical Geopolitical Theory as an Analytical Framework

Geopolitics finds the drivers of political actions of states in geography. Based on geographical position, Kjellén classified states as island states, states on a continent with access to seas, and landlocked states (Kjellén 1917, 65). This position determines their motives and the directions of their political actions. Mahan argued that in order to acquire the status of a sea power, a sea state must meet seven conditions (Mahan 1898, 25-35). The basic condition is the control of the islands, naval ports located along the most important maritime trade routes and straits through which these routes pass. Additionally, a sea power must obtain a foothold on the continent in order to contain other land powers' access to the high seas, control areas rich in energy, and influence the internal affairs of (coastal) continental states (Mahan 1898, 62; Kjellén 1917, 65; Lea 1912, 156). Mahan's principles were summarized in Lea's rule that sea power is measured "by its capacity to prevent the maritime superiority of any state placed on the external shores of the sea in which it is located (Lea 1912, 156)."

Land states are focused on advancing towards the areas rich in energy and towards geographical barriers that serve as secure frontiers. Furthermore, due to the lack of trade and security comfort offered by an insular position, the interests of the land powers related to the sea can "be condensed into access to the sea as extensive and as free as possible" (Mahan 1900, 56) which is why this is a "political motive of the first order (Kjellén 1917, 34)." This advance causes fear among the sea powers because "whenever a continental state abuts upon the sea in which is situated an insular kingdom, and acquires a relative equality in maritime power, the probabilities of eventual victory rest entirely with the continental nation (Lea 1912, 156)."

This statement by Lea holds the reason why generally the sea powers do not look favorably upon the presence of a land power on the coasts. Nevertheless, alliances and hostilities are shaped by specific positions and interests at a given moment. This means that alliances between the sea and land powers are not inherently impossible. A notable example of this is the alliance between the Russian Empire and the United Kingdom during World War I, which is particularly interesting given that Mackinder's geopolitical theory was founded on the rivalry between these two empires

(Mackinder 1904, 421-437). In a multi-actor geopolitical situation, the central question is not whether a power is a sea or a land power, but with whom the given power can align in order to achieve its geopolitical interests. This dynamic is evident in the case of the US and the USSR, which were allies during World War II against Germany and Japan, but immediately after the war became geopolitical rivals.

Sea and land powers, alone or in alliance, are in a global struggle for dominance that takes place on and around Eurasia as the World (Large) Continent (Mackinder 1919, 82-83). Brzezinski vividly compared Eurasia to “*the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played*” (Brzezinski 1999). The central position on the chessboard occupies the vast landmass known as the Heartland. The Heartland is encircled by the Rimland (buffer zone), which resembles a crescent and consists of Scandinavia, Western and Central Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, Afghanistan, India, China, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Siberia (Mahan 1900; Mackinder 1904; Spykman 1942). Around the Rimland runs the “*great circumferential maritime highway*” (Spykman 1942, 181) which starts in the Baltic and the North Sea in Europe, passes through the European Mediterranean and the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, and further stretches through the Asiatic Mediterranean and ends in the marginal seas of the Far East. The rest of the world is the outer insular crescent.

The importance of controlling Eurasia for global dominance is undisputed in geopolitical theories. However, there are different views on what factors most decisively influence the control of Eurasia. Mackinder considered that whoever controls the Heartland controls the World, while Spykman modified this formula and argued that whoever controls the Rimland controls the World (Mackinder 1904; Spykman 1942). Spykman’s theory seems to be more adequate since if the land power does not control the Rimland, it will be contained by the geographical circle dominated by sea powers. To be more precise, if a land power seeks to achieve global dominance, it must secure the strategic routes through the Rimland to the high seas. On the other hand, a sea state that is unable to control these routes through the Rimland cannot be considered a sea power, nor can it ensure global dominance.

This further implies that the Great Powers win and lose geopolitical battles in the Rimland, where their interests touch, intertwine, and oppose, making this zone both geographically and politically important. According to Mahan, no state located within the Rimland can confidently “repose securely upon its own strength, or even upon the certainty of non-interference by ambitious neighbors (Mahan 1900, 22).” In this way, these states, including Iran and Israel, become “weights in a balance used by others” (Spykman 1942, 20) because their fate is a part of the geopolitical strategies of the Great Powers, achieving their interests only to the extent to which they align with the interests of the Great Powers.

Nevertheless, China is located in the Rimland and represents an exception to Mahan’s conclusion. In 2013, China began shaping a significant part of the Rimland through

the “*Belt and Road Initiative*. The Initiative was launched with the idea of enabling China to break free from the geographical encirclement both by land in the west, across Central Asia and the Middle East, and by sea in the south, through Pakistan and Myanmar (Rahman 2024; (Blanchard and Flint 2017). China uses infrastructure projects to *reshape geography*, thus making new routes to the high seas and adapting them to its needs and interests.

From a technical point of view, China can overcome geographical obstacles. The US confirms that it is the “only competitor with both the intent to reshape international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it (White House 2022, 23).” From a political point of view, the reshaping process has an uncertain outcome because China does not support its interests using military force. Nevertheless, China has already been positioned as a crucial geopolitical actor. Thus, if the US seeks to preserve its global dominance, it must prevent an alliance between Russia and China, bearing in mind the same arguments Mackinder raised against an alliance between Germany and Russia (Mackinder 1919, 112). Therefore, we can use his modified formula: *Whoever is China’s strategic partner rules Eurasia! Whoever controls Eurasia controls the World!*

Geopolitical Interests and Position of the US, Russia, and China

Geopolitical interests and the position of the US

The US symbolically acquired the status of a sea power during World War II, when the United Kingdom granted it the right to use its possessions in the Atlantic Ocean for a period of 99 years, in exchange for 50 destroyers needed at the time to defend the United Kingdom from Germany (Con and Fairchild 1989, 51-62). After the war, the US began establishing positions across the Rimland and creating a geographical ring around the USSR, in accordance with the geopolitical principles advocated in classical geopolitical theories. This geopolitical approach became known as the Truman Doctrine and persisted as a strategic approach to relations with Russia and China after the Cold War (Department of State n.d.).

In Europe, the United States provided financial assistance through the Marshall Plan (1948-1953), thereby laying the groundwork for the military and political integration of the European states under the US patronage (National Archives 1948). NATO was established in 1949 as a defensive alliance based on the principle of collective defense (NATO 1949, Art. 4). Greece and Turkey joined NATO in 1952, and in 1953, they formed the Balkan Pact with Yugoslavia (Office of the Historian 1953). Through these alliances, the US secured a foothold in Europe, enabling it to influence the internal affairs of Western European states and to contain the USSR’s access to the high seas. Nevertheless, Turkey was an undisputed American partner until 2003, when the Turkish parliament refused to allow the US troops’ passage to Iraq (Wikileaks 2003). The culmination of this breach in relations occurred after the

failed military coup in 2016, when Turkiye became a closer partner of Russia. In the Middle East and South Asia, the geographical ring consisted of Turkiye, Iran, Pakistan, and India. To deter Soviet aggression, the US stationed nuclear weapons in Turkiye and assisted India (1954), Pakistan (1956), and Iran (1957) in launching their nuclear programs ([Rammana 2007](#)); ([Mian 2013](#)); ([United Nations Treaty Collection 1957](#)). Pakistan was a reliable partner, supporting the efforts of the US in organizing the resistance movement against the USSR in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. Pakistan also supported the US during its military presence in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. However, in 2015, Pakistan shifted its strategic alignment and turned to cooperation with China ([CPEC Secretariat n.d.](#)). The US exerted decisive influence in Iran until 1979, particularly after 1953, when it orchestrated a coup to overthrow Prime Minister Mossadegh and strengthened the position of Shah Reza Pahlavi, with whom the US reached an agreement concerning the civil use of atomic energy in 1957.

In Southeast Asia and the Far East, the US gradually established a barrier against the land powers. It first purchased Alaska in 1867, and then it conquered Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines in 1898 as strategically important islands. After World War II, it occupied Japan with which it signed the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security in 1960 ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1960](#)). From 1950 to 1953, the US was involved in the Korean War, after which it signed the Mutual Defense Treaty with South Korea ([United States Forces Korea 1953](#)), thereby securing a foothold in the Far East. The victory of the Communist Party in the Chinese civil war raised concerns about the spread of communism through Southeast Asia, prompting the US involvement in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from 1955 to 1975 ([Kissinger 1994](#)) and political support to Taiwan. For the same reason, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand founded ASEAN in 1967, later joined by Myanmar, Laos, the Philippines, Brunei, and Vietnam ([ASEAN n.d.](#)).

To protect the pillars of sea power, the US established a network of military bases throughout the Rimland. A continuous geographical belt of states with the US (NATO) bases stretches from Norway, the United Kingdom and Denmark in Europe, to Oman in the Middle East, with Ramstein in Germany being the largest base in Europe and the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar being the largest and the most important base in the Middle East ([Allen, Flynn and Martinez Machain 2021](#)). The United States, however, no longer has bases in Central Asia following its withdrawal from Afghanistan, ceding this country to Iranian and Pakistani influence. The likelihood of establishing a new military presence in Central Asia is considered low, given the strong Russian and Chinese influences in the region ([Umarov 2021](#)). In the Far East, the US has most bases and most troops stationed in Japan and South Korea.

What was previously stated shows that Central Asia, as a region which Iseri described as the new Heartland of Eurasia ([Iseri 2009, 34](#)), represents a “soft spot” for the geopolitical strategy of the US. In this energy-rich region, the US does not have

political partners, nor does it have military bases that could support its interests. Furthermore, it does not control Iran and Pakistan as coastal states that connect Central Asia to the high seas. Therefore, it was concluded that in order to restore the principles of sea power, the US first needs to induce a change in the strategic alignments of Iran and/or of Pakistan.

Geopolitical interests and the position of Russia

From the geopolitical principles that determine the interests of the land powers, we derived Russia's three geopolitical objectives. First, Russia seeks a secure land border. Second, it aims to control resource-rich areas so that it can influence global trade. Finally, Russia's political motive is access to the high seas. According to classical theories, Russia has three routes to the high seas: across Europe, through the Caspian region and Iran to the Indian Ocean, and through Manchuria.

To the west of Russia lies the vast European Plain, which does not provide enough security. Consequently, Russia has three potential courses of action. First, Russia's interest lies in the existence of small, weak states at the western border that are under its influence, to serve as a buffer zone in case of invasion from the west (Kjellen 1917). Finland, the Baltic states, Belarus, and Ukraine, if neutral or pro-Russian, would constitute an ideal buffer zone. However, the Baltic States joined NATO in 2004 and Finland in 2023. The second option for Russia is to go westward to the line Szczecin – Berlin – Dresden, where the European Plain is the narrowest. Third, Russia could extend its reach further to the Atlantic Ocean, thereby securing its western border and simultaneously achieving its goal of accessing the high seas. However, the Baltic states, Western and Central European states are NATO members, making any Russian actions in Europe, other than Ukraine, highly unlikely.

The second route to the high seas is across the vast plains of Central Asia and Iran, which is why the partnership with Iran holds critical importance for Russia. Russia signed a military-technical agreement with Iran in 2001 and 2023 (Wallshaein 2025), the Treaty on Strategic Partnership in 2025 (Maini and Kumar 2025) and supported Iran's membership in BRICS (2024). Furthermore, Russia is also interested in forming a partnership with Central Asian states and Iran because of their natural resources. Furthermore, the partnership with Iran allows Russia's direct access to resource-rich states in the Gulf region, where Russia plays an important role, both through its cooperation with OPEC to set oil prices and through investments in exploration and production in the region. With its economy and federal budget dependent on energy exports and with global downward pressure on oil prices since 2014, Russia has sought to stabilize energy markets. Russia's cooperation with Saudi Arabia on oil production is a notable example" (Wasser, et al. 2022, 58-59). Russian direction to the south is intersected by the Chinese *Belt and Road Initiative*, which stretches from east to west. Currently, the two powers' interests in this region are compatible, making the cooperation between Russia and China both feasible and beneficial. This strategic partnership holds potential for the integration of Eurasia

under the leadership of these two Great Powers. Classical geopolitical theories also suggest that Russia could access the high seas in the Far East through Manchuria. However, this direction leads to the marginal seas of Asia, which are not controlled by China.

Geopolitical interests and the position of China

As a land power, China is encircled by a geographical ring that consists of high mountains and deserts to the east, north, and south, with weak states on its borders forming a buffer zone (Mongolia, Nepal, Bhutan, former Soviet republics, and states in Southeast Asia), along with marginal seas to the east. It has two geopolitical objectives (Stajić, Mirković and Radivojević 2025). Firstly, it seeks to achieve access to the high seas. To the east, China is encircled by a geographical ring controlled by the United States. According to Spykman (Spykman 1942, 184), the easiest route from China to the Indian Ocean is through Pakistan and Myanmar (Burma). In 1999, China initiated economic corridors with India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, and in 2015 with Pakistan (Karim and Islam 2018). Through its economic corridor with Pakistan, China established a robust infrastructural network in Pakistan linked to ports Gwadar and Karachi. This Sino-Pakistani partnership forced India to pause projects in its economic corridors with China. However, China concluded individual agreements with Myanmar (Dutta 2018).

Secondly, according to “the World Bank data for 2023, China’s GDP, adjusted for Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), is the highest in the world, at approximately \$ 35 trillion, followed by the US at about \$ 27 trillion. According to these data, China is the first economy in the world, and for its normal functioning and growth requires a large amount of energy (Stajić, Mirković and Radivojević 2025).” That is why China is deeply interested in the Middle East and Central Asia. The Sino-Pakistani economic corridor provides direct access to Iran’s resources, which account for 15% of China’s overall imports. China demonstrated its interest in a strategic partnership with Iran by signing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement in March 2021 (Tiezzi 2021) and supporting Iran’s membership in BRICS.

The achievement of these geopolitical priorities is hampered by the conflicts or political instability in Myanmar, Pakistan, and Iran. Firstly, in 2021, a military coup took place in Myanmar and caused a civil war. While Western states and their allies in Southeast Asia condemned the military coup (Reuters 2021), both China and Russia supported the military junta (Walker 2025; Abuza and Aung 2025). The ongoing civil war, with belligerents controlling various parts of the state, has severely hindered political and economic stability, which is essential for the implementation of infrastructural projects. Secondly, on 7 May 2025, India initiated a short-term conflict with Pakistan, a part of the broader conflict between the two states. Indian officials accused China of providing military support to Pakistan (Reuters 2025). Thirdly, on 12 June 2025, Israel launched attacks on Iran, intending to change the political regime in Tehran. These attacks “exposed the limits of China’s ambitions in

the Middle East, revealing that despite its rhetoric and economic presence, Beijing remains unwilling and unable to replace the United States as a true regional power” (Evron 2025, 39) even though the Chinese Communist Party “ has articulated a vision of a world order in which China supplants the United States as the leading global power and the United States must accommodate Chinese interests” (Wasser, et al. 2022, 58-59).

Iran and Israel in the Geopolitical Strategies of the Great Powers

Iran in the geopolitical strategies of the Great Powers

Based on the previous analysis, it can be concluded that Iran is the subject of geopolitical interest for all three Great Powers, which makes its position extremely unfavorable. Russia seeks to break free from the geographical ring through Central Asia and Iran, while China is primarily interested in Iran’s natural resources and in utilizing it as a corridor linking Central Asia with the high seas. “For many years, Iran has held a distinctive place in China’s Middle East strategy, serving both economic and geopolitical aims. Economically, Iran supplies 5-15 percent of China’s imports. After the imposition of international sanctions, China became Iran’s primary investor and trading partner. These ties were formalized in March 2021 with a 25-year \$400 billion strategic cooperation agreement, including discounted Iranian oil and reciprocal investment. Strategically, Iran acts as a counterweight to US influence in the region” (Evron 2025, 37). Iran is also a subject of interest for the US for at least four reasons. Firstly, Iran represents a crucial point where the US needs to block Russian access to the high seas. Secondly, Iran has the third-largest oil reserves (OPEC 2022) in the world and is in a strategic partnership with China, which has been identified as the US’ principal global adversary. Third, Iran’s nuclear program serves as a deterrent to potential aggressors, thereby reducing the available options for the US to change the regime in Tehran.

Finally, Iran’s influence over Shiite communities in neighboring states provides it with the capacity to further destabilize the US’s geopolitical position in the Middle East. In 2006, Iran established a geographical crescent, disrupting the territorial link between the US allies in the region, specifically between Israel and Turkey, and between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. This crescent began in Palestine, where Hamas has held power since 2006, and Lebanon, where Hezbollah operates as a pro-Iranian militia, and extended to Syria, a state with which Iran had maintained close cooperation until the regime change in late 2024. When US troops entered Iraq in 2003, Iran encouraged “all Shiite factions in Iraq to cooperate in the US – led political process, given that the size of Iraq’s Shiite population (about 60% of the population) would likely guarantee Shiite dominance in government (Blanchard 2008).” This strategy was successful and, after the 2005 elections, Nouri al-Maliki was appointed Prime Minister. Furthermore, Iran enjoys favorable relations with Qatar, partly due to the presence of an influential Shiite minority and shared economic interests, particularly

in natural gas. The CIA has identified a Hamas office in Doha, indicating Iranian influence, which is problematic given Qatar's hosting of the Al Udeid Air Base.

On the other hand, the US has tried to change the regime in Tehran and dismantle Iran's nuclear program since 1979. Following the Revolution, the US used Iraq to wage a proxy war against Iran. "Between 1984 and 1988, Iraq conducted at least seven air strikes against Iran's Bushehr reactors ([Castelli and Samuel 2023](#))." In 1984, the United States imposed sanctions on Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism (U.S. Department of State n.d.). Furthermore, since 2006, Iran's nuclear program has been the subject of sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council ([The Security Council 2006](#)). This situation coincides with a period during which Iran established its geographical crescent in the Middle East, at the expense of the US's influence. Most recently, the US provided direct military support to Israel during the Twelve-Day War by conducting airstrikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. It is significant to observe that these attacks coincide with a period in which Iran is reaching unprecedented levels of oil exports to China ([Liu, Yap, and Tunagur 2025](#)). At the same time, even though Russia and China agreed on strategic cooperation with Iran, these powers provided indirect military and limited political support to Iran ([Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2025](#); [Calabrese 2025](#)) showing they perceived "both Iran and Israel as assets, regardless of how Teheran and Jerusalem view the situation" ([Shpunt and Khanin 2025](#), 41). Another reason why Russia has refrained from providing open military support to Iran stems from the broader pattern of mutual restraint in US – Russian relations, reflected in observation that "the United States and Russia have generally been cautious concerning each other's presence" and that "neither side has viewed the conflict as primarily a way to impose costs on its competitor" ([Rhoades, et al. 2023](#), 11).

Israel in the geopolitical strategies of the Great Powers

Israel has significant importance for the US's geopolitical interests. It serves as a critical foothold in the west of the Asian continent. Geographically, Israel is situated between the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea, in close proximity to the Suez Canal, a vital maritime point connecting Asia and Europe. Additionally, Israel extends southward through a narrow corridor to the port of Eilat on the Red Sea, thereby disrupting the territorial continuity of Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa, while providing the US with access to the Red Sea. This position is of particular significance to the US, especially as Saudi Arabia and Egypt became members of the BRICS (2024).

Israel is established with inherent deficiencies, which left all interested parties dissatisfied. Originally a British protectorate, Palestine was divided into an Israeli and a Palestinian state by the General Assembly Resolution No. 181 ([The United Nations 1947](#)). According to the Resolution, the Palestinian state consists of three physically separate areas: the Gaza Strip on the Mediterranean coast, the West Bank on the coast of the Dead Sea, and an area bordering Lebanon. Despite the Resolution and international

recognition, the US has consistently blocked Palestine's admission to the UN since 1948. In contrast, Israel was granted full membership in the UN on May 11, 1949.

The establishment of Israel in a region where Arabs constitute the majority has been viewed as provocative, triggering multiple wars by Arab states against it. Throughout the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel was also an unofficial pillar of U.S. policy in the region and served as an effective partner in combating the Soviet Union's regional partners. During that period, the United States backed its ally Israel, while the Soviet Union supported Egypt and its Arab allies, including Iraq and Syria" (Rhoades, et al. 2023, 8). Nevertheless, the USSR, and subsequently Russia, never regarded Israel as an adversary. In fact, the USSR, together with the US, extended formal recognition to Israel immediately following its declaration of independence. Even today, Israel is „the only country of the Golden Billion not to introduce sanctions against Russia“ (Shpunt and Khanin 2025, 41).

Israel considered the entire former British protectorate to be historically Jews' land, which led to the integration of territories that were meant to constitute the Palestinian state. This triggered armed resistance from the Palestinians, initially led by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and later by Hamas. Iran, as a non-Arab and non-Sunni state, was a natural ally of Israel in the fight against the Arab states. However, since 1979, Iran has denied Israel's right to exist (Iran International 2023) and has started to support militant groups such as Hezbollah (stationed in Syria and Lebanon), and later Hamas in Palestine. Consequently, the suppression of Iran's hostile influence in the region, alongside efforts to change the regime in Tehran, became the first point at which the interests of Israel and the US overlap.

In Israeli public discourse, Iran's nuclear program is perceived as an existential threat. At the same time, the US views Iran's nuclear program as a deterrent, reducing the means available to influence regime change in Tehran. Thus, the annihilation of Iran's nuclear program emerges as the second point where the interests of Israel and the US overlap. Since 2006— the year in which international sanctions were imposed on Iran's nuclear program—a series of subversive activities, acts of sabotage, cyberattacks, and airstrikes have been conducted against Iran's nuclear program. Between 2007 and 2010, the “Stuxnet” malware destroyed a significant number of uranium enrichment centrifuges at the Natanz facility (Corera 2021). From 2010 to 2025, leading Iranian nuclear scientists were assassinated in targeted operations, most of which have been attributed to Israel (Tobey 2020). In 2018, Mossad came into possession of a large number of documents from a warehouse in Tehran, containing information about the alleged “Amad Project”, which was active between 1989 and 2003 and aimed at developing nuclear weapons (BBC 2018).

Efforts against Iran's nuclear program culminated in the Twelve-Day War, during which numerous nuclear scientists were killed, and nuclear facilities were destroyed. Furthermore, on June 24, 2025, the US airstrike targeted and destroyed fortified

bunkers at all three of Iran's nuclear sites. Nevertheless, Iran's nuclear program was not destroyed, so in an ongoing geopolitical struggle, Iran's nuclear program will continue to serve as a justification for sanctions, limited military strikes, and subversive actions within Iran. The confirmation of this conclusion is the initiative launched on 28 August 2025 by the United Kingdom, Germany, and France ([Berg 2025](#)) to reimpose sanctions on Iran due to renewed concerns over its nuclear program, even though the US President stated that Iran's nuclear facilities had been completely obliterated in the US airstrikes ([Guardian 2025](#)).

Conclusions

The hostility between Iran and Israel cannot be viewed as an isolated regional conflict. Instead, it must be understood within a broader geopolitical context, where the underlying causes of the conflict are determined by the interests of the Great Powers. Until 1979, Iran played a crucial role in the geographical barrier that kept the USSR away from the high seas. However, after the 1979 revolution, Iran left the US sphere of influence and created a crack in the geographical ring around the USSR. This development brought into question the basic principles of the US's maritime dominance. In response to this situation, the US has undertaken military and non-military actions against Iran since 1979. These actions aimed to change the political regime in Tehran and to eliminate Iran's nuclear program.

Iran did not experience a new revolution. On the contrary, in 2006, Iranian influence in the Middle East reached its summit thanks to the influence on Shiite communities in the neighboring states. In the same year, the international community imposed sanctions on Iran due to its nuclear program, thus formalizing Iran's status as a state that poses a threat to international security. Under these circumstances, Iran's nuclear program became a justification for unilateral actions by the US, and potentially by the international community upon a decision by the Security Council. However, due to the interest of Russia and China as permanent members of the Security Council, an international intervention against Iran is highly unlikely. As a result, the US is forced to use Israel to wage proxy wars.

The most recent Twelve-Day War failed to achieve its primary objective to change the regime in Tehran, meaning that Israel and the US did not achieve their objectives. Iran's nuclear program was not destroyed in this conflict, which means that the reasons for a new escalation remain intact. On the other hand, Russia and China provided both military and political support to Iran, thereby preventing regime change and winning this geopolitical battle. However, the geopolitical interests of the US have not disappeared, nor have the reasons that could lead to further conflicts. This is the reason why we can anticipate new conflicts between Iran and Israel with the support of the Great Powers. Considering all the facts established in this research and the conclusions drawn, we may confirm that the general hypothesis has been fully proven.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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A Year After Autonomy: Evaluating the Performance of Local Governments in Kwara State Post-Supreme Court Electoral Enforcement

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Abstract

Local governments in Nigeria have long operated under restrictive state control, with unelected caretaker committees undermining democratic legitimacy and grassroots service delivery. In 2023, the Supreme Court mandated states to conduct proper local government elections or risk losing federal allocations, a ruling widely viewed as a turning point for subnational governance. One year after this enforcement, however, the extent to which autonomy has produced substantive improvements remains uncertain. This study evaluates post-reform performance in three Kwara State LGAs: Ilorin Metropolis, Offa, and Moro. Drawing on a mixed-methods design and data from 400 respondents, the analysis shows that while elected councils are now in place, perceptions diverge sharply on electoral fairness and fiscal autonomy. Yet, broader governance outcomes appear relatively consistent across respondent groups. The findings suggest that autonomy, though symbolically significant, requires stronger institutional safeguards, transparent fiscal practices, and sustained civic oversight to translate electoral legitimacy into effective grassroots governance.

Keywords:

Local Government Autonomy; Electoral Reforms; Grassroots Governance;
State–Local Relations; Decentralization in Nigeria.

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Introduction

Following prolonged unrest caused by citizens, civil society organizations, and development stakeholders, the local government system in Nigeria has again come under scrutiny, echoing its historical marginalization during both colonial administration and the early post-independence period (Ezeani 2012; Olowu and Wunsch 2004). Despite constitutional provisions recognizing local governments as the third tier of governance, successive state governments have undermined their autonomy, primarily through the imposition of caretaker committees rather than elected councils (Adeyemi 2013; Arowolo 2011).

A central argument advanced by defenders of the status quo has been the high cost and logistical challenges of conducting periodic local government elections (Ikeanyibe 2016). This has allowed state governors to exert control by informally selecting individuals to occupy key leadership positions, often under the guise of political expediency or fiscal prudence (Oviasuyi, Idada, and Isiraojie 2010). However, widespread criticisms about the erosion of grassroots democracy and fiscal accountability led to renewed calls for constitutional clarity and institutional independence for local governments (Agba, Akwara, and Idu 2013).

In response to these concerns, the Supreme Court of Nigeria recently delivered a landmark ruling mandating the conduct of democratic local government elections and authorizing the federal government to withhold allocations from any state that fails to comply (Punch 2023; Vanguard 2023). This judicial intervention was widely celebrated as a structural breakthrough aimed at strengthening subnational governance and restoring the integrity of local institutions.

Nevertheless, more than a year after the enforcement of this autonomy, the tangible impact of the reform remains contested. While some local governments report greater access to funds and operational independence, others appear to be trapped in pre-existing constraints, including administrative inefficiencies, limited revenue generation capacity, and political interference (Ajayi 2020; Nkwede 2021). The reforms have, thus far, yielded uneven results and raised new questions about the actual empowerment of local institutions.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the outcomes of local government autonomy one year after the enforcement of democratic elections. It aims to assess whether the shift has translated into improved governance, development delivery, and administrative efficiency at the grassroots. The research will further interrogate whether structural autonomy alone is sufficient to address the deep-rooted factors that have historically impeded the performance of local governments in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

1. To assess public and official perceptions of the effectiveness of local government following enforced autonomy.
2. To examine the degree of state government interference post-Supreme Court directive.
3. To evaluate the financial autonomy and service delivery capacity of local governments after the structural change.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Federalism

Federalism is a system of governance in which political authority is constitutionally divided between multiple levels of government, typically the national, state, and local units, each with legally enshrined autonomy and distinct areas of jurisdiction. It is grounded in the principle of shared sovereignty, where subnational entities possess rights not merely delegated by the central government but constitutionally protected. Wheare (1963) defines federalism as a system where “two levels of government exercise power and authority within the same territory and over the same people, but each level has autonomy in some matters.”

In Nigeria, federalism has been historically complex and frequently contested. While the country is formally federal, the actual practice has veered toward centralization, with the federal government retaining significant control over revenue distribution, security, and even local governance through constitutional ambiguities. This tension has made local governments technically the third-tier function more as administrative outposts of state governments than as autonomous entities.

Local Government Autonomy

Local government autonomy refers to the degree of self-governance that local authorities possess in decision-making, financial management, and political administration without undue interference from higher levels of government. In theory, autonomy includes political (elected leadership), administrative (capacity to plan and implement policies), and fiscal (independent control over revenues and expenditures) dimensions ([Akindele and Olaopa 2002](#)).

In Nigeria, autonomy has been more declaratory than substantive. Although the 1999 Constitution (Section 7) mandates democratically elected local councils, state governments have often bypassed this provision by appointing caretaker committees. Furthermore, through the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), states have exerted control over local government finances, undermining fiscal independence and developmental planning. Thus, autonomy remains a contested ideal rather than an operational reality.

State–Local Government Relations

State–local government relations in Nigeria are shaped by a paradox: while the Constitution guarantees local government existence, it simultaneously vests states with the power to determine their structure, enabling state governments to exercise extensive control. This vertical dependency has allowed governors to manipulate local government structures to consolidate political control and divert funds, often resulting in weak accountability and poor grassroots development.

The core problem stems from the absence of a clear operational boundary. Unlike in some federations (e.g., the United States or Brazil) where local governments derive autonomy from their own charters or state constitutions, in Nigeria, local governments exist at the discretion of state legislatures, making them structurally subordinated despite constitutional recognition.

Federal–State–Local Government Relations

The triangular relationship among the three tiers is at the heart of Nigeria’s governance challenges. The 1999 Constitution assigns responsibilities for revenue allocation and intergovernmental transfers through the Federation Account, but does not provide a transparent framework for federal oversight over state-level local government affairs. Consequently, federal allocations intended for local governments are often intercepted or reallocated by state governments, distorting fiscal federalism.

The Supreme Court ruling enforcing local government elections and granting the federal government the power to withhold funds from defaulting states marks a significant intervention in this tripartite dynamic. It signals a rebalancing of relations in favor of federal oversight, albeit raising concerns about overreach and the politicization of local governance.

The 1976 Local Government Reform

The 1976 Local Government Reform was a watershed in Nigeria’s local administration, as it sought to create a uniform, nationwide local government system. Initiated under the military government of General Murtala Mohammed, the reform aimed to:

- Establish local government as a third tier of government;
- Provide direct funding through statutory allocation from the federal purse;
- Define clear functions and responsibilities for local councils (outlined in the Fourth Schedule of the 1979 Constitution);
- Ensure that local governments served as instruments of development and democratic participation.

While ambitious, the reform left many issues unresolved. Most critically, it placed local governments under the administrative purview of states, sowing the seeds of future tensions around autonomy.

The 1986 Political Bureau and Local Government Reform

In response to the failures of earlier efforts, the 1986 Political Bureau set up by General Ibrahim Babangida proposed further democratization and administrative efficiency for local governments. The Dasuki Panel Report (1985) that preceded this period advocated for:

- The institutionalization of elected councils;
- The expansion of financial independence and direct federal allocation;
- The abolition of dual roles for traditional institutions in formal governance.

By 1988, under Decree 23, local governments were recognized as fully political units with the right to an elected chairman and council. This reform also introduced the Office of the Auditor-General for Local Governments and increased fiscal allocation to local councils from the Federation Account. However, like previous reforms, implementation was weak, and over time, state dominance reasserted itself.

Empirical Review

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, the autonomy of local governments in Nigeria has remained a recurring subject in both academic literature and policy discourse. At the heart of the debate is the question of how federalism, originally conceived as a system of shared and divided powers, has evolved in Nigeria's context. Scholars have long observed that Nigeria's federalism functions more in principle than in practice, particularly with respect to the third tier of government. While the federal constitution recognizes local government as an independent arm, practical realities reveal a structure in which the local tier remains administratively and fiscally subordinate to state governments. Analysts such as Suberu (2001) and Elaigwu (2007) argue that this paradox stems from a centralist tradition embedded in Nigeria's political architecture, in which power and resources are heavily concentrated at the centre and, secondarily, at the state level.

The concept of local government autonomy has been widely defined in Nigerian literature as the capacity of local councils to operate independently in decision-making, revenue generation, and policy execution without undue external interference. In theory, the 1999 Constitution provides for a democratically elected local government system under Section 7. However, in practice, this provision has often been circumvented by state governments through the appointment of caretaker committees, the manipulation of electoral timelines, and the control of local finances through the State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA). Scholars such as Agagu (2004) and Eme and Onyishi (2014) have pointed out that local governments in Nigeria often function as administrative extensions of the state, rather than as independent policy-making bodies. These structural constraints have rendered the concept of autonomy largely aspirational, rather than operational.

A significant body of work has also interrogated the nature of state-local relations, particularly in the post-1999 democratic period. These studies converge on the

argument that the ambiguity in the constitution has empowered state governments to dominate local governments politically and financially. For instance, Ikelegbe (2005) notes that governors have become gatekeepers to the functioning of local councils, often deciding the political fate of chairpersons and the disbursement of funds. Even when elections are conducted, the processes are often criticized for lacking credibility, thereby undermining the essence of grassroots democracy. The Supreme Court's intervention in 2023, which ruled that states must conduct proper local government elections or risk losing their federal allocations, marks a significant legal milestone. However, the extent to which this directive has resulted in meaningful structural change remains largely under-researched, a gap this study aims to address.

Relatedly, the federal–state–local relationship has often been portrayed as triangular but asymmetrical. Despite constitutional recognition, the local government remains institutionally weak in its relationship with both the state and the federal government. As scholars like Arowolo (2011) and Adeyemo (2005) have observed, this imbalance arises partly from the way in which funds are allocated and controlled. While the federal government channels funds intended for local councils through the states, the states often act not as mere intermediaries but as principal actors who appropriate and redistribute these funds at their discretion. This process has effectively robbed local governments of fiscal independence, thereby eroding the financial base required to pursue development objectives and responsive governance. Literature on decentralization consistently identifies fiscal autonomy as the most critical, yet least achieved, component of effective local governance.

The historical roots of Nigeria's local government system can be traced back to the 1976 Local Government Reform, which is widely regarded as the most ambitious attempt at restructuring subnational governance. The reform aimed to standardize local government structures across the country, assign clear functions, and ensure their direct connection to the federal system through statutory allocations. Scholars such as Olowu (1988) and Abubakar (1998) have credited the reform with establishing the framework for modern local governance in Nigeria. However, they also acknowledge that the reform introduced tensions by assigning supervisory powers to state governments, thus entrenching a dual system of autonomy and subordination. These contradictions continue to manifest in the post-1999 era, where local councils operate within a complex web of dependence and limited authority.

A further critical juncture came during the 1986 Political Bureau and the associated period of structural adjustment under the Babangida regime. This era expanded the number of local government councils and aimed to enhance their role in democratic participation and development planning. However, this period also coincided with austerity measures and reduced public expenditure, which significantly weakened the fiscal capacities of local governments. Studies by Osaghae (1990) and Egonmwan (1990) document how the local tier was caught between growing responsibilities

and diminishing resources, thereby compounding the structural weaknesses already identified in earlier reforms.

Despite decades of reform, scholars remain skeptical about the reality of local government autonomy in Nigeria. Most studies converge on the idea that autonomy is undermined not only by legal ambiguities but also by entrenched political practices that prioritize central control over decentralised governance. Yet, there remains a gap in the literature on whether the enforcement of electoral mandates at the local level, as directed by the Supreme Court in 2023, has triggered any significant change in the autonomy or effectiveness of local governments. Specifically, very little is known about whether elected local councils have translated into improved service delivery, greater citizen participation, or more accountable leadership.

This study, therefore, steps into a relatively unexplored area of inquiry by examining the state of local government autonomy one year after the Supreme Court's electoral enforcement. It investigates not just the formal structures that have changed, but also the lived realities of governance at the local level. In doing so, it responds to longstanding academic calls for more grounded, empirical evaluations of local governance in Nigeria's federal structure.

Theoretical Review

Structural Dependency Theory

Structural Dependency Theory draws on the broader school of political economy and intergovernmental relations, emphasizing how institutional design, revenue allocation frameworks, and political incentives create entrenched subordination of local governments to higher tiers, especially state governments. This theory argues that autonomy is not merely a function of constitutional provision but of actual access to independent authority, decision-making space, and control of resources (Olowu 1988; Davey 1993).

In the Nigerian context, several structural mechanisms reinforce dependency:

- i. The State Joint Local Government Account (SJLGA), which allows state governments to control the disbursement of local funds;
- ii. The absence of constitutional safeguards that insulate local councils from state interference;
- iii. The politicization of local appointments through caretaker committees;
- iv. And a long tradition of top-down policy mandates that limit local initiative.

Structural Dependency Theory helps explain why, even after the 1976 reforms and the 1999 Constitution's guarantees, local governments remain functionally incapacitated. It frames subordination as an embedded institutional condition, not a temporary aberration. This theory is crucial in understanding why autonomy has historically failed and why mere electoral reforms may not suffice unless structural

bottlenecks are addressed. The structure of Nigerian federalism has historically predisposed local governments to dependency on state executives for legitimacy, funding, and personnel deployment ([Olowu 2001](#)).

Democratic Participatory Theory

Democratic Participatory Theory provides a normative and functional rationale for local government autonomy. The theory posits that governance is most responsive, inclusive, and accountable when decisions are made as close as possible to the people affected by them. Originating from thinkers like J.S. Mill and later Tocqueville, the theory emphasizes local political participation, civic engagement, and accountability as central to democratic consolidation (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*; Smith 1985).

Applied to the local government context, the theory argues that:

- i. Elected local councils create venues for democratic inclusion, especially for marginalized groups;
- ii. Proximity to the people enables responsive governance and service delivery;
- iii. Autonomy reduces the alienation that often accompanies centralized policymaking;
- iv. It also acts as a school of democracy, preparing citizens for higher levels of participation.

In Nigeria, this theory justifies the Supreme Court's enforcement of democratic elections at the local level. It also explains why structural autonomy is not just an administrative concern but a democratic imperative. Where there is no real local autonomy, local government becomes a tool for elite consolidation, not grassroots empowerment ([Ekeh 1975](#)).

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of local government autonomy in Kwara State, one year after the Supreme Court's directive on electoral enforcement. The rationale for this design is to triangulate findings, ensuring both the breadth of statistical generalisation and the depth of interpretive insight ([Creswell and Clark 2018](#)). The quantitative component focused on measuring public perceptions and institutional outcomes, while the qualitative component explored experiential and contextual realities underlying these patterns.

The study was conducted across three local government areas in Kwara State—Ilorin Metropolis, Offa, and Moro. These were purposively selected to capture urban–rural diversity, administrative variation, and differential exposure to governance reforms. Ilorin Metropolis represents the urban core with high bureaucratic density; Offa offers a semi-urban environment with moderate local activism; while Moro captures the predominantly rural administrative dynamics.

The target population included residents, local government officials, elected councilors, civil society actors, and traditional leaders. A stratified sampling technique was adopted. The first stratum comprised 325 respondents from the general populace, selected randomly from the three local government areas using population proportionate sampling to ensure representativeness. The second stratum consisted of 75 government stakeholders, drawn purposively from local and state government offices. This produced a total sample size of 400 respondents, adequate for both descriptive and inferential analysis (Israel 2013).

The quantitative survey instrument consisted of nine statements grouped under three thematic areas; (1) institutional independence, (2) fiscal control and service delivery, and (3) perceived effectiveness of the autonomy reforms. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” The questionnaire was pretested among 20 respondents outside the study area to ensure clarity and internal consistency, producing a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.82, indicating strong reliability. The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with local government chairpersons, councilors, civil servants, and traditional leaders, as well as focused group discussions with community members. These sessions aimed to capture nuanced perspectives on the operational realities of autonomy, state interference, and citizen engagement. Interview guides were structured around the three study objectives to ensure thematic consistency.

Both primary and secondary data were utilised. Primary data were derived from the fieldwork instruments (questionnaires, interviews, and FGDs), while secondary data were obtained from policy documents, state audit reports, council proceedings, NEITI reports, National Bureau of Statistics data, and scholarly publications on decentralisation and fiscal autonomy in Nigeria. Data collection was conducted between March and June 2025. Trained research assistants administered the questionnaires in person to ensure comprehension and reduce non-response bias. Interviews and discussions were recorded (with consent) and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout.

Quantitative data were processed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 26). Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, and mean) were used to summarise respondent profiles and general perceptions. To test for differences in perception between public and official respondents, the Chi-square (χ^2) test of independence was employed at a 5% level of significance. For the qualitative component, a thematic content analysis was performed. Transcripts were coded based on recurring patterns related to autonomy, fiscal control, and service responsiveness. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative insights enhanced interpretive validity and allowed for robust cross-verification of findings (Denzin 2012).

Results and Data Presentation

To assess the real-world implications of local government autonomy one year after the enforcement of electoral mandates in Kwara State, the study administered structured questionnaires to a total of 400 respondents across three local government areas: Ilorin Metropolis, Offa, and Moro. The sample was stratified into two distinct groups: 325 respondents from the general populace, selected to capture civic perceptions and lived experiences of governance at the grassroots; and 75 respondents drawn from local and state government stakeholders, including elected officials, bureaucrats, and public administrators. This dual-perspective approach enables a comparative evaluation of how reforms are perceived both from within the local government apparatus and among the general public.

The questionnaire covered nine key statements spread across three thematic objectives: (1) institutional independence, (2) fiscal control and service delivery, and (3) perceived effectiveness of the autonomy reforms. Respondents answered using a standard 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.”

TABLE A. General Populace Responses (n = 325)

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q1. Local governments now operate with greater independence than before.	85	95	47	66	32
Q2. The abolition of caretaker committees has improved accountability.	86	92	49	61	37
Q3. Local government elections have been free and fairly conducted.	92	95	52	57	29
Q4. Service delivery has improved since the local government’s autonomy.	85	81	55	70	34
Q5. Local governments have gained better control over their finances.	84	90	57	63	31
Q6. Local councils now respond more quickly to citizens’ needs.	82	94	49	70	30
Q7. Political interference from state governments has reduced.	78	96	47	74	30
Q8. Citizens now feel more involved in local decision-making.	75	111	51	57	31
Q9. Overall, the autonomy reform has been impactful.	86	103	36	65	35

Source: Researchers' survey, 2025

TABLE B. State and Local Government Officials’ Responses (n = 75)

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q1. Local governments now operate with greater independence than before.	20	18	13	15	9
Q2. The abolition of caretaker committees has improved accountability.	31	23	10	4	7
Q3. Local government elections have been free and fairly conducted.	24	21	13	9	8
Q4. Service delivery has improved since the local government’s autonomy.	30	20	10	10	5
Q5. Local governments have gained better control over their finances.	25	29	5	13	3
Q6. Local councils now respond more quickly to citizens’ needs.	25	20	14	12	4
Q7. Political interference from state governments has reduced.	25	19	6	16	9
Q8. Citizens now feel more involved in local decision-making.	25	21	9	13	7
Q9. Overall, the autonomy reform has been impactful.	27	26	5	13	4

Source: Researchers' survey, 2025

Descriptive Overview of the Data

The responses from the general populace (n=325) exhibit a generally positive but cautious outlook toward local government reforms. Across most items, the highest frequency of responses clustered around “Agree” and “Strongly Agree,” especially on questions related to improved service delivery and financial transparency. However, a consistent minority expressed disagreement or uncertainty, particularly on the issue of whether local governments have truly escaped state influence, indicating mixed perceptions of actual autonomy.

For the state and local government officials (n=75), the responses skewed more positively. A larger proportion of this group selected “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” across all thematic questions, especially in relation to institutional control and the conduct of elections. This suggests that stakeholders within the system perceive a more significant shift than the general public does. Nevertheless, a non-negligible number of officials still reported disagreement or undecided views, particularly regarding financial independence and lingering structural limitations.

Thus, the data reveal a perceptual gap between official optimism and public ambivalence, a contrast that frames the analytical core of the study. This divergence is essential for understanding whether formal reforms have meaningfully altered governance outcomes at the local level or merely changed administrative appearances.

Hypothesis Testing

The chi-square test results reveal notable divergences in perception between government officials and the general public on two key areas: Question 2 and Question 5. These likely correspond to issues surrounding the credibility of local

TABLE C. Chi-Square Test Summary for Response Differences Between Populace and Officials

Test Statistic	Value
Chi-Square (χ^2) Value	75.40
Degrees of Freedom (df)	68
p-value	0.252
Decision Rule ($\alpha = 0.05$)	$p > 0.05$
Statistical Significance	Not Significant
Interpretation	No significant association between the respondent group and the response pattern

Source: Researchers' survey, 2025

TABLE D. Chi-Square Results by Individual Question

Question	Chi-Square (χ^2)	df	p-value	Decision
Q1	1.21	4	0.876	Fail to Reject H_0
Q2	11.85	4	0.018	Reject H_0
Q3	1.72	4	0.787	Fail to Reject H_0
Q4	7.57	4	0.109	Fail to Reject H_0
Q5	10.70	4	0.030	Reject H_0
Q6	4.10	4	0.392	Fail to Reject H_0
Q7	4.89	4	0.299	Fail to Reject H_0
Q8	3.82	4	0.431	Fail to Reject H_0
Q9	5.36	4	0.253	Fail to Reject H_0

Source: Researchers' survey, 2025

government elections and the extent of fiscal or operational autonomy under the new reforms. In both cases, the difference in response patterns was statistically significant, indicating a gap in the manner in which these stakeholder groups assess recent changes. However, across the remaining questionnaire items, there was no significant difference, suggesting that both the public and officials share broadly similar views on the general state of local governance since the autonomy mandate.

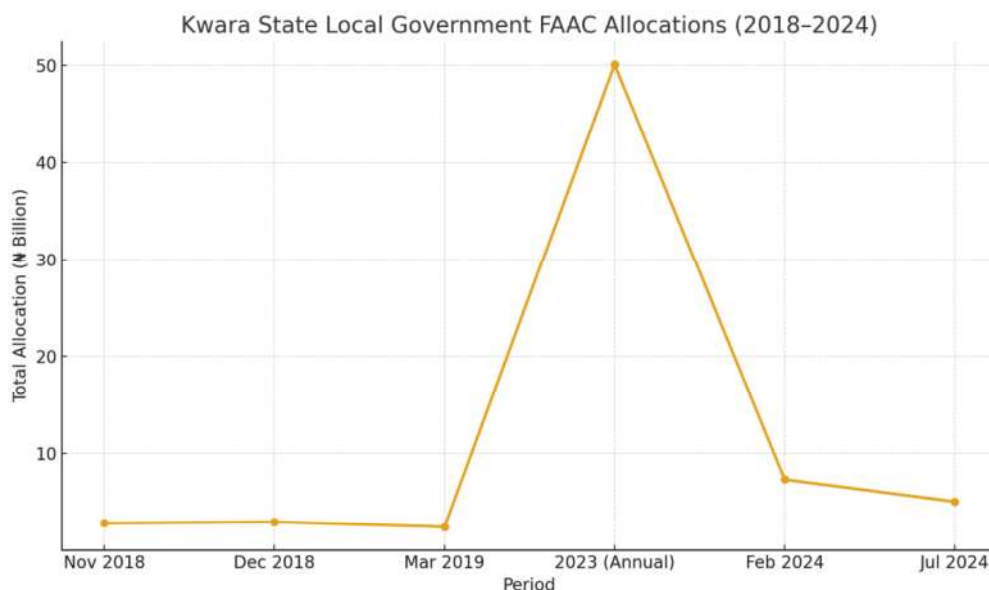
PANEL DATA: Federation Account Allocations to LGAs (2019–mid-2024)

Year	LGA Allocation (₦ Trillion)	Source
2019	1.66	Guardian
2020	Approx. 2.09 (Total states & LGs 4.18 – FG 3.09)	Daily Post
2021	1.71	Guardian
2022	2.17	Guardian
2023	2.32	Guardian
Jan-Jun 2024	1.699 – 1.699 (six months) ≈ 3.40 annualized	ICIR
Full-Year 2024 Estimate	~3.40	ICIR

Between 2019 and 2023, local government allocations in Nigeria rose significantly from ₦1.66 trillion to ₦2.32 trillion, demonstrating a steady upward trajectory. Preliminary 2024 data (₦1.699 trillion as of June) suggests an annual projection of about ₦3.40 trillion, marking the sharpest increase yet. This trend coincides with the Supreme Court’s 2023 judgment mandating direct disbursement of federal allocations to local governments, effectively bypassing state intermediaries. While data for 2020 required adjustment (deducting federal share from total disbursements), all figures are drawn from verifiable sources, including the National Bureau of Statistics, NEITI, and major financial media. Collectively, these data confirm the growing fiscal relevance of local governments and offer a firm empirical basis for evaluating Nigeria’s evolving local autonomy.

From 2018 to 2019, monthly FAAC allocations to local governments in Kwara State ranged between ₦2.8 billion and ₦3.0 billion. By 2023, this had increased significantly, with a total annual disbursement of ₦50.1 billion averaging ₦4.18 billion monthly, reflecting nearly 40 percent growth over five years. The July 2024 allocation of ₦5.03 billion further confirms this rising trend. However, the first half of 2024 recorded lower-than-expected disbursements, highlighting persistent fluctuations tied to national fiscal policy and intergovernmental transfers. These patterns underscore that while local government funding is improving, its volatility especially in the absence of structural fiscal safeguards can still undermine effective autonomy and stable local governance.

Kwara State Local Government FAAC Allocations



Source: Researchers construct from Panel Data, 2025

Discussion of the Findings

Theme 1: Effectiveness of Local Governments Following Enforced Autonomy

The enforced return to democratically elected local governments was expected to energize local governance structures. However, the reality across the study areas Ilorin Metropolis, Offa, and Moro reflects varied levels of institutional responsiveness and capacity enhancement. While Offa experienced modest improvements in transparency and civic engagement, Ilorin Metropolis and Moro continue to show signs of administrative inertia.

This discrepancy mirrors what has been observed in India after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which mandated elected panchayats. In Kerala and Karnataka, where civic education and political accountability were stronger, local governments flourished. In contrast, in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, elections made little impact due to elite capture and bureaucratic bottlenecks (Jha 2002).

In Offa, civic groups reported that elected officials were more responsive and visible. This aligns with 68% of respondents there who believed local governance had improved post-election. Meanwhile, Ilorin residents voiced concerns about continued state dominance, with one FGD participant remarking:

“Elections happened, yes but real decision-making still comes from the governor’s table.”

This pattern reflects institutional isomorphism where reforms are adopted in form but not in function. Quantitative results from Q1 and Q3 confirm this: only 54% of the general populace believed elections improved functionality, while 72% of officials

claimed so exposing a confidence gap. This mirrors findings in Brazil, where post-decentralization local governments performed better only where municipal leaders had prior administrative experience or external support (Falleti 2010).

Theme 2: Post-Autonomy Interference from State Governments

Despite the Supreme Court ruling, evidence shows that state interference persists, mostly through party mechanisms, fiscal control, and bureaucratic filtering. This echoes global federal patterns: in South Africa, despite the 1996 Constitution granting strong local government powers, provinces still exert control via conditional grants and administrative regulations (de Visser 2005).

In Ilorin, civil servants acknowledged that many chairmen are effectively “nominated” by state executives before elections. In contrast, Offa’s more assertive civil society space has curtailed excessive interference. The quantitative findings show a striking divergence in Q4 and Q8 responses, with only 44% of the general populace agreeing that interference has reduced.

This corresponds to what Suberu (2001) described as “overcentralization by subnational units” a unique dynamic in Nigeria where states, rather than the federal center, are the primary agents of local repression. In Moro, this takes a more traditional form, with political actors leveraging chieftaincy institutions and kinship ties to influence local leadership structures. A community elder stated:

“If the Oba and the House leader agree, then that person becomes the LG boss.”

In a comparative perspective, this is similar to Pakistan’s devolution reforms (2001–2008), which failed due to provincial resistance and patronage politics at the local level (Cheema and Mohmand 2006). The persistence of informal gatekeeping despite constitutional changes demonstrates that legal autonomy is insufficient without sociopolitical insulation.

Theme 3: Fiscal Autonomy and Service Delivery Capacity

The cornerstone of autonomy lies in whether local governments can plan and execute their budgets independently. In Offa, several community-driven projects such as market upgrades and small-scale roadworks have been successfully implemented under elected councils. This aligns with Q5 and Q9 responses from both stakeholders and the populace.

However, in Ilorin and Moro, fiscal bottlenecks remain. A revenue officer in Ilorin noted:

“Most months, we only get running costs. No capital vote. The state still deducts joint account funds before we see anything.”

This phenomenon is not unique to Nigeria. In Argentina, the 1990s decentralization drive transferred responsibilities without resources, resulting in administrative overload and service delivery gaps (Grindle 2007). Similarly, Nigeria’s Joint

Allocation Accounts Committees (JAACs) continue to impair direct access to federal allocations, allowing state governments to mediate local expenditure priorities.

While 65% of officials believed financial autonomy had improved (Q5), only 52% of citizens agreed highlighting a perception gap. Again, Offa stands out, with interviewees citing increased procurement transparency. The divergence reflects what Oates (1999) described as “the decentralization theorem” that local governments are more effective when both fiscally empowered and politically accountable.

Comparatively, South Africa’s experience with equitable share allocations and municipal borrowing shows what is possible when intergovernmental fiscal relations are rule-bound and transparent. In Nigeria, the continued opacity of JAACs makes local planning erratic.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and comparative insights, here are recommendations to enhance the functionality and autonomy of local governments in Nigeria, particularly post-election enforcement:

1. Operationalize Direct Fiscal Transfers to LGAs

The Federal Government, through constitutional or statutory adjustments, should ensure direct crediting of federal allocations to local government accounts, bypassing Joint Allocation Accounts Committees (JAACs), which currently allow for excessive deductions and state interference. This can be modeled after South Africa’s equitable share formula, which allocates predictable, unconditional grants to municipalities.

2. Establish an Independent Local Government Fiscal Monitoring Agency

To enhance accountability, a federal-level oversight body independent of both state and federal ministries should be created to monitor fiscal transparency and budget execution at the local level. This body should publish annual reports and citizen scorecards, similar to India’s Comptroller and Auditor General audits of panchayats.

3. Strengthen Electoral Independence and Internal Party Democracy

State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) must be reformed or merged into a National Local Government Electoral Commission, insulated from state governors, to prevent candidate imposition. Within political parties, transparent primaries should be enforced to reduce the informal handpicking of candidates, as observed in Ilorin and Moro.

4. Institutionalize Local Government Service Delivery Benchmarks

The Federal Ministry of Local Government (or its equivalent) should define and enforce minimum service delivery benchmarks (in health, sanitation, and education), and assess LGAs through performance contracts tied to conditional grants drawing from Brazil’s Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento (PAC) model.

5. Revive Local Civic Oversight Structures

Traditional town union systems and ward development committees should be formally integrated into local planning and budgeting, as Offa's experience shows. This participatory mechanism builds public trust and fosters accountability. Legal backing should ensure their inputs are binding in budget formulation stages.

6. Invest in Local Government Capacity Building

Federal and state governments should collaborate to fund regular training, digital systems, and career incentives for LGA staff, especially in finance, procurement, and planning. Partnering with institutions like ASCON and development agencies will professionalize local governance.

7. Pass a Constitutional Amendment Guaranteeing Local Government Autonomy

The current constitutional ambiguity on local government status should be resolved. An amendment should clearly define LGAs as a third tier with exclusive responsibilities, guaranteed tenure, and fiscal independence. Comparative federal systems like India and Ethiopia have such enshrined guarantees that safeguard decentralization.

8. Create a Citizen-Led Local Government Performance Index

Independent CSOs and research institutions should develop an annual Local Government Performance Index, ranking LGAs on budget utilization, project execution, public satisfaction, and inclusiveness. This would enable citizens to compare councils, pressure underperforming ones, and reward transparency.

Summary and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the enforcement of local government autonomy in Kwara State following the Supreme Court's 2023 directive has produced visible administrative adjustments but limited structural transformation. While local government elections were reintroduced and caretaker committees abolished, these formal reforms have not substantially altered the deep-rooted dependence of local councils on state authorities. Statistical analysis indicates that, although officials and the public share broadly similar views on governance improvements, significant perceptual gaps exist on the legitimacy of local elections and the reality of fiscal control. Officials tend to express greater confidence in the autonomy framework, whereas citizens remain skeptical about whether such changes translate into tangible improvements in service delivery.

The field data further show that autonomy in name has not translated into autonomy in function. Persistent issues of fiscal centralisation, delayed disbursement of allocations, and the continued influence of state political actors undermine institutional independence at the grassroots. However, the example of Offa Local Government suggests that where civic oversight, media engagement, and historical administrative capacity are strong, local councils exhibit relatively higher

accountability and responsiveness. This underscores the importance of sub-national variation in assessing reform outcomes. The comparative reference to federal democracies such as India, Brazil, and South Africa supports the conclusion that legal or constitutional guarantees of autonomy are insufficient in isolation. What sustains local governance effectiveness is the alignment of political will, institutional accountability, and fiscal transparency. Without these, formal reforms risk becoming symbolic gestures rather than instruments of empowerment.

In sum, one year after the judicial enforcement of local government autonomy, the Nigerian case reflects a transitional stage: progress in legality but inertia in practice. The study concludes that autonomy reforms must move beyond legal proclamations toward the consolidation of institutional culture, citizen oversight, and financial devolution if the promise of decentralised governance is to be realised in full.

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Security Communities. Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract

The central idea of the article is that a 'security community' is not just a formal pact, but an invisible structure of trust and shared identity between states. Starting from the vision of pioneer Karl Deutsch, who described it as a 'shared feeling' that eliminates the fear of confrontation, authors Adler and Barnett develop this image, showing how consolidated norms and values transform entire regions into "spaces of peace." The article traces the path and convergence of material factors, procedural mechanisms, and ideological dimensions, thus revealing the continuum that lays the foundation for cooperation up to the constructivist process through which populations adopt solidarity as second nature.

Keywords:

Security Community; Identity; Norms; Cooperation.

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Introduction

The current global context is characterized by an unprecedented level of globalization and interdependence among the multitude of actors on the international relations stage, which makes it almost impossible – regardless of the intensity of exchanges, the degree of hierarchy, or the impact of behavioral variables – to deny the existence of a coherent international system. However, since the dynamics of this international system involve frequent transformations of its structure and permanent adjustments of its fundamental parameters, any explanatory approach must integrate both a knowledge of ‘formalized structures and relationships’, such as international organizations and the rules of interaction between actors, as well as knowledge of the ‘more informal aspects of international relations’ such as customs, informal regional commitments and hierarchies, identity dilemmas, or the various interactions between state and non-state/sub-state actors ([Dungaciu 2017, 374-375](#)).

For example, British political scientist Barry Buzan states in one of his seminal works, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post Cold War Era* (1991), that ‘security is a relational phenomenon’ in the sense that ‘we cannot understand the national security of any existing state without understanding the international model of security interdependence in which it is embedded’. At the same time, the British political scientist suggests that in order to carry out a comprehensive analysis of security, we need to ‘investigate with particular care the way in which the regional level mediates the exchange between states and the international system as a whole’. Without a prior understanding of the regional level, it is unlikely that we will be able to understand the position of state actors in their relations with their neighbors, or the nature of the relations between the great powers and local states ([Buzan 2017, 232](#)).

In this context, the concept of a security community provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding the bridge between the state, regional, and international levels, as well as an understanding of the dynamics and emerging transformations in the international system, given that, in order to grasp the logic of a security community, it is necessary to analyze formal structures (international organizations, treaties, regulatory frameworks), but also a careful study of informal elements (customs, informal regional arrangements and hierarchies, identity dilemmas, or various interactions between state and non-state/sub-state actors).

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the **conditions and mechanisms that produce the transition from regional interdependence to a sustainable security community, as well as the factors that determine the stability or fragility of this transition.**

The central argument of the article is that the development and viability of security communities result from the dynamic convergence of *material factors* — capacities

and power structures that act as 'cores', *procedural mechanisms* — transactions, institutions, and social learning processes, and *ideological dimensions* — common identities, norms, and practices that legitimize self-control among members. Transformation usually takes place on an evolutionary continuum – from birth to maturity and, occasionally, to disintegration.

From a methodological perspective, this article is a qualitative study, based mainly on document analysis, in particular thematic case studies on related issues, as the main method of documentation and substantiation.

The Security Community: An Overview

Given the purpose of this article, this section aims to answer four main questions: (1) What are security communities?; (2) How do security communities emerge?; (3) How do security communities develop?; and (4) What are the main factors that determine the fragility/disintegration of a security community? In addition, this section seeks to highlight the main features that differentiate security communities from other forms of regional security organizations.

The Security Community: Origin, Evolution, and Conceptual Delimitations

A community is usually defined as 'a collective whose members are bound by a strong sense of participation', representing, at the same time, a structural unit of 'cultural and social organization and transmission'. The main components of a community are: (1) population; (2) territory; and (3) a link between these elements, which provides the community with the infrastructural capacity to act as a whole, as well as the capacity to intervene in the lives of its members. Communities can be identified based on: (1) the existence of universally accepted beliefs and values; (2) the existence of a consistent level of interaction between their members; and (3) the existence of a high degree of reciprocity that expresses 'a certain long-term interest and altruism' (Costopoulos 1995, 16).

The combination of the two terms, community and security, denotes their interdependence, with their most obvious common element being the centrality of shared fundamental values. Thus, if we consider that security aims to protect/preserve fundamental values against any threats, its importance (i.e., security) is obvious: 'the loss of its fundamental values means the end of a certain community (...)'. Thus, the community cannot survive without a sustained effort to ensure its security, just as security 'makes no sense if there is no community of values to protect'. (Costopoulos 1995, 20).

Initially proposed in the early 1950s by Richard W. Van Wagenen, the concept of a security community was only addressed theoretically and empirically after the pioneering study by Czech-born political scientist and sociologist Karl W. Deutsch and his associates, who in 1957 published the work '*Political Community and the*

North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience. Their seminal work defined the security community as a group of people integrated by a 'sense of community', that is, by a 'belief on the part of individuals in a group that they have reached agreement at least on this point: that common social problems must and can be solved through processes of peaceful change' (Tusicisny 2007, 426).

In the authors' words, by *integration* we mean the achievement, within a territory, of a 'sense of community' and institutions and practices that are sufficiently strong and widespread to ensure, for a 'long' period of time, reliable expectations of 'peaceful change', and by *peaceful change* the authors meant 'the resolution of social problems in a normal way, through institutionalized procedures, without resorting to large-scale physical force' (Costopoulos 1995, 1-2).

In other words, the concept of a security community refers to 'a group of actors who genuinely believe that the members of the community will not fight each other physically, but will resolve their disputes in another way', a particular feature of which is that, unlike other institutions involved in preventing military confrontations, 'it is based on the premise that its members do not accept in any way the idea of using violence against each other' (Miroiu and Ungureanu 2008, 243-244).

For Deutsch and his collaborators, security communities could be divided into two categories: (1) amalgamated security communities, which are constituted by 'the formal merger of two or more independent units into a single larger unit, with a certain type of governance after amalgamation' and (2) pluralistic security communities, in which 'member states retain the legal independence of their separate governments, but have become integrated to the point where they enjoy reliable expectations of peaceful change'. Although Deutsch *et al.* divide security communities into two distinct categories, it is clear that in both cases, the members of the security community do not suspect each other of aggressive intentions and regard the use of force between them as unthinkable; moreover, they also effectively give up preparing to fight each other (Aşan 2008, 5).

The core of Karl W. Deutsch's security community approach is shaped around a transactionalist perspective of international integration, which emphasized the importance of communication processes and flows of interaction/transactions between various agents as the main driving forces of sustainable peace in certain regional contexts. Thus, Karl W. Deutsch started from the assumption that 'only communication allows a group to think together, see together, and act together' (Julio Bulling 2016, 86), suggesting that communication binds social groups in general and political communities in particular.

At the same time, in Karl W. Deutsch's formulation, security communities emerge as a result of interaction flows/transactions between various agents. According to his transactional approach, flows such as trade, migration, tourism, cultural and

educational changes, and the proliferation of communication facilities serve to underpin a 'social fabric among both elites and the masses, instilling in them a sense of community, which becomes a matter of mutual sympathy and loyalty; a sense of "we-feeling", mutual trust and consideration; partial identification in terms of self-image and interests; mutually successful predictions of behavior; ... in short, a matter of a perpetual dynamic process of mutual attention, communication, perception of needs and responsiveness in the decision-making process' ([Adler 2005](#), 208).

Karl W. Deutsch viewed transactions as a primary source of new identifications, but his excessive emphasis on quantitative measures made his theoretical model 'inattentive to international organizations and social groups or classes, decision-makers, business elites, and the mix of interests and self-image that motivate their behaviors'. Furthermore, Karl W. Deutsch's theoretical model has often been criticized for not paying sufficient attention to the complex and causal ways in which 'the power and practices of states, international organizations, transactions, and social learning processes can generate new forms of mutual identification and security relations' ([Adler and Barnett 1998](#), 9).

At the same time, Karl W. Deutsch did not limit his analysis to inter-state relations, explicitly adopting an 'individual-societal and bottom-up approach', as evidenced by his definition of the security community as 'a group of integrated people'. Furthermore, Deutsch never limited the study of international relations to the interaction between states, but instead, as we have shown above, adopted an approach focused on transactions between individuals, groups, and societies. He also accepted the realist view that 'international relations are organized as a system of states based on the distribution of material power and capabilities', but at the same time emphasized 'their social relations based on common understandings, principle-based belief systems, and narratives', which gave the concept of a security community 'a middle ground theoretical position' in the study of international relations ([Koschut 2014](#), 522).

However, despite its potential theoretical and practical importance, the concept of security community developed by Karl W. Deutsch and his collaborators did not generate any solid research agenda in the following decades. Potential explanations could be that:

(1) it was not the right time for such an approach, given that during the Cold War, especially in its early stages, 'any discussion of a community of states seemed hopelessly romantic and extremely discordant in the context of the harsh conditions of the time and the prospects of nuclear war'. At the same time, the theoretical premises of the concept were quickly overshadowed by other integrationist approaches, such as regional neo-functionalism, as the process of European integration gradually emerged. Moreover, the idea of a pluralistic security community made up of sovereign states was viewed with skepticism due to the shortcomings of the UN, which was considered 'the

- only organization capable of forming such a community at the global level’.
- (2) the field of international relations was strongly dominated by realist paradigms that considered the emergence and development of such security communities to be unrealistic from both a theoretical and practical point of view, in which sense they ‘removed this concept from the general theoretical debates that studied the absence of war and stable peace’.
- (3) the ‘Deutschian framework’ suffered from various theoretical, conceptual, and methodological problems inherent in the concept itself, which undoubtedly ‘deterred future applications’ (Ulusoy 2003, 3-4).

Despite previous efforts to modify and update the concept of security community, it was only after the well-known study by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, entitled ‘*Security Communities*’, published in 1998, that it began to be truly reconsidered. Essentially, the main contributions of their study in terms of reconceptualizing, modifying and updating Karl W. Deutsch’s analytical framework include, but are not limited to: (1) redefining the concept of security community from a qualitative and social constructivist perspective, to the detriment of Deutsch’s purely transactionalist orientation; (2) emphasizing pluralistic security communities and their redefinition; (3) identifying the conditions under which they could emerge; (4) developing a three-phase evolutionary model of security communities, as well as a three-level analytical framework; (5) emphasis on the role of transnational forces; and (6) consideration of their possible development in different regional contexts, providing a rich agenda for further research.

Within the constructivist reconceptualization, the community is characterized by ‘identities, values, and meanings shared by its members’, thus becoming an ‘imagined region’ or a ‘cognitive region’ whose boundaries ‘may or may not be congruent with traditional geographical boundaries’ (Aşan 2008, 22). Viewed from this perspective, the community becomes a kind of ‘regional system of meanings’, made up of people whose common identities and interests are built on common understandings and normative principles other than national sovereignty, and who: (1) actively communicate and interact across state borders; (2) show a high degree of involvement in the political life of a region and commitment to pursuing common regional goals; and (3) urge, as citizens of states and the community, ‘to act as agents of regional good, based on regional systems of governance’. At the same time, within this ‘regional system of meanings’, people ‘institutionalize commonalities that cut across the region, including shared perceptions of external threats, and promote practices of mutual non-threat’ (Adler 2005, 181).

Essentially, Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett concluded that there are three defining characteristics of a community, namely that: (1) members have common identities, values, and meanings; (2) members have close relationships, constant and multilateral interactions, and (3) members show reciprocity that expresses a certain degree of long-term interest and maybe even altruism (Jädersand 2021, 15).

With regard to the emphasis on pluralistic security communities and their redefinition, we note that Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett continued the Deutschian view that 'the world is not ready for political amalgamation through the merger of national governments or the creation of powerful international administrative agencies. At best, we can hope that pluralistic security communities can develop between nations' (Koschut 2014, 522). However, unlike Karl W. Deutsch, Adler and Barnett reconceptualized the idea of pluralistic security communities from a social constructivist perspective, emphasizing the role of shared values and identity, in which context they defined a pluralistic security community as 'a transnational region consisting of sovereign states whose populations have credible expectations of peaceful change' (Adler and Barnett 1998, 30). The constructivist perspective of the two researchers is revealed by the fact that ensuring credible expectations of peaceful change among the population of a security community 'requires stable norms and a collective identity capable of transforming the behavior of states from self-help to trust-building' (Koschut 2014, 525).

The emphasis on common/collective identity is not accidental, given that, as Emanuel Adler suggested in a 2005 study entitled '*Communitarian International Relations. The epistemic foundations of International Relations*', 'cooperative behavior between individuals is mediated by the perception of belonging to a common category' (i.e., common/collective identity), and within the community 'we help others, seemingly selflessly, because we perceive their needs and goals as those of our social category and, therefore, as our own'. In other words, the role of common/collective identity is revealed by the fact that when individuals define their state as belonging to a particular community, they internalize a certain normative framework, in the sense that 'certain behaviors (...) become appropriate, while others (...) become inappropriate or illegitimate'. Thus, in a discussion about democratic communities, Emanuel Adler concludes that 'the state follows democratic norms not only because its people believe in democracy, but because the category of 'democratic state' now defines, in part, their identity'. Furthermore, the understanding of 'peaceful change' invoked by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett in their definition of pluralistic security communities can also be understood by the fact that 'the identity factor allows peoples from different states to get to know each other', which reduces the uncertainty generated by the anarchic nature of the international system and increases mutual responsiveness (Adler 2005, 189).

At the same time, Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett have expanded the analytical framework of pluralist security communities, distinguishing between two ideal types of such communities, namely: (1) loosely coupled pluralist security communities, which, in their words, 'meet the minimum defining properties and nothing more: a transnational region made up of sovereign states whose populations have reliable expectations of peaceful change', in which community members 'do not expect bellicose activities from other members and, therefore, consistently practice self-control' and (2) tightly coupled pluralistic security communities which, unlike the

former, have a much higher degree of integration, in that: (a) they have laid the foundations for a 'mutual aid society', within which members end up building various collective systems; (b) they possess a 'system of governance that lies somewhere between a sovereign state and a centralized regional government', equipped with 'joint supranational, transnational, and national institutions and some form of collective security system' ([Adler 2005](#), 30).

So far, we have discussed the contributions made by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett in terms of: (1) redefining the concept of security community from a qualitative and social constructivist perspective, as opposed to Deutsch's purely transactional approach, and (2) emphasizing pluralistic security communities and their redefinition. The rest of the contributions will be addressed in the following sections.

The emergence of security communities

In this section, we aim to identify the main variables that facilitate the emergence of security communities, both from the initial perspective proposed by Karl W. Deutsch and through the lens of the constructivist reconceptualization developed by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, as well as from the subsequent contributions of other authors established in the field of international relations.

As we have shown previously, both Karl W. Deutsch and Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett were skeptical of any form of supranational structure, i.e., of the amalgamated forms of the security community, in which context the discussion of the emergence of security communities will be limited to the emergence of pluralistic security communities.

Karl W. Deutsch did not find a 'perfect recipe' for the emergence and development of security communities, but he did discover that, under certain fairly specific conditions, 'it is possible to achieve a state of integration that makes war almost impossible in the foreseeable future' ([Costopoulos 1995](#), 2).

Karl W. Deutsch was convinced that security communities can have 'humble and selfish' beginnings, all that was needed in the initial phase being a 'complementarity of needs and resources' ([Adler 2005](#), 209), coupled with 'sustained interaction (trade, migration, tourism, cultural and educational exchanges) between relevant agents'. Such cross-border movements, Karl W. Deutsch suggested, generate 'reciprocity, new forms of trust, the discovery of new interests and even collective identities, in short, a set of conditions and relationships that, over time, instill a sense of community in the participating agents' ([Aşan 2008](#), 10).

Starting from here and along with: (1) increased communication; (2) a consistent number of transactions; (3) learning and socialization processes, which lead to the creation of a common normative framework and common models of behavior; (4)

a 'core of power' that attracts weaker states and guides them; (5) the emergence of 'community-building institutions'; and (6) the existence of elites who use material and symbolic resources to enhance a certain set of identity traits necessary for the existence of a collective identity, a framework conducive to the emergence and development of security communities would be formed ([Adler 2005](#), 209).

Based on these conditions, Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, in their study entitled '*Security Communities*', have made numerous additions/clarifications regarding the emergence of security communities. Thus, concerning the first two conditions, Adler and Barnett believe that, within the framework of communicative action, 'participants negotiate definitions, values, and mutual understandings as they join the discourse around a task', and in addition to this, 'they bring not only formal knowledge, but also practical experience and interests'. At the same time, through transactions of all kinds, 'joint learning processes in which "doing things together" becomes an important component of "knowing together" are encouraged' ([Adler and Barnett 1998](#), 417).

Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett define the learning process as an 'active process of redefining or reinterpreting reality based on new causal and normative knowledge', which plays an active role in the emergence and development of security communities, contributing to: (1) the spread of norms, which facilitates the expansion of the area in which mutual trust and collective identities can emerge; (2) the redefinition of regional security in ways that have promoted 'trust-building and the social construction of collective identities'; and (3) the formation of collective identity through the creation of common norms, symbols, and customs, including by discovering previously non-existent or unrecognized cultural similarities between different states, or by socially constructing or redefining the regions themselves ([Adler and Barnett 1998](#), 422-423).

Regarding the 'core of power', Karl W. Deutsch observed that 'security communities usually develop around "power cores" consisting of larger, more powerful, politically, administratively, and economically advanced political units' that functioned as 'poles of economic or political attraction', assuming leadership roles ([Aşan 2008](#), 9). Although he noted the importance of 'power cores' in the development of security communities, Karl W. Deutsch offered no further guidance on them. In their landmark study, Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett went beyond the Deutschian framework, distinguishing between two distinct but probably necessary ways in which 'power cores' facilitate the emergence of a security community, namely: (1) using the phrase 'carrots and sticks', the two authors refer to 'power cores' as decision-making centers or informal leaders who have the ability to allocate resources and use selective incentives to offer rewards/impose sanctions in order to shape the behavior of community members, and (2) 'power cores' have 'the ability to project a sense of purpose', their power being 'not someone to be feared, but rather someone to be emulated' ([Adler and Barnett 1998](#), 424). Additionally, Pinar Aşan believes

that ‘power cores’ play an important role in the emergence and development of security communities because they: (1) have a high potential to resist the demands and requirements imposed on them during the process of building the security community; (2) confer increased material and moral authority on the norms and practices they disseminate on the international stage, in the sense that they ‘can induce their political adoption and institutionalization’; and (3) have a ‘magnetic effect’ on other weaker actors who aspire to benefit from their inclusion in the emerging order (Aşan 2008, 9).

The causal relationship between international institutions and the emergence of security communities is based, according to Emanuel Adler, on ‘agency’, that is, on ‘the catalytic function of institutions to promote, induce, and socially construct the community through community-building practices’ (Adler and Barnett 1998, 120). Thus, with regard to the formula of ‘community-building institutions’, in one of the case studies published in the book *Security Communities*, Emanuel Adler states that they: (1) help determine the common understandings that will be selected culturally and politically to become the practices and interests of governments; (2) create evaluative, normative, and sometimes causal frameworks around which a security community is built; (3) disseminate and institutionalize common values, norms, and understandings; and (4) play an important role in intra- and inter-state processes that shape the political choices that make the development of security communities possible (Adler and Barnett 1998, 150-151).

In other words, the Deutschian model offers three essential conditions for the emergence of a pluralistic security community. The first condition necessary for the emergence of a pluralistic security community is the compatibility of major values (Costopoulos 1995, 23). The second necessary condition is mutual receptivity, i.e., the ability of the community’s constituent units to ‘respond to each other’s needs, messages, and actions quickly, appropriately, and without resorting to violence’. In this sense, mutual responsiveness implies: (1) the ability of member units to understand the problems of other members of the community; (2) the ability of member units to find answers to these problems through a negotiation process that satisfies the needs and desires of all community members; and (3) the joint implementation of these solutions and a feedback process on the new demands generated by these solutions (Costopoulos 1995, 39-40). The third condition for the emergence of a pluralistic security community is mutual predictability of behavior, a condition that Karl W. Deutsch considers to be less important, rather a normal consequence of the two conditions mentioned above, given that ‘the member states of a pluralistic security community must take joint decisions only on a more limited range of subjects and each retains a much wider range of issues for autonomous decision-making within its own borders’. Nevertheless, the importance of mutual predictability of behavior lies in the fact that it ‘allows the formation of reliable expectations about the future behavior of other members of the system,’ expectations that are very important for “the latency of the social system as such” (Costopoulos 1995, 54; 58).

In addition to the additions and clarifications made to the Deutschian model, Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett laid the foundations for an integrative model structured on three levels on how security communities emerge, combining material and ideological, structural and procedural, as well as empirical and normative explanations. Thus, according to the two authors, the emergence of security communities is conditioned by the completion of the following three levels/stages:

- *Level 1* is represented by precipitating conditions, which, in the authors' words, include but are not limited to 'technological developments, an external threat that causes states to form alliances, the desire to reduce mutual fear through security coordination, new interpretations of social reality, transformations of economic, demographic, and migration patterns, and changes in the natural environment'. Such conditions can mobilize states to coordinate policies to their advantage, and even if, at this level, there is no 'expectation that these initial meetings and acts of cooperation will generate mutual trust or identification', they create a favorable climate for the further development of relations, paving the way for more frequent and friendly interactions between states (Adler and Barnett 1998, 38).
- *Level 2* is represented by the fact that, as a result of the actors' fairly long exposure to various precipitating conditions, 'states and their peoples became involved in a series of social interactions that began to transform the environment in which they are embedded'. According to the authors, this level consists of two distinct categories: structure and process. The first is represented by the structural categories of power and knowledge. According to the two authors, power is a central element in the development of a security community, given that, by virtue of power, a central state has the ability 'to determine and, occasionally, to compel other states to maintain a collective position'. In other words, power is considered a 'magnet' around which not only a material dimension, based on the balance of power, crystallizes, but also an ideological one, built on the symbolic coherence of the hegemon's vision and its power to sanction deviations from agreed norms. On the other hand, the authors consider that, beyond the material dimension, knowledge, in the form of a framework of shared meanings and norms, is equally indispensable for the emergence of a security community, given that it 'represents the categories of practical action and legitimate activity' (Adler and Barnett 1998, 40). The second is the category of procedural elements which, in the authors' opinion, involves: transactions, international organizations and institutions, and social learning (Adler and Barnett 1998, 41-45).
- Finally, *level 3* marks the attainment of the stage where the precipitating conditions, coupled with the constant interactions between the structural and procedural categories, have generated sufficient social capital for states to act predominantly based on mutual trust and collective identity. Trust appears here as the willingness to act 'despite uncertainty', and collective

identity is formed when people ‘not only identify (positively) with the fate of other people but also identify themselves and those other people as a group in relation to other groups’. At this level, both symbolism (myths, rituals, common flags) and internally adopted norms reinforce the ‘boundaries’ of the community and make the escalation of violence between members less and less likely ([Adler and Barnett 1998](#), 45-48).

The issue of the emergence of security communities has also been addressed by other authors. In his work entitled ‘*Communitarian International Relations. The Epistemic Foundations of International Relations*’, Emanuel Adler identifies six contextual variables that promote the emergence and development of security communities. These are: (1) the expected utility of peace, which exceeds that of war, a variable that lays the foundations for a climate in which dialogue and regular exchanges are no longer mere transactions but become instruments for building mutual trust, and multilateral norms and procedures become legitimate through the active participation of countries in their development and implementation; (2) the prevalence of liberal democratic regimes; (3) the existence of ‘power centers’ committed to resolving any disputes peacefully; (4) the existence and implementation of an articulated set of international principles and norms designed to guide the behavior of states toward the peaceful resolution of disputes and discourage the use of force; (5) the existence of a mutual, tacit or sustained agreement on the institutional/principled legitimacy underlying the joint organization of the security community, the legitimacy of the community in the eyes of its members explaining, more than anything else, the existence of a system of regional governance based on collective identity; and (6) the existence of ‘peacemakers’ with significant agency, i.e., actors who can mobilize resources, inspire courage and strategic vision, and are considered catalysts that generate conditions conducive to the creation of a common purpose, collective identities, and mutual trust ([Adler 2005](#), 215-218).

Another perspective comes from Indian author Amitav Acharya, who, in his 2001 work ‘*Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order*’, identifies three key elements in the creation of security communities: institutions, norms, and identity.

Concerning institutions, Amitav Acharya believes that multilateral institutions contribute to the formation of security communities on two complementary levels: in the neoliberal-institutional paradigm, they mitigate anarchy by providing information, reducing transaction costs, supporting dispute mediation, and, through sanctioning mechanisms, discouraging cheating, which encourages states to cooperate rationally and pursue their interests through cost-benefit calculations. From a constructivist perspective, institutions not only regulate the behavior of states, but also shape their identities and interests through processes of socialization and normalization: they transmit and reinforce norms of conduct, promote a common regional culture (e.g., democracy and respect for human rights), host functional

projects that strengthen the sense of a common destiny, and facilitate social learning that redefines states' perceptions and expectations. Furthermore, both 'rational-legal' formalities and informal 'customs, practices, and ideas' of dialogue and consultation, essential for countries sensitive to sovereignty, contribute to cementing the cohesion and legitimacy of a security community (Acharya 2001, 22-24).

Norms, according to Amitav Acharya, serve as essential normative and constitutive structures for security communities: they prescribe and prohibit behaviors, reduce uncertainty, and legitimize cooperation by establishing common standards of rights and obligations, providing a framework for peaceful dispute resolution and the prevention of subversive actions. From a constructivist perspective, norms have an independent constitutive effect, 'teaching' states to adopt/accept new interests and identities, redefining national preferences, and generating collective interests that shift attention from selfish sovereignty to community solidarity. By adopting similar behavioral claims, members of a community create parallel models of peaceful conduct across borders, coordinate their values in order to avoid war, and consolidate a 'social habit' of non-violence, thus cementing the sense of 'us' and mutual loyalty necessary to sustain reliable expectations of peaceful change within a security community (Acharya 2001, 24-25).

Last but not least, identity is seen by Amitav Acharya as the third essential pillar in the development of security communities, as it is considered the psychosocial glue of communities, transforming state actors driven by material interests and self-help thinking into conscious members of a cohesive group marked by a sense of 'we-feeling' that generates mutual receptivity, trust, and consideration, thus reducing the security dilemma. The development of identity also involves the development of a collective sense not only of 'who we are', but also of 'how we differ from others', as well as 'ensuring external recognition of the distinctive character of the community'. Amitav Acharya identifies three indicators of collective identity: (1) multilateralism, i.e., the desire of community members to solve more and more problems through regional cooperation rather than unilateralism; (2) the development of cooperation in the field of security (collective defense, collaboration against internal threats, collective security, etc.); and (3) the clarity of the community's borders and membership criteria, i.e., how 'regional' boundaries are defined and the rules that determine who belongs to this community and who remains outside it (Acharya 2001, 26-29).

Another perspective belongs to Professor Laurie Nathan, who, in her paper '*Security Communities and the problem of domestic instability*', argues that 'internal instability in the form of large-scale violence prevents the emergence or existence of a security community in several ways'. She offers three reasons why internal stability is important enough to be considered a necessary condition for the emergence and development of a security community: (1) large-scale domestic violence undermines the credibility of the idea of a security community, because citizens caught up in internal conflicts cannot benefit from reliable expectations of peaceful change; (2)

internal instability generates tension and mistrust between states, preventing them from achieving the high level of mutual trust and collective identity necessary for the creation and maintenance of a security community; and (3) internal violence erodes the coherence and predictability of behavior, destroys the sense of community, and makes it impossible to build the mutual trust necessary to rule out the use of force and guarantee non-violence (Nathan 2004).

Another perspective belongs to Andrej Tuscisny, who in his work *'Security Communities and Their Values: Taking Masses Seriously'* identified several variables that should facilitate peaceful change and the emergence of security communities: (1) interpersonal trust, or the sense of 'we-feeling' that strengthens internal cohesion and reliable expectations of peaceful change; (2) tolerance towards 'out-groups', or acceptance of ethnic, religious, and political minorities, which should help reduce internal tensions and the risk of civil conflict; (3) democratic commitment, i.e. the belief that any disputes can be resolved through institutional means and not through violence; (4) economic liberalism, which contributes to a 'universal expansion' of trust within a community because 'in a market economy, most people must engage in non-violent interactions with each other'; and (5) civic engagement, i.e., involvement in voluntary associations and activities that create interpersonal trust and overlapping and interdependent social networks, which can 'reduce the propensity for conflict' (Tuscisny 2007, 431-432).

In summary, this section emphasized that the emergence and consolidation of security communities cannot be explained by a single factor, but rather by the complex interaction of several key variables. The section started from the approach of the founding father, Karl W. Deutsch, then presented some of the contributions of Adler and Barnett, who enriched this framework with structural, procedural, normative, and institutional dimensions, showing how prescribed and constitutive norms, supported by multilateral institutions, generate new interests and patterns of peaceful behavior. Subsequently, several additional points of view were presented, from democratic peace theory and the role of free markets to the importance of visionary leadership and social learning, aspects that expanded the inventory of variables that facilitate peaceful change and the emergence and development of security communities. Together, these elements reveal a dynamic interweaving of material, ideological, and institutional factors, whose convergence transforms the stakes of security from pure state survival into a sustainable social construct capable of responding to both internal challenges and cross-border threats.

The security community as a process

In this section, we aim to highlight the contributions made by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett to the development of a three-phase research program on security communities, as well as their emphasis on the role of transnational forces.

Thus, while in the previous section we identified the main variables that contribute to the emergence of a security community, in this section we will analyze the security

community not only as a static result, but as an evolutionary process.

The merits of the three-phase security communities research program belong, as previously stated, to Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett who, starting from the idea that ‘security communities are socially constructed’, concluded that they ‘have a history and, therefore, present an evolutionary model that follows the direction of the “arrow of time”’ (Adler and Barnett 1998, 49).

Essentially, security communities do not arise and disappear suddenly, but follow a continuum, as follows:

- *Phase I – nascent phase* is characterized by the fact that states do not explicitly seek to lay the foundations for a security community *per se*, but instead engage in various diplomatic, bilateral, and multilateral exchanges to coordinate their relations in order to achieve certain goals. In other words, this phase is characterized by ‘organizational emulation and a common ignorance of the existence of the security community’, with regional actors acting without any plan, but merely testing the ‘nature of the ongoing exchanges’. Not surprisingly, for this phase, institutions play a crucial role in interpreting, deepening, and expanding ongoing exchanges (Vucetic 2001, 113).

In Adler and Barnett’s model, institutions, or ‘third parties’ as they call them, play an essential role in building security communities because they ‘contain norms and provide mechanisms that make states accountable to each other; institutionalize immediate reciprocity (if not diffusion); identify common interests (or even identities) among a selected population; and produce agendas and convene meetings and seminars, reflecting an attempt to create a binding set of interests and a collective future’ (Adler and Barnett 1998, 52).

- *Phase II – ascendant* is characterized by an intensification of interactions and a notable increase in relational density, with the multiple flows of the incipient phase becoming increasingly extensive and deepened. At the same time, new international institutions and organizations emerge, reflecting not only increased coordination and cooperation but also a visible reduction in mutual uncertainties and fears. At the same time, the expansion of networks and the intensification of relations and interactions between societies, states, and organizations ‘institutionalize cognitive structures and strengthen mutual trust and responsiveness’ (Adler and Barnett 1998, 53).

- *Phase III – maturity* marks the moment when reliable expectations of peaceful change become so well established among regional actors that the security community ‘begins to exist’. In this phase, regional actors share not only common interests but also a common identity, assuming credible expectations of peaceful resolution of any disagreements, signaling the crossing of a critical threshold—the rhetoric of war loses all instrumental meaning.

Here, Adler and Barnett provide additional insights into the distinction and evidence of the emergence of two types of pluralistic security communities: weak and tightly coupled.

Thus, regarding the weakly coupled (minimalist) pluralistic security communities, their members 'positively identify with each other and proclaim a similar "way of life"; there are multiple and diverse mechanisms and patterns of interaction that strengthen and reproduce the security community; there is an informal system of governance based on shared meanings and a collective identity; and, although there are conflicting interests, disagreements, and asymmetric negotiations, states are expected to exercise self-control'. Evidence of the emergence of a loosely coupled pluralistic security community includes: (1) multilateralism; (2) the existence of unfortified borders; (3) changes in military planning with regard to community members; (4) provision of a common definition of what constitutes a threat; and (5) the existence of a visible concordance between the discourse and normative actions of the state and the standards of the community.

In tightly coupled pluralistic security communities, mutual cooperation becomes a routine, everyday practice, and the sense of national identity is expressed through joint efforts. At the same time, the unilateral right to use force is transferred from individual states to the collective of sovereign states and becomes legitimate only 'against external threats or against members of the community who deviate from the fundamental norms of the community'. Conventional power balances, nuclear deterrence, and the possibility of retaliation remain functional instruments, but they are mobilized exclusively in defense of the common space against 'foreigners'. In the event of external aggression, the security community can pool its resources to respond as a collective security system or even as an integrated military defense bloc. Evidence/indicators of the emergence of a closely coupled pluralistic security community include: (1) the transition from mutual arms control to cooperative security internally and collective security externally; (2) a high level of military integration; (3) coordination of policies against 'internal' threats; (4) free movement of people; (5) internationalization of legislative authority; and (6) the existence of a 'multi-perspective' policy that allows for the creation of rules and decision-making mechanisms between the national, transnational, and supranational levels ([Adler and Barnett 1998, 55-57](#)).

- *The disintegration of the security community* is succinctly presented by Adler and Barnett as a variable that occurs when the forces that previously constituted the security community begin to erode under the impact of exogenous shocks or internal dysfunctions. At the heart of the two authors' perspective on the disintegration of the security community lies the 'loss of mutual trust', which paves the way for the revision of common norms, the restriction of transactions, and the fragmentation of the institutional framework ([Adler and Barnett 1998, 58](#)).

The issue of the disintegration of a security community has also attracted the interest of other authors. For example, Karl W. Deutsch identified six possible

causes for the failure of a political system, namely: (1) loss of power; (2) loss of communication channels; (3) loss of leadership or coordination capacity; (4) loss of memory depth; (5) loss of partial internal reorganization capacity; and (6) loss of comprehensive or fundamental internal structure reorganization capacity. According to the author, all six causes have in common the fact that they 'call into question the mutual predictability of behavior'. At the same time, Deutsch considers that the challenge of mutual predictability arises in two different ways, namely: (1) through doubts that arise about the system as such and (2) through doubts that arise about the will and ability of a member. In the first case, doubts about the system 'create a sense of distrust in the fixity of the system, as well as in its ability to fulfill its role as a forum for relations between members', in which context mutual predictability of behavior becomes an impossible condition once the environment that led to its emergence has changed. In the second case, as a result of changes in the actions of a member unit, disintegration results from the fact that 'the member unit of the security community is considered unreliable by the other members' (Costopoulos 1995, 65-66).

Another perspective on the disintegration of a security community belongs to Indian author Amitav Acharya, who offers two points of view in this regard: a neorealist point of view and a constructivist one. From a neorealist theory perspective, Amitav Acharya believes that the decline of security communities is explained by major changes taking place on the international relations scene which, in the author's words, 'can generate new threats to the security of states, causing new external alignments among some members, which can prove disruptive and divisive (...) for the integrity of the security community. In contrast, according to the constructivist approach, Amitav Acharya places the sources of decline not only in exogenous factors, but especially in the internal dynamics of the socialization processes that constitute the security community, highlighting the fact that excessive expansion through the 'introduction of previously "unsocialized" actors' can test the material, psychological, and normative capacities of the community, as well as the socialization processes within the community and between it and the outside world (Acharya 2001, 36-37).

Distinguishing security communities from other regional security systems

In this section, we will highlight the main features that differentiate security communities from other forms of regional security organization, *alliances*, *collective security*, *security regimes*, and *security complexes*, in order to emphasize the unique contribution of each model to the logic and practice of state cooperation. We will compare the basic vocabulary, operating mechanisms, and horizons of application, thus providing a clear framework for further analysis. For clarity, we will present the differences succinctly in the form of a table.

TABLE 1. The difference between a security community and other forms of regional security organizations

FORM OF ORGANIZATION	BASIC VOCABULARY	OPERATING MECHANISMS	SCOPE OF APPLICATION
Security communities	Fundamental, unequivocal, and long-lasting convergence in avoiding war; collective identity, the sense of 'us'; accepted norm of non-use of force among members; reasonable certainty that all share the same commitment	Multi-dimensional integrative process (formal and informal institutions, diplomatic practices, evolving norms and customs); peaceful resolution and self-control mechanisms; sustainable practices that 'prevent' war through socialization, functional interdependence, and mutual trust building	Avoiding armed conflicts between members; maintaining internal peace and stability; prevention through common practices, without necessarily targeting an external threat; peace between community members assumed as the norm
Alliances	Collective defense imperative; mutual military commitments; identification and deterrence of a pre-recognized and commonly perceived external threat	Formal (or informal) agreements whereby states commit to providing military support to an ally under attack; common front against an external enemy; joint command or military consultation mechanisms; 'security role' (Lynn Miller) ¹ .	Collective against an external enemy; common defense to deter aggression; does not guarantee non-conflict between members when there are no external threats
Collective security	The feeling of 'us'; the threat of collective punishment for any aggression committed by a member of the group; the supremacy of physical force as a means of enforcing sanctions	Multilateral legal mechanism (e.g., UN) that punishes the aggressor through sanctions or collective intervention; priority given to the credibility of the punishment mechanism; minimal cooperation required to maintain the credibility of sanctions; does not imply trade interdependence or deep functional integration	Discouraging and punishing any aggression between members; maintaining peace through collective force; does not profoundly transform internal relations, but relies on punishment/sanctions
Security regimes	A set of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures designed to reduce the security dilemma; balance of power or mutual deterrence; interests that are 'neither completely compatible nor completely competitive'	Inhibition of force use through balance of power and reasonable expectations of behavior (monitoring, deterrence); occasional cooperation in dispute management; does not imply deep functional ties or identity; can function in contradictory contexts as long as force remains a last resort	Managing disputes and avoiding war within a framework of deterrence and balance; maintaining a state of 'no war' but not completely eliminating uncertainty and not establishing lasting peace through common identity
Security complexes	Significant interdependence between states (rivalry or common interests); regional nodes in the global security network; interrelated securitization/de-securitization processes	Analysis and coordination at the regional subsystem level, depending on the dynamics of friendship-enmity, does not automatically imply integrated cooperation, but rather notes interdependence (e.g., rivalries, mutual fears, or functional solidarity); it focuses on security issues in mini-systems, without imposing common rules on the non-use of force	Mapping and managing security in a regional space defined by multiple interdependencies (conflictual or functional); it does not necessarily focus on avoiding war, but rather on managing security relations

Source: Table compiled by the author using information taken from: (Acharya 2001, 17-21; Sava 2005, 150; (Buzan, Waever and Wilde 2010, 28; 281)

¹ By 'security role', Lynn Miller refers to an integral part of a defense community that denotes 'the organization's potential to present a common military front against an external actor or actors'. In contrast, the 'peace role', which is essential to a security community, refers to 'the potential of a regional organization, through its peacekeeping mechanism and diplomatic techniques, to control the resolution of conflicts between its members by force'. See Amitav Acharya, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

Summarizing the table above, with regard to the essential difference between the security community and other forms of regional security organization, we emphasize that the former is distinguished by an essential 'cognitive transition' (Acharya 2001, 20) that shifts from the logic of fear and balance of power to an accepted norm of non-use of force within the group, supported by identity and lasting trust, while the other models maintain, to one degree or another, the possibility and legitimacy of force as a security tool.

Conclusion

In view of the above, we consider that this article has achieved its intended purpose of providing a comprehensive and critical overview of the conditions and mechanisms that bring about the transition from regional interdependence to a sustainable security community, as well as the factors that determine the stability or fragility of this transition.

First, we focused on fundamental definitions, from Karl W. Deutsch's transactionalist perspective to constructivist reinterpretations that emphasize the role of transnational identities and norms. We thus outlined a clear delimitation of the notion of security community, highlighting its essential characteristics: convergence of interests, non-use of force, and mutual certainty of reliable expectations of peaceful change, in contrast to other forms of regional cooperation.

Next, through a detailed analysis, we revealed the main variables that facilitate the emergence of security communities, both from the initial perspective proposed by Karl W. Deutsch and through the lens of the constructivist reconceptualization developed by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, as well as from the subsequent contributions of other authors renowned in the field of international relations.

At the same time, we examined in depth the procedural dynamics of community life: from the early phase of pragmatic orientation, through the rise of dense relationships and institutions, to the moment of maturity, when reliable expectations of peaceful change become the norm, making war between members unthinkable, providing both a conceptual map of the stages and empirical indicators for each phase. We also showed how these evolutionary processes, dependent on trajectory, can paradoxically lead to decline when loss of trust or internal and external transformations test the resilience of the community.

Finally, through a comparative analysis, we distinguished security communities from other forms of regional security organization, clarifying the points of conceptual tangency and separation.

Methodologically, the approach was supported by a systematic analysis of the literature and other relevant documents, ensuring the coherence and transparency of the reasoning.

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Uncovering the Major Drivers Behind Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in Northwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

The spread of SALW in Northwestern Nigeria has intensified banditry, communal attacks, kidnapping, and insecurity. Guided by the Jurgen and Muggah theory, this study examines why weapons are acquired and how they circulate across the region. The analysis draws on Key Informant Interviews conducted with 25 respondents across five Northwestern states, supported by secondary sources. Findings show illiteracy, perceived injustice, economic marginalization, illegal mining, community self-defense, weak governance, and poor judicial enforcement drive demand for ammunition. These motivations are sustained by porous borders, instability in the Sahel, smuggling networks, limited security capacity, and evolving trafficking routes. Together, these factors reinforce a cycle of violence among bandits, militias, criminal groups, and affected communities. The study concludes that proliferation reflects governance and socio-economic failures rather than a stand-alone security issue and calls for a multidimensional response that strengthens border control, improves security capacity, and supports regional cooperation, justice reform, and community-based disarmament.

Keywords:

Northwestern Nigeria; Human Security; Arms Proliferation; Small Arms and Light Weapons.

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Introduction

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) have become characteristic of the security crisis in Nigeria, with a detrimental effect on human security as well as an aggravation of violence in diverse regions. These illegal weapons arm common non-state armed groups, insurgents, and networks of crime, leading to unending insecurity, displacement, and a halt in economic flows. The insurgents like Boko Haram have been able to perpetuate their extremist violence in the Northeast by stealing military guns from the stockpiles and have suffered indiscriminate violence against life, livelihood, and dignity (Iroegbu 2022). In a related manner, armed groups in the Niger Delta have used SALW to raid oil installations, abduct civilians, and compromise governance and development (Akinola 2011). These weapons are also experienced in the Middle Belt, where farmer-herder conflicts are turning into the deadly type of retaliatory violence with both parties equipping themselves (International Crisis Group 2021).

These impacts of the proliferation of SALW transcend several security dimensions, such as economic, food, health, personal, community, and political. It interferes with farming, hinders the delivery of medical services, displaces whole groups of people, and undermines governmental power (Iroegbu 2022). A number of drivers support this crisis, including diversion of legally shared weaponry, transnational criminal organisations, legacies of previous conflicts, soft borders, weak controls on weapons, and national corruption (United Nations Press Release 2021). The dynamics lead to the eruption of fertile grounds to armed structures, criminal activities, and intercommunal violence as well, which enhance the insecurity levels in Nigeria (Bashir 2014).

The challenge is national, but Northwest has become a significant infectious hot spot over the past several years. According to Muoemenam and Okafor (2022), the region is among the worst regions gripped by SALW-related crimes, and this is coupled with the Northeast and Southeast. Fulani militias and armed bandit bands have been rampaging the Northwest, killing, kidnapping and masse and mass displacing citizens. Self-help has become the only option that most citizens can find because the ability of the state to grant protection has been further and further diminished. The increased role of non-state actors within the region may be strongly associated with the historical grievances, such as perceived marginalization, the lack of good governance, and systematic neglect.

The Nigerian government's inability to provide security and execute efficient arms control has led to a failure of people's trust. The populace has to endure poverty, hunger, and unemployment; the inability of the state to fulfil its duties has forced a large number of people to buy guns (Adeyemi 2021). The deficits in governance, characterized by unresponsiveness, corruption, and an ineffective justice system, have allowed the proliferation of weapons and emboldened the people, who disrupt the control of the states. According to Mustapha (2013) and Christian (2020), the

maintenance of pre-independence control systems like the security institutions of colonialists still affects the structures of the post-independence government. Unless there is active reform and inclusive government, all the primary causes of insecurity, such as the lack of control on the flow of arms, are bound to continue ([Amujiri and Agu 2012](#)).

Thus, the following paper is aimed at discussing the key contributors to the spread of small armaments and light weapons in Northwestern Nigeria. It investigates the interaction between regional crises, institutional fragilities, and the socio-political forces to find out how the region has become an environment that perpetuates the trade in arms and the worsening of security.

Objectives

To ascertain the major factors aiding the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Northwestern Nigeria.

Literature Review

The international proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has posed a serious security challenge to policymakers and security analysts. According to Tsaku (2021), the circulation of 640 million weapons in the whole world includes about 100 million in Africa, including 30 million and 8 million in sub-Saharan and West Africa, respectively. A majority of weapon possessions are by civilians at about 59 percent, government armed forces 38 percent, police 2.8 percent, and armed groups 0.2 percent of the total 100 percent, which depicts high access by civilians that contributes to insecurity.

Some researchers have also discussed the conditions that continue the proliferation of SALW. According to Klimkowski (2021), this can be explained by the presence of both political instability and corruption, as well as corruption, and strategic geography. The author says that national and international concerted efforts should lead to meaningful solutions. According to Oluwarotimi (as cited in [Christian 2020](#)), good governance is needed to address insecurity. According to her, one of the effective ways of weakening the drivers of armed violence is to improve the standards of governance, particularly accountability and transparency. Adeyemi (2021) continues to argue this case, detailing that in order to have a significant impact, good governance has to be participatory, consensus-based, and must enforce the rule of law.

Within Northwestern Nigeria, the widespread SALW has increased the phenomenon of armed banditry and kidnapping. Availability of SALW to organized criminal gangs has enabled them to raid communities with violence, loot, and kidnap civilians to get a ransom ([Idris 2021](#)). These attacks have caused widespread displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and a rising fear that affects social and economic life. This

has been fueled by the illicit arms that have made these groups feel more confident in overwhelming the local security services, enhancing their arrogance and the feeling of lawlessness.

The human security consequences are serious. Odia (2023) observes that banditry not only brings economic distress due to murders and kidnappings but also educational decline and lack of access to medical services as well. In most situations, children have lost the right to education because of school closures when faced with security threats. Such knock-on effects are a source of inter-generational poverty and worsen regional inequality.

Idris (2021) and Iroegbu (2022) also contain empirical evidence that the availability of SALWs allows non-state armed groups, such as Boko Haram, militants, and bandits, to conduct a prolonged violence campaign against the civilian population. The effect is displacement, law and order failure, and the disruption of important services. Ibrahim and Bala (2018) and Phillip (2018) further contribute that the spread of these weapons undermines the rule of law since, through them, gender-based violence, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary arrests become possible.

Besides, local populations have had their economic welfare threatened. Proliferation of SALW has destabilized food security and economic development because the agricultural and commercial activities, among other means of livelihood, have been destabilized. As it has been clarified in the research of the International Crisis Group (2021), the flare-up of communal conflicts over land and water availability has also been caused by the easy admission of these weapons, strengthening the spiral of revenge violence and undermining dispute resolution mechanisms.

Simone Wisotzki (2021) discusses the attempts of the world community to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and states that in the majority of cases, these attempts have not given the desired outcome. Her discussion reveals that the UN Programme of Action is failing as states are in conflict over sensitive areas like civilian ownership and transfers to non-state actors. These differences left critical gaps in the framework, particularly in such areas as ammunition control. The system depends largely on self-reporting, which makes numerous states escape total compliance. This has caused uneven implementation across the nations and undermined the fundamental goals of the UNPoA.

Another aspect which Wisotzki pays attention to is the mixed origins of the crisis. Outside influences are those involving trafficking across porous boundaries, corruption, and poor tracking of the cross-border transfer. The internal pressures are poor governance, poor management of the stockpile, and less accountability among the security institutions. There is also the availability of new technologies, such as modular weapons and 3D printing, which complicate regulation. In the case of Wisotzki, technical failures are not the only way out of the problem. What

is more troublesome is a lapse of political will, as the effective control should be associated with the more extensive reforms in the security institutions, development planning, and post-conflict reconstruction. Devoid of this broader commitment, she asserts that the international standards of SALW control will still experience severe challenges.

Amali and Buthelezi (2025) further discuss the issue of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and the ways they jeopardize the national security of Nigeria. They note that the common concern with porous borders is not the sole reason why the problem is so. Their output demonstrates that the demand for weapons increases in the environment, characterized by poverty, inequality, and political exclusion, whereas poor border control only allows smugglers to transfer the weapons to the country more easily. Their analysis is based on the information presented in the National Security Strategy of Nigeria, the National Commission on SALWs, UNODC, the Small Arms Survey, and reports of prominent media and human rights organizations. Combined, these sources enable them to have a clear image of the ways structural issues on the home side and lack of control at entry points are interconnected.

They discover that the increasing level of insecurity and bad economic states have promoted the development of criminal gangs and other militant groups who depend on such weapons. This encompasses organizations in banditry and insurgency. Meanwhile, poorly controlled borders contribute to the perpetuation of the illicit supply of arms. It is on these findings that the authors believe the government should act on two fronts. One of them is to decrease the need for weapons through the solution of inequality and political marginalization. The other one is to intensify the supply-side controls by enhancing the control of the borders, investing in surveillance technology, and implementing more effective control measures. They arrive at a conclusion that the two fronts should be dealt with simultaneously in case Nigeria wishes to curb the proliferation of these weapons and enhance national security.

Machakanja and Manuel (2021) equally address the role of regional politics in Southern Africa that influence the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. They indicate in their chapter that the borders are weak, the historical grievances are not resolved, and the unequal state capacity has been used to leave a large gap of illicit arms markets. They indicate that the post-conflict countries usually experience high volumes of stockpiles that are not well-maintained. These arms find their way into the neighboring states with the weak governance or the armed groups in the remote states. Another observation made by the authors is that, due to the protracted existence of smuggling networks coupled with the limited collaboration of the security agencies, governments find it hard to prevent the flow of illegal weapons across borders.

They also suggest that economic poverty, political instability, and lack of confidence in the state institutions among people make the need to possess weapons among civilians and armed groups greater. Within such a setting, the initiative of regional organizations like SADC has been marked by both successes and failures since the implementation depends on the national governments with highly varied capacities and political priorities. The authors state that technical controls will not fix the issue. Instead, it is essential to have effective regional cooperation reinforced by more powerful national institutions, improved management of stockpiles, and the commitment of the member states in reality. Their comparison is useful in explaining why Southern Africa still faces the challenge of SALW proliferation, even though several regional agreements are in place.

Tar and Onwurah (2021) present an extensive source of literature that discusses the causes and effects of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Africa. The handbook demonstrates the influence of weak institutions, unresolved conflicts, porous boundaries, and political competition, which have made the illicit flow of weapons very easy in the environment. The editors draw attention to the connections among SALW flows and issues on a larger scale, including state frailty, criminal groups, and insecurity at a community level. As demonstrated by their contributors, these weapons are not only the consequences of conflict but also their fuel and the reason why the violence continues, making it hard to fix and overwhelming the state's capacity.

The volume also emphasizes the fact that the reaction to the SALW issue is still imbalanced. Although most African states have signed international and regional treaties, these are usually slow or uneven in implementation due to the lack of resources, political goodwill, or lack of effective supervision by governments. Tar and Onwurah believe that effective progress would demand stronger national institutions, an effective accountability system, and more systematic regional collaboration. They also observe that community involvement, better border control, and clear stockpile control are necessary in case states wish to minimize the supply of illegal weapons. The handbook lays a general ground for realizing the impact of SALW proliferation on insecurity on the continent and why the control policies are yet to be effective.

This literature body points out that the growth of SALW in Nigeria is not only a security ordeal but an inter-dimensional challenge to the national progress. A comprehensive solution, which has to act on governance change, regional collaboration, institutional enhancement, and community robustness, is necessary to handle it.

Methodology

The manuscript research uses a qualitative approach of research purposely because it allows free expression, elimination of preconceived notions, an expansive tour of the

sphere of research undertaken, and arousal of interests or excitation in the minds of individuals on their own particular opinions. In this study, the purposive sampling technique as a method of recruiting subjects is thus employed to conduct viable research and a valid data collection. The number of respondents employed for this research is in line with the argument of Glaser and Strauss (1967), which argues that the number of individuals recruited would depend on the point at which saturation is attained. The distribution of the respondents that will be picked to be interviewed through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) is in five states in Northwestern Nigeria. The states that were covered comprised Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, and Jigawa, and each state included one local government area and one village or town sampled. The 5 key informants from each of the locations selected were interviewed, giving a total of 25 key informants. It is also an intentional engagement in trying out a balanced representation in the key conflict areas of the region in question. Dandi, Sabon Birni, Zurmi, Jibya, and Maigatari are the local governments selected in the KII because they are located in peripherally based or borderland areas, and these areas are usually typified by permeable borders as well as state absence. These regions have always been reported and addressed in literatures as potential hotspots in the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), due to their proximity to the border, their transnational smuggling syndicates, and lack of law enforcement penetration. Moreover, the choice of a single site per state represents a methodological complication to assure geographic dispensing, but maintain the sample and thus be qualitatively similar to the area units. The consistency in the number of interviews that is set at five at each of the sites strengthens the cross-site comparisons and makes it easier to identify trends within the region on the process of arms proliferation and insecurity.

The criteria used to select respondents for the purpose of this study are based on their relevance to the study, their ability to provide unbiased information for the study, and to also fit to give accurate information to the study. Below is a table showing the category of respondents interviewed.

TABLE no. 1. Table Showing Respondents Category

S/N	Target Population
1	Traditional/Community Leaders
2	Repentant Bandits
3	Community Security Agents (Members of Vigilante Groups)
4	Nigerian Customs Officers
5	Nigerian Immigration Officers & Nigerian Army
6	Nigerian Police Officers & Civil Defence Officers

Source: Author's Compilation, 2025

This research collected its data through Field observation, Key Informant Interviews, alongside government reports and documentation. Other secondary data used were extracted from journals, textbooks, newspapers, and the work of other scholars in the area under study.

The research included a thematic analysis of the collected data using NVivo 15. The programme was utilized to perform data coding and pattern building based on in-depth interviews. The process of transcription and coding was based on the recorded interviews. The interviews with participants were conducted in English and Hausa. Transcribing audio from an audio recording, like an interview, into text is known as transcribing, as transcriptions were equally performed before the final step of analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Jürgen and Muggah's Theory of Small Arms Demand

That is why it is necessary to elaborate on the arguments of the proposed theory, stating the locations and the reasons of obtaining small arms and light weapons (SALW), in other words, their demand (Jurgen and Muggah 2006). This theory does not focus on misuse or abuse, but it mainly looks at the structural conditions that guide procurement with emphasis on the effects of demographic, social, political, and economic factors in the small arms acquisition. The model described by Jurgen and Muggah offers the demand as a consequence of two factors: incentives (why persons or groups want to get weapons) and means (the access to those weapons), which combine the result of two lenses to study small arms markets.

Findings of the case studies on various conflict-prone and high-crime settings such as Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, South Africa, and Brazil support the theory in question. These contexts were taken to shed light on the role of ideas of insecurity, weak governance, poverty, and social marginalization that lead to civilian demand for SALW. In this way, Jurgen and Muggah (2006) provide a basis for forming evidence-based strategies that would reduce the demand for arms using local, having in mind context-sensitive interventions primarily based on field data.

Applying the theory to the situation in Nigeria, we obtain a good framework with the help of which it is possible to analyse the escalation of armed violence in the region of Nigeria and the Northwest. Indeed, the theory provides an overarching conceptual framework of the assessment of the underlying origins of SALW acquisition, which is primarily rooted in possession or misuse of the SALW, but deeper and broader, in structural and systemic facilitation (Roosevelt and Subair 2021). They affirm that the theory emphasises the motivations of arms acquisition by different social and political forces such as marginalisation, lack of trust in state institutions, and perceived or actual threats.

In a micro-level analysis of civilian insecurity in Delhi, Sonal Marwah (2010) further proves the usefulness of the theory in the local level context. Calling on the principle of disaggregation of demand, Marwah explains why the personal experience of insecurity of human beings, when joined with available means, results in weapons purchase. This area-based intervention stands in close relation to local dynamics in Northwestern Nigeria, where local populations are commonly equipped with arms as institutions have limited capabilities to protect them, and both bandit and other gunmen activities are increasing.

This framework by Jurgen and Muggah is also used in the research work of Agu Agidi and Ugada M. (2024) conducted on the application of SALW in the general elections of 2019 conducted in Benue State, Nigeria. They point out that the theory emphasizes the interaction between insecurity and arms demand in politically sensitive times. To some extent, elections are potential conflict zones in conflict regions, like the Northwest, where insecurity and political competition may exponentially increase the SALW demands in youth militia groups and socially sponsored groups.

Keith Krause (2007) confirms that the other research by Muggah draws on the demand of SALW to be associated with poverty and inequality. These are socio-economic situations, which make small arms be viewed as weapons of self-defense, livelihood security, or even weapons of power. It can be observed in Northwestern Nigeria, where poverty and inequality are combined with historical grievances and ethnic tensions, and therefore promote the spread of SALW.

Sasha Jespersen (2016) continues this argument to the question of governance and its ability to regulate markets in arms. Summoning his theoretical perspective by Jurgen and Muggah, Jespersen refers to the significance of the institutional trust and state capacity in damping down the arms demands. Post-conflict situations or weak states, like in the Northwest of Nigeria, where the security agencies are largely untrusted, historical conflicts are still outstanding, and violence is tolerated, create a further drive in the use of SALW to protect and to execute acts of retaliation.

In combination, these academic uses of the theory stress how the theory is applied with regard to the complex and multifaceted nature of SALW proliferation. The Theory of Small Arms Demand, which is excellently developed by Jurgen and Muggah in Northwestern Nigeria, where violence is perpetuated by complex social, economic, and political realities, has a solid background to question the motivation and the mechanism of the armed violence. It stresses that in the absence of the reduction of such drivers as poverty, political marginalization, and the lack of state presence, attempts to decrease the traffic of arms can be futile.

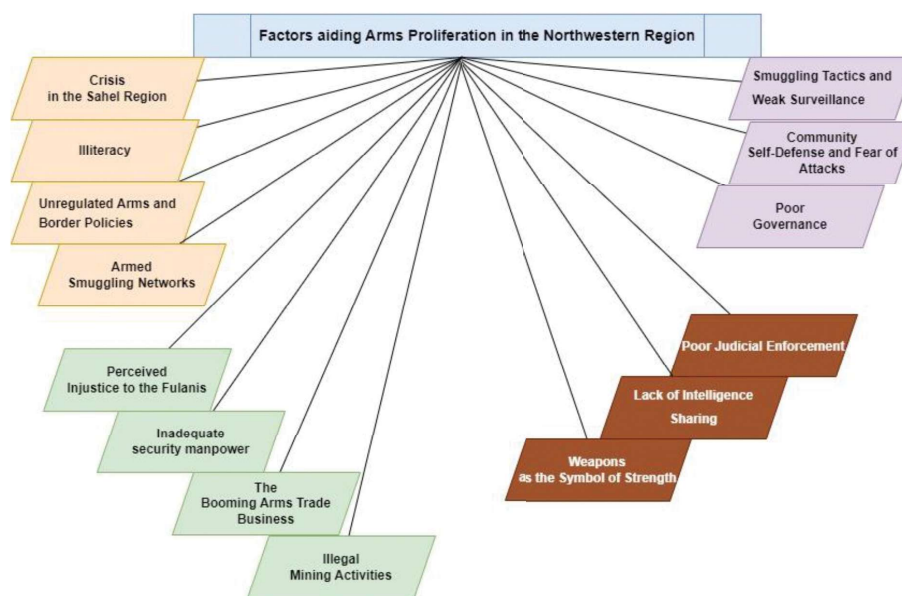


Figure 1 Factors Aiding Arms Proliferation in the Northwestern Region

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork; Draw.io. 2025

The figure above displays the pictorial view containing the Reasons for the proliferation of small and light weapons in Northwest Nigeria, which is the main objective.

Data Analysis

This section contains the analysis of data gotten from the field using the NVivo 15 software. The analysis dwells on the manuscript's main objective, which is to ascertain the main factors that aid arms proliferation in the northwestern region.

1. Crisis in the Sahel Region

The crisis in the region is a contributing problem leading to the spread of ammunition in the region. The interview revealed that there is a crisis in the Sahel region of Africa caused by the fallout of unrest in the Sahel region, such as Libya, Chad, and Niger (Inf25 & Inf4). Another informant added that weapons from the past crises resurface in society. Availability of arms increases communal clashes (Inf4).

2. Illiteracy

The number of uneducated youths in the region is growing day by day, as the informant interview revealed that there are several reasons behind the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in north-western Nigeria. Part of it is illiteracy, poverty, and unemployment of the youth (Inf22). Another informant added that the reason why there is arms proliferation is illiteracy and insecurity itself, after illiteracy, unemployment, and insecurity itself (Inf22& Inf25). In another development, an informant put it that the core reasons behind the increasing level of the spread of small arms and light weapons in this part of the northern side of Nigeria can be traced to low levels of education and

poverty (Inf25 & Inf22). Similarly, an informant put it that:

It's hard to encounter educated people engaging in arms deals or illegal arms possession, and on the other hand, it's also hard to encounter people with jobs or who are gainfully employed to have arms and ammunition (Inf26).

3. Unregulated Arms

Another sub-theme developed is unregulated arms control, the interview conducted suggesting that Arms regulation is weak and access to ammunition gives room for bargaining (Inf20). Another informant put it that "Lack of effective control measures and enforcement mechanisms has contributed to widespread availability of small arms and light weapons in the region" (Inf10& Inf11). Also, the interview added that:

The Nigerian government's efforts have had limited success, with ongoing challenges like corruption, weak enforcement, and porous borders hindering effective control and security. Government regulatory loopholes come from a lack of policy implementation. Unregistered arms dealers operate due to weak economic regulations (Inf11)

Another informant added that Arm monitoring agencies are underfunded (Inf46). In another development, another informant stated that there is a network of unregulated arms transactions (Inf13 & Inf21), and there are a lot of unregulated transactions due to informal markets (Inf20).

4. Armed Network

There is arm network going on in the Sahel region due to the collapse of Libya; many armories were opened, and weapons got to the criminal gangs. The interviews further show that international arms movement has been coordinated by a criminal network, and local armament has been increased by external armed groups (Inf20). Also, sophisticated weapons are more in circulation due to a stronger external supply network (Inf12).

5. Injustice matted to the Fulanis

Part of the reasons for the proliferation of arms in the region is because injustice is a reason for the increase, especially related to the Fulanis (Inf18)

6. Inadequate Manpower

There is inadequate manpower that the security agencies are facing, as the interviews revealed inadequate and insufficient manpower (Inf14). Another informant added the lack of sufficient equipment to security agencies and the lack of personnel (Inf20).

The negligence on the part of security personnel is causing a whole lot of havoc in the northwestern region. Some of

the smugglers can carry in small arms and light weapons by virtue of the fact that they are able to bribe their way in through the corrupt security personnel and or lazy officers who are unable to do their search diligently (Inf21).

Another informant observed that there are limited numbers of security personnel (Inf15). Finally, an informant put it that they do not have enough manpower and the level of corruption is high (Inf 17& Inf25).

7. Booming Business

The actors involved are getting a lot of money, as the interview shows the profit in arms trade is keeping the business to thrive (Inf2), also another informant added that the economic benefit gotten from banditry encourages this (Inf47). In addition, black-market transaction is on the increase in the general market (Inf 3). Similarly, an informant said that

The extravagant lifestyle and huge amounts of money being made from arms smuggle is another major factor that is contributing significantly to the menace of small arms and light weapons proliferation (Inf6 & Inf7).

Another informant put it that:

Trading in this part of the region contributes significantly to the spread of arms and equally to the high level of immorality in the society. The “Illicit arms production brings financial benefit. There is complicity in the arms trade (Inf7).

The issue of arms trading is also a factor that has brought about arms proliferation. The interview further revealed that:

Small arms and light weapons are also aided by trading activities where a trader wants to cross or encroach into other nations’ borders at all costs to trade their commodities (Inf24).

8. Illegal Mining

The activities of miners also create problems, as the evidence from the interviews shows:

Illegal mining activities necessitate the acquisition of arms (Inf19, Inf22, Inf25). Illegal mining activities impact the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The presence of mineral resources like gold has resulted in illegal mining (Inf15). Also, there is the reliance of armed escorts on illegal mining sites (Inf16)

9. Tricks Used in Arms Smuggling

There are many tricks used in smuggling arms and ammunition, like donkeys, camels, etc. The interviews conducted show that:

Part of the tricks used by smugglers to bring in illicit arms

and ammunition is by hiding those arms in grains to escape being caught at the border, which, of course, brings about more arms in circulation (Inf 1).

Another informant stated that nomadic farmers and traders' aid arms trade (Inf15). Similarly, foreign used arms are being smuggled into the country (Inf13). Therefore, drone-assisted smuggling is on the rise, armed traffickers use the lapses in the law, which led to piracy and sea robbery, cattle rustling, etc.

10. Fear of Attack

Fear of attack contributed to the rising cases of proliferation of ammunition in North-west, as an informant said:

The fear of being attacked by bandits has brought about the acquisition of small arms and light weapons in the region. There is also the issue of modernization, where our youths want to copy the Western world (Inf18& Inf19).

Another interviewee put it that some people in the North-western region see arm-acquisition as a way to protect themselves and families from every form of attack, either from within or outside (Inf4).

11. Poor Governance

Poor governance has also contributed to rising insecurity in North-west Nigeria, as the interviews show:

Loss of confidence in the government to protect its citizens amidst the emergence of security challenges in the region. The nature of Nigerian politics makes it such that those in the most remote regions hardly feel the impact of government, except, of course, during elections (Inf7)

This has created a lucrative market for illicit arms dealers. Similarly, an informant said that another significant factor is poor governance and neglect by the government, which has led to the proliferation of militias and armed groups in the region (Inf6). In addition, there is a lack of transparency in policy implementation (Inf17 & Inf2). In addition, corrupt customs officers accept bribes and allow illicit goods through the borders (Inf46 & Inf20). The hypocrisy of the government security personnel.

There is absolutely no way the presence of fortified state-backed military and paramilitary outfits in these communities would not scare away the non-state intruders. A state-backed military is equipped with better military hardware to defeat the opponent (Inf25 & Inf 20)

In another development, an informant put it that, in his own opinion, if bribery and corruption are being tackled among security operatives, there will be less proliferation of small arms and light weapons in use (Inf1 & Inf2). Some top

government officials are benefiting from the crime/crisis. However, an informant further put it that:

Corrupt officers who are in charge of safeguarding the border have made it almost impossible for proliferation to stop and are increasingly aiding the smuggling of small arms and light weapons in the region (Inf4 & Inf10).

Therefore, the communities that perceive government neglect seek self-protection using small arms and light weapons. Poor governance makes the proliferation of small arms easier due to ineffective policies. The “factors like greediness and corruption are the cause” (Inf 11).

Government neglect is a cause of self-reliance; there are some so-called government officials who sometimes benefit from arms deals (Inf12). In another development in Katsina, weak government presence has led to escalating farmer-herder clashes, with communities resorting to self-defence militias (Inf19). There has been a strategy of strategizing security patterns and the introduction of different policies, as another informant put it, when corruption is the order of the day, money meant for acquiring weapons would be embezzled (Inf24). Poor governance gives room for lapses in the security architecture. Poor governance contributes significantly to issues surrounding border porosity, which brings about arms smuggling and arms trade in the North-western region. Poor governance is synonymous with poor administration of policies (Inf25 & Inf1). There is a poor policies. Arms proliferation is always prosperous due to poor governance (Inf12 & Inf15). Similarly, due to low wages, security personnel accept bribes as well as diversion of security funds for other personal purposes (Inf19). Another informant said that:

Reasons that can be attributed to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons are the ill collaboration between the corrupt security personnel and the arms smugglers at the borders (Inf 23).

12. Lack of judicial penalties

The informant further revealed that the slow and weak legal consequences encourage the illicit arms trade (Inf13). In another development, an informant said judicial leniency discourages security forces (Inf15). Another informant said the nature of weak judicial consequences leads to continuous activities of political thuggery and limited enforcement of arms control policies (Inf12). Also, there is a lack of judicial penalties for erring armed smugglers (Inf1). There is a lack of strict punishment for offenders and a weak judicial system (Inf17). In addition, there is the idea of jungle justice because of a failed judicial system (Inf20). Finally, there is weak enforcement of law by government officials” (Inf 15).

13. Weak government commitments

There is also weak support from the government, as the interviews revealed corruption, lack of political will, politicization of the process, etc. (Inf18& Inf11).

On the contrary, another informant put it that:

The government is doing its best in the eradication of small and light weapons. That's why we have a center that records all the recovered arms in circulation. It has degraded the overall security situation. Trading of ordinary AK-47 for foodstuffs happens at intervals (Inf14)

Economic interests, lack of political will, security concerns, and institutional challenges. The analysis also shows that the Nigerian government is not doing enough as a system to curb the issue of small arms and light weapons proliferation in the northwestern Nigeria” (Inf22). Also, the lack of commitment on the part of the government is a big obstacle that serves as a barrier for development and also aids the proliferation of SAWL (Inf24). In addition, an informant said that addressing the proliferation of small arms requires a multi-pronged approach, which the government has failed to prioritize due to competing national interests” (Inf17). The government shows no sincerity of purpose (Inf12). There is a delay in action taking” (Inf13). Also, there is a lack of sincerity (Inf15). Also, that will be an unfair assessment, but their efforts are not yielding results” (Inf1). An informant also reported that it was weak and required more action and sustainable policies” (Inf2). In addition, it has acquired a political economy dimension with strong vested interest in the government circle (Inf3). Another informant said governments may not prioritize the eradication of small arms and light weapons due to competing interests, lack of resources, or limited political will (Inf7). The intervention to curb the menace is, on average, but lacks consistency and consolidation. The government should do more (Inf11). In another development, an informant said that he perceived a lack of appropriate attitudes of our government towards security issues (Inf12). Another informant said that:

The use of arms by local security forces, especially when there is little or no state support, also leads to an increased demand for weapons. Poor monitoring of borders also encourages cross-border smuggling. Also, some politicians arm militias, which leads to long-term circulation of weapons, due to corruption within government officials and enforcement agencies, stolen or seized (Inf8).

14. Inadequate intelligence sharing

The interviews further revealed that intelligence sharing among security agencies is weak, leading to armed proliferation, the act of poor intelligence by security operatives (Inf10); another informant added that “Intelligence gathering is inadequate (Inf17, Inf7), also “Poor intelligence gathering promotes small arms proliferation (Inf12). Another informant put it that there is an obstruction of intelligence sharing between rival agencies (Inf10). Finally, there is weak intelligence sharing among security personnel (Inf14). Another informant added that communities establish informal communication networks to share intelligence on potential attacks, allowing for rapid response or evacuation (Inf22).

15. Acquisition of arms as a symbol of power

People glorified violence in the region to the extent that acquisition of arms as a symbol of power, as another informant put it, is seen to be a symbol of masculinity; they acquire those guns for personal reasons (Inf18). Another informant added that militarization of local policing fuels rearmament (Inf19). Also, an informant said that some individuals hide under the pretense of defending themselves during an inter-communal crisis to acquire small arms and light weapons (Inf20).

Discussion of Findings

This section is thematized into two parts, which is in line with the theoretical assumptions of Jurgen and Morgan. This division into motivation/incentives and means/capabilities is also given due to the fact that it clearly separates the factors that drive individuals and groups to desire weapons and structures or opportunities to get and distribute said weapons. Incentives indicate the social, political, and economic pressures that groups have undergone and which require them to demand arms, which include grievance, insecurity, poverty, and profit. Means are the pragmatic avenues through which the movement and availability of weaponry become feasible; some of them consist of porous borders, trafficking networks, poor presence of security, and regional instability. It is possible to better see how the motivations and enabling conditions interact to maintain the presence of small arms and light weapons in North-western Nigeria, which is fundamental to formulating the targeted policy response that responds to the causes and the enablers of the crisis.

Motivations/Incentives

1. Illiteracy

The prevalence of illiteracy in the North-western region has complicated the situation of security since it has generated a group of youth that is susceptible and can easily be fooled. Rufa'i (2023) suggests that the absence of proper educational opportunities has created a situation in which the youth can become recruits of arms dealing, violent gangs, and brutal groups. The problem with illiteracy is a lack of knowledge of legal behavior and citizenship, and thus, recruiting young people is far simpler for armed groups into criminal groups. In addition, the educational situation in most rural communities is a cause of this predicament due to the absence of actual schools, teachers, and learning materials. The lack of educational facilities and livelihood stigmatizes what goes in as a loop of violence, where guns are not only viewed as survival instruments, but also as sources of influence and power.

2. Perceived Injustice to the Fulanis

This perceived injustice, especially among Fulani communities, has led some of them to pick up arms to defend themselves and also fight back. According to Rosenje (2020), the resentment that has made violent outlets of grievance towards the system in question has grown in the context of systemic marginalization and political

exclusion. A lot of Fulani herders perceive the government policies and community enmity to be targeted, and this adds to the motivation that drives them to be well armed. Not only has it been a cause of these tensions, but the spread of weapons has been both a cause and result of allowing violent reprisals and communal conflicts. This situation makes peace building difficult and intensifies distrust between ethnic groups and the nation, and leaves the whole place in a fragile state full of unending experienced violence.

3. The Booming Arms Trade Business

The trade in weapons has turned out to be a lucrative business backed by the requests of the bandit gangs and rebels. According to Rufa'i (2023), the number of weapons held by groups in Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna is estimated at 30,000, whereas a lot of them are employed in mass kidnappings and extortion. There is a high economic incentive to get involved in the trafficking of arms, as an AK-47 gun is reportedly being sold as high as 1,000,000 Naira. OCHA (2023) outlines the changes the problem of banditry in the region has reached since it has become a quasi-formalized insurgency, which is being maintained through the availability of mechanisms of firearms. This trade is becoming all the more appealing to criminal entrepreneurs due to its high level of returns on investment and laxity in the arms control legislation.

4. Illegal Mining Activities

In Zamfara, Katsina, and Kebbi, illegal mineral (mainly gold) mining has given rise to an alternative economy that facilitates the financing of armed groups. Rufa'i (2023) notes that the income generated by illegal mines is commonly used to acquire weapons, and mining fields turn out to be the targets of intense violence. Such mining processes are very unregulated and are a source of income and a rallying point for the criminal syndicates. According to Akinyetun (2021), exploitation in the use of natural resources contributes to persistence in violence, where major interventions have to be taken by states to break such economies of violence. The combination of the extraction of resources and arms trade deepens the war economy that is prosperous in the condition of insecurity.

5. Community Self-Defense and Fear of Attacks

In most societies, a lack of security by the state has induced the creation of self-defense groups. Alao (2022) charts the effect of the extensive displacement and threats of bandit attacks, forcing the masses to buy guns to protect themselves. Although these self-defense programs are organized to protect the community, the program, in most cases, matures into militarized community organizations, subscribing to retaliation or other violent encounters. Even with this response being easy to understand, it makes the controlled circulation of arms impossible because this allows simplifying disarmament efforts. It also creates ambiguity between civilians and combatants, which complicates the work of conflict resolution.

6. Poor Governance

The state has become unable to exercise security because of the culture of corruption and weak institutions. Visoka (2022) states that the governance issue in Nigeria covers the inability of the state to provide law enforcement, service provision, and maintain peace due to the government's problems. Embezzlement of the funds to finance the security activities, poor political will, and unaccountability of the funds are some of the factors that lead to the failure of policy implementation. In that sense, weapons turn into the instruments of political dominance, and they are being used to threaten their rivals or interfere with the election processes, deepening instability even further. The lack of good governance allows non-state actors to come in and occupy the vacuum, which is done through violent approaches.

7. Poor Judicial Enforcement

Regulation of the arms is an outdated legal construct, and it is not enforced in a consistent manner. Malami et al. (2018) cite the Firearms Act of 1959 as not adequate in solving the modern-day issues. The researchers point to the absence of a special National Commission on SALW and to the likelihood that court cases on arms trafficking will be dropped or shelved, making a statement of impunity to those wishing to commit a crime. Real impact and stiff punishment are absent in the case of arms dealers and smugglers, and therefore, they go about their business without fear of any punishment, and the victims of arms violence are not able to get their justice.

8. Lack of Intelligence Sharing

There is weak collaboration and intelligence sharing among agencies in security efforts. Through this argument, Agu and Uguda (2024) posit that intelligence delivery networks are fragmented, and competition amongst agencies does not allow a quick reaction to security threats. The inability to create standard communication patterns among the security agencies prevents them from being proactive, and the traffickers of arms get to escape. There is a need to intensify inter-agency cooperation and real-time exchange of intelligence information, to break the network through which the arms have been getting to their destination, and also bring back the confidence of the people in the security system.

9. Weapons as the Symbol of Strength

Increasingly, firearms are being regarded as a means of authority and status, particularly in rural and crime-prone areas. According to Eyina and Kabari (2021), the colonial age influenced the development of this perception because firearms were employed during hunting and traditional ceremonies. In today's culture, arms and weapons are used as cultural adoration. Arming and the power and honor connected to it are masculine in several societies; disarming without in-depth social change in connection to violence and power is near impossible.

Capabilities/Means

1. Crisis in the Sahel Region

The Sahel region of Africa has been in a state of instability, and countries like Libya, Chad, and Niger have fallen into the cycle of conflict situations and poor state authority. Subsequent breakdown of the state formation in Libya after the crisis involving Muammar Gaddafi left a vacuum, which would liberate a massive number of weapons into the neighboring lands ([Aluko and Ajala 2021](#)). The strategic geographical position and the large (4,000 kilometer) border of Nigeria predispose Nigeria to the difficulty of spill-over of these weapons. These under-resourced systems of border control, as well as the porous nature of these borders, have led to the unregulated movement of small arms and light weapons (SALW) to the North-western region of Nigeria. This has been the regional play that has enabled the transnational crime networks and militant groups to succeed, with passages of weapons and fighters across national lines obstructing national and regional rebuilding of peace.

2. Unregulated Arms and Border Policies

The ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Goods, and Services was established to foster regional integration, but it has inadvertently enabled arms proliferation in Nigeria. Aminu (2022) highlights that the legal provisions intended for human mobility have also been exploited for illicit purposes, especially arms smuggling across the Nigeria-Niger border. Cultural and ethnic similarities among border communities in Nigeria and neighboring countries further complicate regulatory efforts and surveillance. Agwu and Ogali (2023) emphasize that transnational criminality, combined with weak enforcement and limited border profiling, allows criminal elements to bypass security measures, undermining national efforts to curb SALW proliferation. Additionally, the inability of security agencies to effectively monitor cross-border activities contributes significantly to the persistent spread of illegal arms.

3. Armed Smuggling Networks

The emergence of well-coordinated arms trafficking cartels has become a defining feature of Nigeria's security crisis. Abdulmalum et al. (2021) describe the arms trade as one of Africa's most critical security concerns, linking it directly to the rise of terrorism and organized crime. These networks exploit ECOWAS free movement policies to transport weapons under the guise of legitimate trade. Enejo et al. (2021) explain how traffickers capitalize on gaps in the system to smuggle arms alongside human trafficking operations. These networks have established routes and safe havens, with complicit individuals among border officials, making it difficult for law enforcement to intervene effectively. Salihu and Ozden (2020) also point out that Nigeria's borders have become transit hubs for illegal goods, including arms, due to poor oversight and corruption within customs and immigration systems.

4. Inadequate security manpower

The security agencies of Nigeria are already overstressed, particularly in remote and war-prone areas. Olagoge et al. (2022) note that there is a lack of trained individuals and equipment that would be able to effectively react to security threats. There is also a poor presence of security and even an absence of security in most parts of the rural setup, where criminal elements enjoy impunity. It is this vacuum that is used by the armed groups to seek to establish dominance over local populations. This breeds insecurity, which hampers investment and development, leading to a loop in security and proliferation of arms. Distrust of the state response also limits trust among the communities, and communities embrace self-help by getting themselves armed.

5. Smuggling Tactics and Weak Surveillance

The smugglers have come up with amazing ways of outsmarting the security guards, such as hiding weapons in trucks, fuel tanks, and grain bags. Mezie-Okoye (2022) and Akpan and Umelo (2020) indicate that arms find their way to the country through the use of donkeys, camels, and other unnoticeable means. Common commercial routes and vehicles are also used in transferring arms, and they exploit the fact that border officials have a small capacity to do full inspection. The border officials are usually ill-equipped and lack the training to handle cargo effectively, and corruption also further compromises the efficacy of the border operations. This fact qualifies the Nigerian borders as a key entry point for the illegal arms that are to be used in preparing a local conflict.

Summary & Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the key contributors to the spread of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Northwestern Nigeria, which is becoming violent because of banditry, community violence, and armed banditry. Based on a guide conceived in the theory of small arms demand advanced in a study by Jurgen and Muggah, the study evaluated the factors composed of structural, political, and socio-economic factors conditions which contribute to motivation and methods through which individuals and groups engage in obtaining SALW. The paper used relevant secondary sources of information to comprehensively state some of the main drivers of the increase in demand and accessibility of SALW in the region, which are porous borders, political instability, economic marginalization, weak state capacity, and poor governance.

It was found that proliferation of SALW is not simply a subject of security concern, but it is also a problem reflecting on other systemic failures. Arms trafficking and non-state violence have become prevalent even though the latter is tolerated by the weak government institutions in rural and border communities due to the high cases of corruption and inability to enforce the law effectively. These conditions have served as an opportunity to stockpile weapons and overwhelm the local security forces by the known armed groups, i.e., bandits, insurgents, and local militias.

Moreover, the authors revealed that economic stress, large unemployment rates among the young population, and the feeling of political marginalization can play a major role in increasing the civilian demand for guns to protect their interests or serve their purposes in organized crime and violence.

The theoretical background given by the framework of Jurgen and Muggah was quite helpful when it comes to magnifying the stacked reasons behind SALW demand in Northwestern Nigeria. Their focus on the movement of motivation (insecurity, fear, economic need) and access (availability, affordability, and access to arms markets) to arms markets, reflect well the facts recorded in the area. The shift in perspective, in the form of focus on the control of supply specifically, and thinking about why people want to own a weapon in the first place, allowed for the problem to be viewed through a more complex lens to solve it accordingly.

To conclude, both the cause and effect of the existing insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria are the spread of smoky weapons in addition to light weapons because the erratic spread of weaponry is closely connected to the elements of governance or institutional collapse, socio-economic inequality, and the lack of controlled boundaries. Attempts made to prevent arm proliferation and violence will be limited in their effects unless such root causes are tackled comprehensively. The research, accordingly, highlights the importance of a multi-dimensional approach that involves enhanced security governance patterns, communal interactions, regional co-operation, and long-term socio-economic investments to break the demand-violence cycles produced by SALW availability.

Recommendations

As a sure way of ensuring that the spread of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is effectively contained in the North-western part of Nigeria, the government should first focus on capacity building along its borders and on regional collaboration. The porous borders continue to be a major route in the smuggling of arms, and the solution to this dilemma would be coordinated action with neighboring and regional organizations like ECOWAS. Improved surveillance tools, intelligence, and patrols on the borders should be introduced. In the meantime, the security institutions in Nigeria should be radically changed. This involves modernization of tools used by workers, upgrading of the level of training, and institution of accountability measures to address cases of collusion or laxity by security agency employees.

It is also crucial to consider eliminating the background factor that pushes people and communities to demand access to weapons. The exclusion by the political representatives, financial tensions, and the lack of effective leadership establish further anger and instability in the region. The government needs to institute a multi-dimensional approach that will foster inclusive government, equitable development, and a better delivery of service. Investing in creating jobs, training, and empowering the youth, as well as creating expectations about finding good jobs, particularly in

rural and underprivileged settings, will lower the mentalities that force many of them to find a means through violence or join the armed forces. In addition, justice reforms, community policing, and transparent governance can be used to restore public trust in institutions, which can minimize the perception of the existence of the need to protect oneself by obtaining illegal weapons.

Finally, any serious attempt at disarmament should be centered on community-based initiatives. The voluntary disarmament may be achieved by involving the traditional leaders, religious institutions, civil society, and grassroots organisations in peacebuilding and sensitization campaigns in order to instill a culture of nonviolence. The social and personal effects of arm proliferation should be sensitized to the population, with the emphasis being put on people to find ways of promoting peace. In conjunction with this, controls of local gun markets have to be realized consistently and impartially, that licensed arms access should be appropriately managed, and the black market should be heavily punished. The reversal of this proliferation tide and consolidation of peace and stability of North-western Nigeria needs a holistic approach, an inclusive approach based on security reform and good governance, as well as economic empowerment and people engagement.

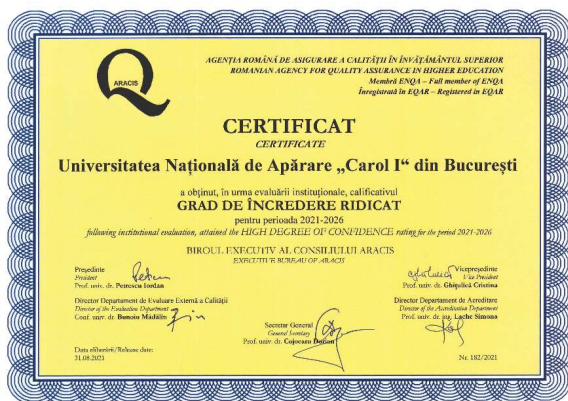
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