


Unknown gunmen and insecurity in Nigeria: Dancing on the brink of state fragility

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Abstract

There is a compelling need to address the protracted and recurring multidimensional insecurity in Nigeria. The prevalence of insecurity in the country is multipronged and caught in a cyclic web. Insecurity in Nigeria comprises insurgency, killer herdsmen, extrajudicial killings, ethnoreligious conflict, armed robbery, militancy, banditry, cybercrime and attacks by unknown gunmen, among other things. The incidence of attacks by unknown gunmen is pervasive and symptomatic of a fragile state where the government's monopoly of force is challenged and where marginalisation, crises and contested spaces are ubiquitous. The thrust of this paper is that the menace of unknown gunmen is pervasive and threatens to plunge Nigeria into a cesspit of fragility. The argument is predicated on the conceptual and theoretical suppositions of a fragile state. To this end, the paper adopts the documentary method of data collection and uses qualitative descriptive analysis to expound on the phenomenon. The findings reveal that the words unknown gunmen – terminology that is used to describe the spate of insecurity in the country – are a bane to peaceful coexistence. The paper also shows that the insecurity caused by these armed attacks and other forms of threat is emblematic of a fragile state. Consequently, policy recommendations – state-building and peace-building – are proffered.

Keywords:

conflict, fragility, insecurity, state legitimacy, unknown gunmen

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Introduction

Nigeria is presently bedevilled by an abundance of security challenges that gnaw at the very soul of the nation's existence. One such challenge is attacks by unknown gunmen whose identities are unclear, hence the epithet 'unknown gunmen'. Killings by unknown gunmen have become a daily occurrence even when the reportage is repetitively downplayed. The attacks by these misfits have claimed the lives of several people, including the political elite. The prominent Nigerians murdered by unknown gunmen include Ahmed Gulak, the former special adviser on politics to President Goodluck Jonathan, who was killed in Owerri, Imo State, on his way to the airport. Other victims include Justice Stanley Nnaji, the former judge of Enugu State High Court and Linus Owuamanam, a prominent businessman, who were killed in Enugu and Ibadan respectively. There is also the case of Okiemute Mrere; the Chief provost of the Nigerian Immigration Service in Imo, who was killed along the Owerri-Port Harcourt Road in Owerri. At the time of writing, the most recent attack has been the gruesome killing of Prof. Samuel Ndubuisi, the Director-General, Scientific Equipment Development Institute (SEDI), in Enugu on 7th July 2021 on the Enugu-Port Harcourt Expressway. This happened two days after Ifeanyi Okeke, the Chief Executive Officer of AutoEase was killed in the same area ([Nda-Isaiah, 2021](#), p. 1).

These killings demonstrate the high level of insecurity in the country and the government's loss of its internal security mechanism – an index of fragility. [The London School of Economics \(2018, p. 4\)](#) asserts that “state fragility drives some of the biggest problems in our world today: extreme poverty, mass migration, terrorism, trafficking, and more.” Nigeria is reportedly a fragile state where security, legitimacy, state capacity, private investment, economy and cohesion is constantly threatened and where a weak state structure deepens insecurity ([Tonwe and Eke, 2013](#)).

This paper expounds on the pervasiveness of the menace of unknown gunmen and how it is leading Nigeria to a state of fragility. The central argument posited in this study is that the incidence of attacks by unknown gunmen in Nigeria is indicative of a fragile state where the government's monopoly on the use of force is being contested. The paper further contends that the pervasive threat posed by unknown gunmen has the potential to exacerbate Nigeria's precarious state of fragility and insecurity. This paper lays a foundation for scholarly research on the prevalence of unknown gunmen and its consequences for national security in Nigeria. This is significant given that the erudition on the subject matter is at a nascent and inchoate stage. The paper argues that specific political and economic variables such as marginalisation, deprivation, poverty, ungoverned spaces, under-policing, the proliferation of arms, porous borders and lack of political will are responsible for this nefarious phenomenon in South East Nigeria. The paper also x-rays the implications of the incidence towards state fragility. It pays close attention to the indicators of state fragility and places the attacks by unknown gunmen within this context. The paper is thematically discussed under the following headings: methodology; unknown gunmen; prevalence of attacks by unknown gunmen in Nigeria; fragility and the Nigerian state; unknown gunmen, insecurity and fragility in Nigeria; policy implications; and a conclusion.

Methodology

The purpose of this methodological section is to describe the process followed to identify, classify, and analyse the open sources used in this study. This section describes the research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures. The research design of this study was qualitative and utilised secondary data from open source. This study relied on a content analysis approach to identify and classify data relevant to the research question of how attacks by unknown gunmen is exacerbating insecurity in Nigeria and increasing the

chances of fragility. Data collection for this study was conducted by searching and selecting relevant sources from open-access databases, including academic journals, news articles, government reports, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) reports. The sources were selected based on their credibility and relevance to the research. The data analysis process used in this study involves several steps. First, the data was coded according to specific categories related to the research objective, including the type of insecurity, the geographic location of incidents, and the identity of the perpetrators. The data was then analysed using a thematic approach to identify patterns and trends related to the research question. The data was synthesised and summarised to develop the findings of this study.

The data selection process involved a systematic and rigorous approach, as discussed in five steps. The first step was to define the research question that guided this study. The research question in this study was as follows: What is the nature of insecurity in Nigeria, specifically related to the activities of unknown gunmen, and how does this contribute to state fragility? After defining the research question, the next step was to identify relevant databases that could provide data to answer it. These databases included academic databases, such as JSTOR, Google, Google Scholar, and Web of Science, as well as international and local news databases. The third step involved conducting keyword searches of the identified databases. The keywords used were “insecurity in Nigeria,” “unknown gunmen,” “state fragility,” and related terms. The search was limited to the period 2015 to 2022. After conducting the keyword searches, the next step was to review the materials returned by the search. Each article or report was assessed for its relevance to the research question and credibility. The relevance assessment was based on the article’s abstract and introduction, whereas the credibility assessment was based on the author’s credentials and the publication’s reputation. The final step was to classify the materials into categories based on their relevance to the research questions. The categories used in this study were academic sources, news articles, and reports by NGOs and government agencies.

This study’s systematic approach to analysing open-source data is potentially limited by several factors. The reliance on secondary data from open sources may not provide a complete or representative picture of this phenomenon. The data selection process may have introduced bias, potentially limiting the accuracy of the findings. The credibility and validity of the data may also be affected, as classification may be influenced by bias or assumptions. Finally, the lack of primary data may have limited the scope and accuracy of the findings. Despite this rigorous approach, these limitations must be considered when interpreting the findings of this study.

Unknown gunmen

It is imperative to disentangle the term ‘unknown gunmen’ which has recently become a popular catchphrase in Nigeria’s insecurity imbroglio. The term has been used to refer to criminal elements from a particular part of the country (Nda-Isaiah, 2021, p. 1) thus giving the incidence of insecurity in Nigeria a religious and ethnic colouration. ‘Attacks by unknown gunmen’ is a phrase often used to describe sectional violence taking place in the south-east of the country. This submission was corroborated by the Governor of Ebonyi State, Dave Umahi, who at a briefing in June 2021, said:

Let our people come out to speak out that the unknown gunmen are not really unknown gunmen, they are our young men and women who will defend our land tomorrow. They should stop being killed; they should stop giving themselves to be killed.

He further claims that three factors are responsible for the menace: people being brain-washed and unaware of what they are agitating for; people who go to a talisman to be

fortified against bullets yet end up being killed; and the use of hard drugs ([Channels TV, 2021](#)).

Taking a different stance, [Security Peace and Development \(SPD\) \(2021, p. 1\)](#) avers that the unknown gunmen phenomenon appears to be connected to the banditry malady confronting the north-west. The attacks by unknown gunmen have increased since the government placed a ban on open grazing. Meanwhile, it is not clear whether the unknown gunmen are individuals masquerading as bandits or a repeated case of farmer-herder conflict or vengeance. It is however clear that the incidence requires prompt attention because the spate of killings in the country shows that violent death is fast becoming a norm.

The position above is noteworthy given the incidence of such attacks in other states such as Taraba and Plateau. According to [Nanlong \(2021, p. 1\)](#), the Governor of Plateau state, Simon Lalong, expressed concern over the state of insecurity caused by unknown gunmen in the state. He was quoted as saying:

However, we have also realised that while we consolidate on the peace, the crises merchants are not sleeping as their source of business has been obstructed due to the actions we have put in place to restore stability. Therefore, they are restless and trying various methods to breach the peace. As I commend the security agencies for doing their best to tackle the cases of such attacks and other criminal activities, I have also expressed deep concern over the inability to prevent such killings or arrest the perpetrators in some cases. I have since told the police and other security agencies that I do not want to hear unknown gunmen again in Plateau State! (p.1)

It is hereby evident that the incidence is not restricted to any part of the country, but it is a national malaise. This paper, therefore, describes these unknown gunmen as criminal elements without clear objectives but with the penchant to cause mayhem and threaten national security. This description is echoed by the governor of Anambra State, Prof. Charles Soludo, who states that:

the so-called 'unknown gunmen' were not unknown as they claimed to be but were yet to be exposed because they were being pampered by landlords and other stakeholders... Criminals kidnapping people for ransom, killings and destruction are not agitating but engaging in lucrative criminality. We know where these criminals are... It is not agitation, but a criminal activity. ([Sahara Reporters, 2022, p. 1](#)).

Their modus operandi involves sporadic shooting, abduction, maiming, arson, jailbreak and extrajudicial killing. Their targets include private citizens, business owners, politicians, government institutions and business organisations. Their activities are carried out in rural and urban areas; in daytime or at night. The aftereffect of such attacks is the destruction of life and property, piles of dead bodies, displacement, torched villages, maimed victims, lots of casualties, an increase in internal displacement, forced migration and food shortages. Attacks by unknown gunmen have led to a humanitarian crisis with an increase in the number of internally displaced persons, student abductions and wanton killings ([SPD, 2021, p. 1](#)). These attacks also have economic implications as the means of livelihood of several Nigerians have been destroyed, while foreign investors have been scared away from such volatile areas.

Prevalence of attacks by unknown gunmen in Nigeria

To be sure, the attacks and their resultant victims are widespread in Nigeria and continue unabated. This is represented in table 1, where various attacks in 2021 are reported.

Table 1. Some attacks by unknown gunmen in 2021.

Date	Event	Fatality	Source
January 8	Onueke Police Station in Ezza South Local Government Area was attacked	Three police officers were killed	Vanguard Newspaper
February 23	Unknown gunmen attacked a police station in Aba, Abia State	Two police officers were killed	Premium Times
February 24	A patrol vehicle was torched in Ekwulobia in Anambra State	One police officer was killed	Premium Times
February 24	A police roadblock was attacked in Idundu, Cross River	Six police officers were killed	Vanguard Newspaper
February 24	Gunmen attacked Abayi police station in Osisioma Ngwa, Abia State	A police officer was killed while arms and ammunition were looted and the station was set ablaze	Vanguard Newspaper
February 25	Gunmen attacked MCC in Calabar, Cross River	Four police officers were killed	Vanguard Newspaper
February 25	The Divisional Police headquarters Aboh Mbaise, Imo State was attacked.	A police officer was wounded	Vanguard Newspaper
February 26	Gunmen torched a police station in Imo State	Unknown	Premium Times
March 1	Some gunmen attacked a police station in Essien Udim Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State	Unknown	Premium Times
March 3	Policemen were attacked at Obubra, Cross River	Six police officers were killed	Vanguard Newspaper
March 9	Gunmen attacked a police station in Imo State	Several vehicles were set on fire.	Premium Times
March 20	Unknown gunmen attacked the Divisional Police headquarters at Isiala Mbano, Imo State	Unknown	Premium Times
March 24	Professor Charles Soludo was attacked at a town hall meeting in Isuofia, Aguata, Anambra State	Three police officers were killed while Anambra State Commissioner for Public Utilities, Engr. Emeka Ezenwanne was abducted.	Premium Times
March 30	Commander of the Quick Intervention Unit, CSP Ben Ajide was attacked	The CSP and two others were killed.	Vanguard Newspaper
April 5	Unknown gunmen attacked a correctional facility in Owerri, Imo State and freed 1,844 inmates	Unknown	Premium Times
April 20	Greenfield University, Kaduna State was attacked and students were abducted	Twelve people were abducted	Premium Times
May 6	Unknown gunmen set light to the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NLDEA) office in Amaekpu, Ohafia, Abia State.	Unknown	Daily Trust Newspaper
May 8	The special checkpoint at Choba bridge was attacked and policemen were killed.	Seven police officers were killed and the police patrol vehicle was set on fire.	News24
May 9	Unknown gunmen attack a police station in Trademore estate in Ubani, Abia State	Unknown	This Day Newspaper

Table 1. Continued

Date	Event	Fatality	Source
May 17	Unknown gunmen attacked the Ubakala divisional police station in Umuahia, Abia State.	Two police officers were killed	The Guardian Newspaper
June 2	Gunmen attacked the senior special assistant to Benue Governor Samuel Orton on security	AIG Christopher Dega the SSA to the Governor was killed	Forefront Newspaper
June 12	Gunmen attacked Kadawa village in Zamfara State	About 90 people were killed	Deutsche Welle
June 14	Unknown gunmen attacked a community in Arufu, Taraba State	One was killed and two Chinese nationals kidnapped	This Day Newspaper
July 5	Gunmen attack a school in Kaduna	150 students were abducted	Reuters
July 8	Maradun village, Zamfara State was attacked by gunmen	49 people were killed	Punch Newspaper
July 9	Gunmen attack Warkan village, Kaduna state and killed many	10 people were killed and 5 were abducted.	The Cable
July 18	Gunmen attacked policemen in Bungudu, Zamfara State	13 police officers were killed	Punch Newspaper
July 21	Gunmen attacked a police checkpoint in Enugu State	6 police officers were killed, a police station was torched and firearms stolen	Garda World
August 1	Six communities were attacked in Plateau state and up to 250 houses were destroyed.	Over 7 people were killed and many more wounded	Vanguard Newspaper
August 25	Gunmen attacked Yelwa village in Plateau State	35 villagers were killed and several homes torched	Vanguard Newspaper
August 28	Gunmen attacked two villages in Zangon, Kaduna State	3 people were killed and several others were injured.	Channels Television
September 13	Unknown gunmen blew up a prison in Kogi State and freed 266 inmates	Unknown	Reuters
October 10	Gunmen attacked a market and set cars on fire	20 people were killed and 9 cars were torched.	China Global Television Network
October 18	Gunmen attacked Goronyo community in Sokoto State and mayhem	30 people were killed	The Washington Post
October 23	Unknown gunmen attacked a medium prison in Oyo State and freed over 800 inmates	Two dead and several others wounded	Reuters

The information is sourced from the media – particularly online newspapers – due to the absence of an organisation or research institute saddled with the responsibility of monitoring the attacks or collating data on their prevalence. As a result, this study depended largely on newspapers; even though the data presented in such open sources is often underreported.

The government's response to the menace has been described as languid. The shoot-at-sight order issued by President Muhammadu Buhari has been greeted with mixed feelings, especially considering the level of extrajudicial killings by the security forces. Furthermore,

governors have tried the carrot-and-stick approach by granting amnesty to criminals, giving cash to bandits and paying ransom in exchange for kidnap victims, yet the killings persist and the grief map continues to spread ([Nda-Isaiah, 2021](#), p. 1).

Fragility and the Nigerian state

Fragility is a concept that has gained currency in the development debate since the 1990s. It has attracted wide scholarship given that it describes distressed states that cannot discharge their primary functions and drive development. Fragility is often used to depict the state of development in Third World States; particularly African states that have historically been characterised by corruption, poverty, weak institutions, social inequality and armed conflicts ([Osaghae, 2007](#), p. 692). [Mcloughlin \(2012, p. 9\)](#) defines state fragility as “a fundamental failure of the state to perform functions necessary to meet citizens’ basic needs and expectations.” Fragile states are usually unable to maintain the rule of law and justice, provide basic services, or guarantee the security of their citizens. A distinguishing feature of a fragile state is weak state legitimacy. Such a state is susceptible to internal and external shocks, crises and conflicts. The concept of fragility is heralded by the classification of states according to their strength or weakness: weak states – lacking control over their territories; failing states – failing to achieve economic growth; failed state – the collapse of central government authority to impose order; and collapsed states – where a state ceases to function.

According to [Collier \(2007\)](#), there are about 30–50 fragile states, the majority of which are in Africa and notable for their extreme poverty. These states are either falling behind or falling apart and are caught in one or more of four traps: the conflict trap; the natural resources trap; the trap of being landlocked with bad neighbours; and the trap of bad governance. Fragile states are often troubled by the inability to deliver an efficient and equitable distribution of public goods, insecurity and persistent violence and weak governance. Meanwhile, the rate of poverty, malnutrition and higher child mortality in such states continues to rise ([World Bank, 2007](#)). There is an unmistakably high level of violent conflict, environmental degradation, mass migration, organised crime, terrorism, humanitarian crisis, and transnational security threats in such states ([Chauvet *et al.*, 2007](#)).

Placed within the context of the descriptions above, Nigeria is an example of a fragile state. In addition to being the poverty capital of the world, Nigeria is also plagued by sociopolitical challenges, including bad governance, poor service delivery, identity-based conflicts, poverty and trapped natural resources. The country is also enmeshed in a series of security issues occasioned by the Boko Haram insurgency, armed robbery, extrajudicial killings by security forces, banditry, militancy and, recently, unknown gunmen. This is supported by [Mcloughlin \(2012, p. 16\)](#) who states that “fragility is frequently associated (if not synonymous) with violent conflict and sustained poverty.” As this paper argues, the incidence of unknown gunmen and the consequent insecurity is driving Nigeria to a state of perpetual fragility; whereas the country is presently troubled in this regard. According to the 2022 Fragile States Index (FSI), Nigeria is the 16th most fragile state out of 179 countries. With an FSI score of 97.2, Nigeria recorded a -0.80 change from the previous year, a -4.40 change in five years and a -3.90 change in 10 years. By implication, Nigeria has been experiencing worsening improvement in fragility in the past decade; hence the continued activities of unknown gunmen and other armed groups will further push the country towards an eonian state of fragility.

Fragility is multidimensional, multi-causal and mutually reinforcing given the ambiguous nature of its causes and characteristics ([Mcloughlin, 2012](#)). The major factors, causes and characteristics of fragility are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Major factors of fragility, causes and characteristics.
 Source: [Mcloughlin \(2012, p. 16\)](#)

Structural and economic factors	Poverty, low income and economic decline, violent conflict, presence of armed insurgents, natural resource wealth/lack of natural resource wealth, geography (bad neighbours), demographic stress (including urbanisation).
Political and institutional factors	Crises of state legitimacy and authority, bad governance, repression of political competition, weak (formal) institutions, hybrid political orders, institutional multiplicity, political transitions, succession and reform crises in authoritarian states, state predation, neo-patrimonial politics.
Social factors	Horizontal inequalities, severe identity fragmentation, social exclusion, gender inequality, lack of social cohesion (including lack of social capital), weak civil society.
International factors	Legacy of colonialism, international political economy, climate change, global economic shocks (including food prices).

The above factors when contextualised, incontrovertibly demonstrate that Nigeria is inundated by a majority of the factors identified. This is aptly captured by the fragile state index which tests fragility across various countries using several indicators: security, factionalised elites, group grievance, economy, economic inequality, human flight and brain drain, state legitimacy, public services, human rights, demographic pressures, refugees and IDPs and external intervention. These are shown in Table 3.

To be very sure, these indicators are weighted independently and a cursory look reveals that the most troubling indicators of fragility in Nigeria are demographic pressures and factionalised elites with over 9 points in the period examined. This is supported by [Akinyetun and Bakare \(2020, p. 4\)](#) who suggest that the mobilisation of ethnic sentiments by the political elite to achieve parochial benefits is responsible for the incessant ethnic, religious and communal clashes experienced in the country. The political elite has consciously obfuscated national cohesion through sub-national and identity consciousness – the result of which has been a challenging national integration and recurring insecurity. As [Okoli & Nwabuihe \(2019\)](#) observe, ethnic consciousness serve as genuine faultlines for mustering communal conflicts, especially when the latter is accorded strategic partisan saliency through elites’ politicization. [Campbell \(2013, p. 17\)](#) asserts that “popular alienation and a fragmented establishment have contributed to Nigeria becoming one of the most religious and, at the same time, one of the most violent countries in the world.”

Unknown gunmen, insecurity and fragility in Nigeria

The daunting security challenge in Nigeria is necessitated by a plethora of socioeconomic and sociopolitical quandaries such as marginalisation, deprivation, poverty, ungoverned spaces, under-policing, the proliferation of light arms, the porous border and the lack of political will. This coupled with youth unemployment, a high inflation rate, low industrial output, inadequate physical and social infrastructure and insurgency gives impetus to the proliferation of criminal groups, thereby increasing the risk of fragility ([Ikuomola, 2019](#)). The neglect of Nigerian human resources and the attendant economic discontent increases people’s vulnerability to recruitment for violence. This is supported by the [Nigeria-South African Chamber of Commerce \(2021\)](#) who agree that the paradox of suffering amid plenty enforces the notion of deprivation, unfairness and material inequality. This is corroborated by [Uzoagu \(2022, p. 5\)](#) who states that exclusion from governance, employment opportunities and politics increases the risk of restiveness and criminality

Table 3. Nigeria Fragile State Index Trends by Indicator 2020–2022.

Source: [Fragile State Index \(2022\)](#)

Year	Rank	Total	Security	Factionalized elites	Group grievance	Economy	Economic inequality	Human flight and brain drain	State legitimacy	Public services	Human rights	Demographic pressures	Refugees and IDPs	External intervention
2020	14th	97.3	8.7	9.9	9.1	7.8	7.8	6.6	8.1	8.8	8.3	9.3	6.9	5.7
2021	12th	98.0	8.8	9.6	8.8	8.6	7.7	6.5	8.4	9.3	8.7	9.3	6.6	5.7
2022	16th	97.2	8.9	9.3	8.9	8.3	8.0	6.6	8.5	9.1	8.4	9.5	6.3	5.4

among young people. This has not only impeded community and national development, but also threatens the security and national cohesion of the country. These issues coupled with institutional incapacity make the delivery of public services difficult and can lead to aggrieved Nigerians taking part in criminal activities. Pervasive youth unemployment, widespread poverty and marginalisation become triggers of frustration and aggression for young people to engage in violence.

The issue of marginalisation in Nigeria can be traced to the colonial era which emphasised a northern hegemony that transcended to the post-colonial era. Nigeria is a multicultural state with varied ethnic nationalities and three major groups: Igbo, Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba. These groups are characterised by ethnic rivalry and a contest for superiority which has engendered conflict on several occasions. The politics of identity became rife with the military incursion of January 15 1966, which was seen as an Igbo coup, and the counter-coup of July 29 1966. Following the massacre of Igbos in the North, Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Governor of the Eastern region, declared the Republic of Biafra on May 30 1967. This culminated in a civil war that lasted 30 months. The war left anguish and pain in the Eastern region, while its people have since decried the state of marginalisation and deprivation in the region. Meanwhile, the efforts by the government to foster unity and address the lingering deprivation and neglect – through its Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation initiative, the introduction of Federal Character, Unity schools and the National Youth Service Corps – have failed to mitigate the pervasive marginalisation. On the contrary, there has been an increase in agitations, ethnic rivalry, violence, militancy and secessionism ([Itumo *et al.*, 2018](#); [Onwubiko and Ugorji, 2022](#)).

The spate of marginalisation in the Eastern region is further expressed in the change in Nigeria’s currency in 1968 (which led to an economic loss for the Igbos during the civil war and the creation of more states), which weakened the solidarity of the Igbos; and the granting of 20 pounds to survivors of the war – irrespective of their wealth before the war. Moreover, the years of civil war led to the exclusion or low representation of Igbos in the various echelons of government and the control of the country’s resources. This systemic exclusion continues to linger in flagrant disrespect for the doctrines of federalism. The data in Table 4, which shows the distribution of appointments to various offices in 2018, reveals the manner in which the Igbo have been marginalised from the office of the Head of State/President and the number of states and local government areas to which federal government projects have been allocated. The data shows that when viewed as a

Table 4. Distribution of representation in Nigeria per office and region under President Buhari.
 Source: [Itumo et al. \(2018, p. 400\)](#)

Office/Region	North East	North Central	North West	South East	South South	South West
Head of State/President	1	3	5	1	2	3
Number of States	6	6	7	5	6	6
Number of Local Government Areas	113	112	186	95	125	137
Federal Government Developmental Projects	16.30%	18.80%	25.70%	9.80%	12.30%	17.10%
Inspector General of Police	4	1	5	1	5	4
Chief of Army Staff	4	6	7	2	4	1
Chief of Naval Staff	0	2	2	2	4	11
Chief of Air Staff	4	5	2	1	3	3
Chief of Defence Staff	2	2	4	1	4	3
National Security/Defence Council	2	2	4	0	1	6
Cadet Officers in Department of State Security	100	66	165	44	42	57
Key Government Officials	6	3	13	0	5	3

geopolitical zone, the South East lags in representation in the various key offices, and when assessed as a region, the North amasses greater representation than the East and West – indicating widespread marginalisation in the South.

It is believed that the continued marginalisation of the South East drives violence in the region. This was alluded to by Mr Peter Odo, the former permanent secretary, Enugu State, who claims that the lack of equity and fairness is responsible for increased insecurity in the region. He further states that the security imbroglio in the South East is a result of the lack of true federalism and a lack of political will ([Ikem, 2022, p. 1](#)).

This perceived marginalisation has been at the heart of the agitations in the South East, as exemplified in the resurgence of secessionism by the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) – which was proscribed by the Nigerian government on January 18, 2017 as a terrorist organisation ([Ugwu, 2022, p. 2](#)). The organisation emerged in 2012 under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu to address the complaints of disgruntled South-easterners and clamour for an independent Biafran state. Kanu was accused of inciting violence and criminal conspiracy, leading to his arrest by the Department of State Security on October 14, 2015 ([Amnesty International, 2016, p. 5](#)). His arrest, release and subsequent re-arrests have further radicalised the group leading to the issuing of a sit-at-home order to be observed every Monday starting from August 9, 2021 till Kanu is released.

Although most of their assemblies and gatherings at inception were peaceful, the government has nonetheless clamped down on them using the military. For instance, about 150 pro-Biafrans were killed by security forces in August 2015, while on Biafra Remembrance Day – May 30 2016 – over 1,000 members and supporters were attacked in Anambra State ([Amnesty International, 2016, p. 33](#)). Generally, the group has been subjected to excessive use of force, torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests, and unlawful detention by security forces.

In addition to promoting its secession agenda and ‘anti-one Nigeria’ messages, the group has also fought against the purported Fulanisation of the herdsmen who have been accused of kidnapping in the region and encroaching on farmland. This encouraged the setup of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) on December 12, 2020 to combat ‘insecurity and

Fulani terrorism' (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021, p. 4). This non-formal security wing of IPOB has escalated the tension and conflict between the group and Nigeria's security forces. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (2022), between January 1, 2022 and September 30 2022, a total of 2,772 IPOB-related violent events took place in the South East leading to 7,875 reported fatalities.

A key issue to note here is that these militant and terror groups have access to arms. The violence sponsored in the region is of course driven by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). Contrary to the claims that their arms are produced locally (Akpan, 2021), much of the weaponry comes from organised trafficking, smuggling, local blacksmiths and theft from security agencies. According to a report by Conflict Armament Research (2020, p. 14), in the first instance, assault rifles produced by the Jianshe Machine Tool Factory in China and Belgian-made FN FAL assault rifles from the Libyan Gaddafi era have been seized from various non-state armed groups in Nigeria. Meanwhile, 2,000 pump-action and semi-automatic shotguns shipped into Nigeria from Turkey were seized by the Nigerian customs authorities in 2017. This confirms the suspicion that the flow of illicit arms to Nigeria is perpetuated by a transnational syndicate. With regard to production by local blacksmiths, factory-produced cartridges, crafted pistols, short-barrelled guns and fabricated weapons are among the weapons that have been seized from armed groups in Nigeria, including IPOB (Abdullahi, 2022, p. 1; Conflict Armament Research, 2020, p. 22). IPOB and ESN have also been accused of stealing weapons from dislodged security agencies (Abdullahi, 2022, p. 1). Following the raid on the IPOB ESN Enugu camp on August 12, 2022 by the police, the Enugu State Command claimed to have recovered weapons and uniforms belonging to security agencies (Ndukwe, 2022).

Some of the driving forces for the inflow of illicit arms into Nigeria are its porous borders, ungoverned spaces and undermanned security personnel in the country. Nigeria's borders are grossly undermanned by the relevant authorities thus increasing the country's vulnerability to invasion by illegal migrants and criminal elements. With an additional 1500 illegal borders, the official 84 borders in the country are without adequate protection (Oladopo *et al.*, 2021, p. 338). These illegal borders have become favourite routes for smuggling activities and illicit trade and movement of illegal goods including arms and weapons by non-state armed groups. Indeed, the assembling, growth and coordination of the operations of terror groups and illegal migrants have gone undetected due to the vast ungoverned spaces that pervade the country. An ungoverned space typically has a limited government presence and a general absence of governance. However, given the arguments against the concept of ignoring the presence of traditional authorities in these spaces, the notion of a contested space becomes preferable.

Contested spaces are areas with contested governance where the government performs limited functions in contest with other non-state actors. Such spaces provide a haven for non-state actors to mobilise and establish themselves (Igboin, 2021, p. 426). This explains the growth of IPOB since 2012 and its metamorphosis from a peaceful group to a radical one responsible for the escalation of tension and conflict in the South East. The rise of unknown gunmen and their brazen attacks on security institutions in the country fits within the context of a group that is protected by the haven provided in a contested space.

The shortage of security personnel in the country is also fuelling insecurity. This is alluded to by Senator Kashin Shettima, who notes that "in Nigeria, where we have about 200 million people, the security personnel, including the police, army, immigration, etc. are not even up to 500,000" (Independent, 2021, p. 1). This statement by a Nigerian Senator confirms the palpable state of security agencies in Nigeria and suggests a ratio of 1:400 of security agencies and citizens in the country.

The proliferation of armed groups and their continued battles with the government clearly increases the chances of fragility in the country. This submission finds a kindred spirit in the statement by the [London School of Economics \(2018, p. 16\)](#) that “fragile societies are typically trapped in a syndrome of interlocking characteristics which makes it hard to make sustained progress. Usually, they are fractured into groups with opposing identities, who see their struggles as a zero-sum game. This impedes inter-group cooperation to use the state for national purposes. Instead, it induces a view of the state as a resource to be plundered if only the group can capture control of it”. This is followed by the state’s loss of legitimacy, and the lack of capacity to perform basic functions, such as service delivery, citizen security, taxation, and infrastructure. These challenges culminate in inadequate security, which manifests itself in sporadic outbreaks of violence. This is true of the security situation in Nigeria, where various groups have taken turns to foment trouble over the past decade. It is as though one group is giving impetus to the rise of another. This was why [Akinyetun \(2016\)](#) asserted that when criminal groups are not properly handled, they become internalised, patterned and conventionalised. This engenders the routinisation of violence, reprisal attacks, proliferation of arms and an offshoot of other deadly sects. This explains the incidence of the unknown gunmen coexisting with the killer herder’s menace – which is a precursor to banditry and corollary to the Boko Haram insurgency.

[Iloh and Nwokedi \(2019\)](#) argue that the state’s monopoly of force and security of life and property is constantly threatened by non-state actors. The rise in criminality, vigilante groups (and by extension, unknown gunmen) continues to undermine the state’s legitimacy, for which the people initially gave up some of their natural rights for state protection. In a bid to deal with the lacuna created by poor governance, people have resorted to self-help in the form of non-state activities, which further widens the vacuum created by the inability of formal security institutions to ensure the safety of citizens and their property. Moreover, the nature of criminality in the country has made effective maintenance of law and order very difficult for state security actors, thus these non-state actors constitute a bane to national security and continue to evoke fragility.

[Njoku and Ogugbuaja \(2021, p. 1\)](#) note that the killing of security officers and the incessant attacks on security facilities by unknown gunmen reek of a largely insecure state. They submit that:

There is no security official anywhere to protect anybody. The officials themselves are not safe! They appear to have been cowed into submission. They now go to work on mufti and hole themselves in their stations until the close of duty. So, the unknown gunmen are operating undeterred. They set public institutions on fire; they seize arms and ammunition belonging to security officials and kill them in the process. Nowhere is safe... residents now live and move about in great fear.

The above is typical of the loss of internal control over the security management of the country. For instance, in a brazen display of impunity, unknown gunmen attacked the headquarters of the Imo State Police Command and the Correctional Service Centre in Owerri on April 5, 2021. This led to the setting up of the Ebube Agu regional security outfit by the state government to coordinate the activities of vigilante groups and curtail the rising unrest in the South East region ([Njoku and Ogugbuaja, 2021, p. 1](#)). Of course, this has not stopped the unknown gunmen from espousing intractable violence and communal conflicts. Meanwhile, communal conflicts in Nigeria are social-cultural and identity-based. The incidence itself is indicative of antagonistic sectional, religious and ethnic relations. Ethnic or religious consciousness is hardly salient enough to engender communal conflicts, rather, they serve as genuine ‘faultlines’ for mustering communal conflicts,

especially when the latter is accorded strategic partisan saliency through the politicisation of elites.

According to [Campbell \(2013, p. 34\)](#), “Ubiquitous patronage and corrupt behaviour fuelled by oil money is a root cause of Nigeria’s political and economic sclerosis”. Nigeria’s descending journey on the ladder of greatness is worrisome. Despite its abundant human and natural resources, the country “has in the past decades or so descended into what Samuel P. Huntington calls praetorianism—control of society by force or fraud, especially by venal, corruptible, and often sycophantic people; into what Richard Joseph calls prebendalism—the disbursing of public offices and state rents to one’s ethnic-based clients; and into what Larry Diamond calls uncivil society—lacking the horizontal relations of reciprocity and cooperation that breed the honesty, trust, and law abidingness that mark the civic community” ([Imade, 2013, p. 5](#)). This downward movement describes a failed state and the factors responsible for this are endemic corruption, maladministration, election malpractices, and sectarian violence.

Kidnapping for ransom is another threat that undermines national security in Nigeria. The phenomenon is evidence of organised crime in the country. Based on the methods adopted by kidnapers, four distinct typologies are discernible: routine, invasion, highway, and insider models ([Onuoha and Okolie-Osemene, 2019](#)). Undoubtedly, the incidence of kidnapping is overwhelming for the Nigerian Police and military task force. This is because the government has failed to tackle the root causes such as the absence of a database, marginalisation, extreme poverty, widespread unemployment, as well as weak, poorly trained and technologically incapacitated security and law enforcement agencies. [Odigbo \(2019, p. 99\)](#) also emphasises the role of the protracted farmer-herder conflict as a catalyst for deepening insecurity in Nigeria. He further asserts that:

In the last few years, the intensification and rising cases of the herders-farmers crisis, from a brush fire to an all-consuming conflagration, raised issues of conspiracy of the state, poor attitude and inadequate preparation to providing security to the Nigerian people. The protracted violent confrontations between the farmers and the herders have expanded into more worrisome dimensions. This can be seen from the changing patterns of the conflict in which the strategies adopted by the rampaging herdsmen shifted from primitive attacks at farmlands to the use of sophisticated weapons to invade communities and institutions.

Meanwhile, the government’s efforts to address the protracted farmer-herder crisis are feeble. The government’s laxity and elite conspiracy has restricted the performance of its efforts, such as the deployment of Special Task Force—Operation Safe Haven (STF-OSH) in 2001 to states like Plateau and Kaduna, the failed National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016 and the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, 2017, in states such as Benue, Ekiti and Taraba. This is evident in the security agencies’ inability to apprehend and prosecute the perpetrators ([Odigbo, 2019](#)).

Policy implications

Given the foregoing, this paper makes two policy recommendations:

State-building

This refers to the process of a state functioning more effectively. It is an “endogenous process to develop capacity, institutions and the legitimacy of the state driven by state-society

relationships. Positive state-building processes involve reciprocal relations between a state that delivers services for its people and social and political groups who constructively engage with their state” ([Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \[OECD\], 2008](#), p. 1). With regard to the menace of unknown gunmen in Nigeria, the Federal Government should make an effort to build a positive relationship with members of the state through efficient service delivery. This will address the structural, economic and social factors necessitating the menace, such as poverty, exclusion, inequality etc. An inclusive government that promotes justice and security is advisable. There should also be an improvement in service delivery, especially in the areas of education, healthcare and other public services that improve economic well-being. Moreover, the state would have to guarantee the economic, social and political rights of every citizen whilst promoting transparent, accountable and good governance. These improved conditions will cause the unknown gunmen to desist from engaging in acts of criminality and accept the state’s monopoly of force and legitimacy. The government must also make decisive efforts to increase its presence in its ungoverned and contested spaces by providing adequate security personnel.

Because fragility can arise from exclusion, state-building will help the political and societal groups excluded from the state to participate effectively through an intentional social inclusion programme. The state can adopt political negotiation or other responses that will lead these unknown men to shun violent opposition. Another germane factor in the process of state-building is legitimacy. For state-building to be feasible in Nigeria, it would have to consider the OECD’s (2008) sources of legitimacy: performance legitimacy – which arises from effective and equitable service delivery; legitimacy – derived from socially accepted beliefs about the rightful source of authority; and process legitimacy – the constitutional rule of law and/or appropriate accountability mechanisms. Legitimacy can also derive from international recognition and support.

Peacebuilding

According to [Payne and Islamic Relief \(2020, p. 9\)](#), peacebuilding “encompasses all activities that intentionally try to resolve conflict and bring about a deeper and more sustainable level of peace. It refers to the whole process of building peace before, during and after outbreaks of violence.” Peacebuilding is different from peacekeeping and peacemaking in terms of permanence and scope, respectively. Peacekeeping is concerned with maintaining a truce and preventing immediate violence, while peacemaking refers to political and diplomatic measures that aim to bring conflicting parties to an agreement. Peacebuilding seeks to transform the social and cultural conditions that generated the conflict in the first place – this is called conflict transformation. According to [Lederach and Mansfield \(n.d.\)](#):

Peacebuilding is the development of the constructive personal, group, and political relationships across ethnic, religious, class, national, and racial boundaries. It aims to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the structural conditions that generate deadly conflict. Peacebuilding can include conflict prevention; conflict management; conflict resolution and transformation, and post-conflict reconciliation. (p.1)

This strategy can be applied to the incidence of unknown gunmen and fragility in Nigeria to address the key drivers of violence and forestall the reoccurrence of such by tackling the inherent economic, social and political problems in the political system. The government should engage in wide-ranging reform; economic, governance, justice, security sector and political, as well as create truth and reconciliation processes.

Some of the root causes of insecurity in Nigeria are a weak security apparatus, inequality, social exclusion, marginalisation, poverty, discrimination and violations of human

rights. Therefore, development efforts should be made to address these issues alongside peacebuilding. As [Payne and Islamic Relief \(2020, p. 11\)](#) observe, “if peacebuilding works together with development assistance to ensure that the grievances, frustrations and needs of all communities are addressed fairly then this can help to resolve conflict, which helps to end the humanitarian crisis.”

In addition to the above, the paper recommends that the thin and stretched Nigerian security apparatus should be increased in terms of workforce and devolved into state police units to enable the officers to tackle the growing insecurity in the various regions in Nigeria. By encouraging state policing, citizens will be encouraged to speak to police officers in their indigenous languages to foil criminal cells before they turn into syndicates. This will also help address the lack of trust and fear of victimisation that Nigerian citizens hold for police officers.

The security forces should also employ technology in the fight against insecurity and unknown gunmen. Satellite tracking devices should be adopted, while cameras should be mounted in various areas – particularly densely populated areas. Meanwhile, it is also advised that creating a comprehensive database of Nigerians, including their phone numbers, should be encouraged. This will assist in tracking suspected criminals using cellular networks. The security forces in Nigeria must be trained and retrained in intelligence gathering in rural areas and ungoverned spaces where kidnappers and unknown gunmen are suspected to operate from. Finally, the governors of the South East must develop a regional security outfit like their South West counterparts by jointly contributing their security votes to tackling insecurity and complementing the state security apparatus.

Conclusion

The catchphrase ‘unknown gunmen’ has become widely recognised and associated with insecurity in Nigeria. This study places the attacks by unknown gunmen within the context of state fragility, highlighting their implications for Nigeria’s stability. When assessed using fragility indicators, Nigeria is on the brink of fragility. This paper notes that these attacks have become emblematic of a state of fragility and insecurity, with dire consequences for the country’s peaceful coexistence. This paper presents new knowledge on the prevalence and implications of the menace of unknown gunmen in Nigeria. It establishes that the incidence of attacks by unknown gunmen in Nigeria is indicative of a fragile state in which the government’s monopoly on the use of force is being contested. This study provides a foundation for further scholarly research on the prevalence of incidents involving unknown gunmen and its consequences for national security in Nigeria, particularly given that knowledge of the subject matter is still nascent and inchoate. It argues that specific political and economic variables, such as marginalisation, deprivation, poverty, ungoverned spaces, under-policing, the proliferation of arms, porous borders, and the lack of political will, are responsible for this nefarious phenomenon.

The paper’s practical values are also noteworthy, as they reveal the implications of the slide towards state fragility and places the attacks by unknown gunmen within this context. It focuses on the indicators of state fragility and highlights the need for efforts to restore the stability of the country by implementing the recommendations proposed herein. It identifies unknown gunmen as criminal elements without clear objectives but with the propensity to cause chaos and threaten national security. Furthermore, this paper shows that these attacks have created a humanitarian crisis in Nigeria, leading to an increase in the number of abductions, wanton killings, and the destruction of property.

This study's insights into the various factors fuelling menace, such as brainwashing, drug use, and the ban on open grazing, can be of immense value in informing policy decisions and developing strategies to address the threat posed by unknown gunmen in Nigeria. This study identifies various political and economic variables that contribute to this phenomenon, such as marginalisation, deprivation, poverty, ungoverned spaces, under-policing, the proliferation of arms, porous borders, and the lack of political will. The significance of this study lies in the fact that it offers new insights into the prevalence and implications of attacks by unknown gunmen in Nigeria, highlighting that the incidence is a national malaise and not restricted to any particular region. This provides a foundation for further research on this phenomenon and its impact on national security.

This paper recognises the urgency of the situation and calls for immediate efforts to restore the stability of the country by implementing the recommendations proposed herein. To mitigate the incidence attacks by unknown gunmen, this study recommends addressing these underlying causes through good governance, increased economic opportunities, and effective security measures. In addition, the study emphasises the need to address the grievances of armed groups, while maintaining the territorial integrity of Nigeria requires political will, dialogue, and engagement.

The study also highlights the excessive use of force, torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests, and unlawful detention of IPOB members by security forces as significant contributors to insecurity in the South East region. The study recommends improving security sector governance, including respect for human rights and accountability mechanisms, as necessary to build trust and reduce tension. Furthermore, this study identifies the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) as a significant driver of insecurity in Nigeria. The study recommends controlling the flow of illicit arms through enhanced border security, intelligence gathering, and cooperation with neighbouring countries. It further highlights the humanitarian crisis resulting from attacks by unknown gunmen, including an increase in the number of internally displaced persons, student abductions, and wanton killings. Addressing a humanitarian crisis requires a comprehensive response, including providing humanitarian assistance, protecting civilians, and addressing the root causes of insecurity. Finally, the study recommends conducting further research to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon and develop evidence-based policy solutions to mitigate the incidence of attacks by unknown gunmen in Nigeria.

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