

Countering Lakurawa Recruitment in Northwest Nigeria

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Jihadist insurgents of the Lakurawa group remain active on Nigerian soil, where they continue to recruit new members. Without immediate, coordinated federal and local interventions to counter the insurgent group's influence, the Nigerian state risks the entrenchment of parallel insurgent governance, increased radicalisation of rural communities, and the consolidation of a Sahelian insurgency through its Northwest corridor.

Recommendations

1 Provide alternatives for young men in at-risk areas

To limit Lakurawa's attractiveness, the state must support youth employment opportunities in these areas. Government programmes should prioritise expanding access to vocational training, education and employment opportunities, thereby reducing the appeal of insurgent narratives that promise economic gain and social belonging.

2 Adopt impartial and inclusive responses to banditry that are sensitive to existing ethnic rivalries

The dominance of ethnically homogeneous vigilante groups and the selective targeting of a specific ethnic group by state security forces have exacerbated ethnic grievances and driven recruitment into Lakurawa. To prevent further polarisation, security responses must be ethnically neutral, inclusive and sensitive to local dynamics. A community-driven, impartial approach to security is essential to rebuilding trust and undermining the insurgent group's influence.

3 Strengthen strategic communication with local communities

Community members join Lakurawa under false pretences and are often misled about the insurgents' motives, while state security actors lack critical insight into the group's operations. This mutual information gap undermines effective responses and prevention efforts. To address this, security actors must establish regular, transparent communication channels with local communities to discuss security concerns.

4 Make the physical protection of remote communities a government priority

The Nigerian security forces' inability to respond swiftly in remote border areas has eroded community trust and enabled Lakurawa insurgents to gain support by offering protection. To reverse this trend, security actors must enhance rapid response capabilities and establish a consistent presence in high-risk border areas. Strengthening state-led, community-informed policing is essential to restoring trust and countering insurgent influence.



Background

Lakurawa is a jihadist insurgent group¹, which operates in Northwest Nigeria. The group's presence in Nigeria can be traced back to 2018, specifically to the Gudu and Tangaza local government areas in Sokoto State. This location holds ancestral significance to the group as it is from here that Uthman Dan Fodio spread Islam. After fleeing persecution in 1804, Uthman dan Fodio and his followers, seeking refuge in Gudu, established the foundation for the Sokoto Caliphate. Many members of Lakurawa claim that their ancestors were students of Dan Fodio—a legacy that extends beyond Nigeria and reaches across the Sahel.

Community leaders initially (2018) invited the group to protect communities in Sokoto against cattle rustling, kidnapping and violent attacks orchestrated by bandits². According to a local source, government representatives attempted to hold talks with the group, which resulted in the Malian faction of Lakurawa leaving Nigerian territory in December 2018. However, these negotiations did not achieve the group's sustainable removal from Nigerian territory. On the contrary, Lakurawa began to turn against the same communities it had offered to protect. This shift in behaviour was marked by the group's imposition of land use (farming) and protection levies, the confiscation of livestock and the enforcement of its interpretation of Islam.

IN 2025, THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALLY DESIGNATED LAKURAWA AS A TERRORIST ORGANISATION, ENABLING THE MILITARY TO MOBILISE MAXIMUM FORCE AGAINST THE GROUP.

In 2025, the Nigerian government officially designated Lakurawa as a terrorist organisation, enabling the military to mobilise maximum force against the group. This legal measure went hand in hand with military operations against Lakurawa insurgents, notably Operation Fansam Yamma, which combined airstrikes, ground offensives and intelligence activities to dismantle the group's structures. Recent military operations in the Tangaza and Gudu areas of Northwest Nigeria have weakened Lakurawa's ability to carry out major assaults and enforce its governance model as it did in the past. However, the military approach has proven insufficient to eradicate Lakurawa completely from Nigerian soil.

Despite official declarations in 2024 that Lakurawa had been expelled from Nigerian territory³, our research indicates that the insurgent group remains active and is increasingly recruiting from border communities in Northwest Nigeria. Without immediate, coordinated federal and local interventions to counter the insurgent group's influence, the Nigerian state will face the entrenchment of parallel insurgent governance, increased radicalisation of rural communities, and the consolidation of a Sahelian insurgency through its Northwest corridor.

Lakurawa: An emerging threat

Lakurawa has over 1,000 fighters whose origins span Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The insurgent group has recently expanded its network through active recruitment in border communities across Northwest Nigeria, where it currently operates (see Figure 1)⁴.

Lakurawa insurgents are equipped with diverse and sophisticated weaponry. Fighters typically carry a mix of weapon types, including small arms and light weapons, explosives⁵ and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Some fighters also use satellite communication tools to enhance real-time coordination⁶. Although the group lacks a centralised command structure, it demonstrates a high degree of internal organisation. The insurgent group mainly operates at night, establishing concealed camps deep within forested zones while deliberately avoiding major transport routes used by civilians and security forces. Their use of specialised desert motorbikes, engineered for silent movement, further enhances their mobility and operational stealth⁷. This combination of transnational manpower, advanced weaponry and decentralised tactics has enabled the group to establish itself in hard-to-reach border areas in Sokoto, Katsina and Kebbi in Northwest Nigeria (see Figure 1).

The territorial footprint of Lakurawa varies in scale and intensity: the group primarily establishes operational bases in border communities along national and subnational boundaries (see Nigeria's border with Niger and Benin in Figure 1). While the insurgents exercise exclusive control over some villages in border areas, offering protection from banditry and effectively positioning themselves as a local authority, in other areas, they either collaborate with or compete against factional bandit groups for territorial dominance (see Figure 1). As a result, the insurgent group gains legitimacy and support in some villages while it faces resistance and a loss of trust in others. If Lakurawa succeeds in convincing or aligning with the more than 40 factional banditry groups presently operating across border communities in Northwest Nigeria, the convergence of these armed groups would significantly increase the threat to stability in the region.

Recruitment Dynamics

Lakurawa insurgents recruit through two distinct patterns that combine coercion with persuasion:

1. Forced conscription: Insurgents capture bandits during operations or make enlistment compulsory by issuing mandates to selected households in banditry-affected communities to nominate individuals to join the insurgent group.
2. ‘Voluntary’ recruitment⁸: The insurgent group positions its actions as protection or religious duty, which resonates with community members, and embeds itself as a trusted mediator through local conflict resolution. It also exploits ethnic tensions and economic hardship, particularly targeting vulnerable youth in border communities.

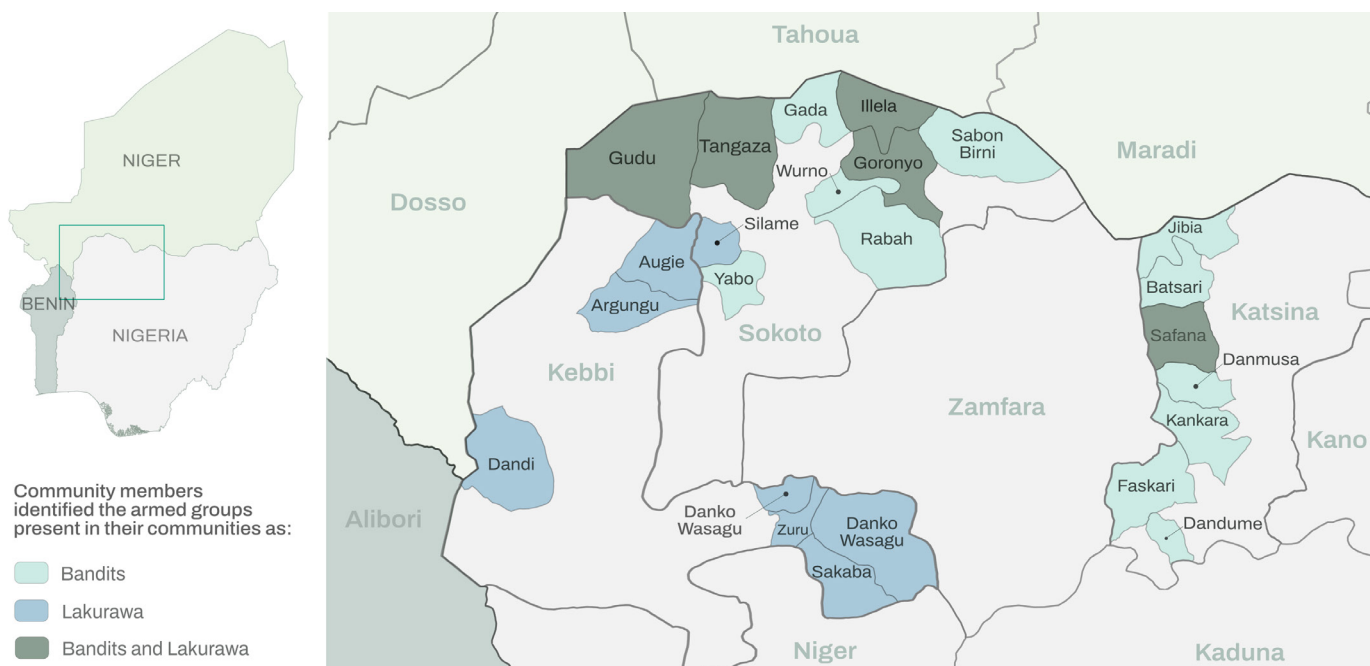
While Lakurawa fights banditry in some communities (e.g., Dandi), it covertly delegates violence to bandits in other areas (e.g., Augie, Kagewa and Mera in Kebbi state). Additionally, insurgent groups coerce bandits captured during operations into joining them or eliminate those who refuse. Due to Lakurawa’s superior firepower and organisational capacity, some established bandit groups have surrendered and now collaborate directly with the insurgents or act under their influence.

Similarly, the insurgents attend social gatherings and events (such as naming ceremonies and weddings), thereby gaining insights into family socio-economic dynamics, which they ultimately use to further their recruitment efforts. To promote their interpretation of Islam, for example, Lakurawa has established a school and a mosque with flags of the group hoisted publicly in Malgam and Sarma, Rabah local government, Sokoto state—less than 60 kilometres from the Niger border. The rule-based governance implemented by the groups, such as prohibiting the intake of intoxicants and encouraging almsgiving, also appeals to some residents in these areas. The insurgent group’s involvement in conflict resolution is yet another aspect of its activities to enhance its standing within local communities. Our research shows that existing formal justice mechanisms have largely failed to deliver timely and impartial outcomes, contributing to a perception of impunity and fuelling a cycle of reprisals. Lakurawa exploits this gap by mediating disputes, negotiating between parties or providing alternative forms of justice, thereby addressing issues that formal state authorities do not adequately respond to. This dynamic enables the group to consolidate trust and influence within the community..

Who is the prime recruitment target?

Lakurawa is ethnically diverse, consisting of fighters from the Hausa, Fulani, Tuareg, Zabarmawa and other ethnic groups. This heterogeneity mirrors the demographic complexity of the Sahel and makes it difficult to attribute the group’s violent activities in Northwest Nigeria to the interests of any single ethnic group. Nevertheless, Lakurawa exploits existing tensions

FIGURE 1: AREAS CONTROLLED BY LAKURAWA AND ARMED GROUPS, CATEGORISED BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS AS ‘BANDITS’ IN NORTHWEST NIGERIA⁹



The data is based on the information collected in the field in Katsina, Kebbi, and Sokoto from November to December 2024.

between farming and herding communities, particularly between the Hausa and Fulani, to recruit from marginalised populations.

Although Lakurawa presents itself as a defender of local communities against banditry, its practices reveal a selective and community-specific approach, depending on whether communities welcome the insurgents or not. In Kebbi state (e.g. Augie, Mera, Kwaido and Yola), the insurgents reportedly rustle more cattle and impose higher protection levies on Hausa communities than on Fulani groups. Conversely, in locations such as Gudu, Tanzaga and Sabon Birnin in Sokoto state, Lakurawa appears to be more lenient towards certain Hausa groups and other ethnic minorities, while taking a stricter stance against Fulani who are herders. This ambivalent and adaptive strategy enables the insurgents to sustain local support and attract recruits from disgruntled individuals across diverse communities in Northwest Nigeria.

A specific demographic profile is most vulnerable to Lakurawa's recruitment. The insurgent group mostly targets young men between the ages of 15 and 27. This age group is disproportionately affected by unemployment and economic marginalisation in Northwest Nigeria. Lakurawa exploits this vulnerability by promoting narratives of economic empowerment and opportunity. A key element of their appeal lies in their use of foreign currencies—such as the US dollar and the CFA franc—for local transactions, bypassing the Nigerian naira. This not only enhances the perceived legitimacy and profitability of joining the group but also positions insurgency as a viable economic alternative for disenfranchised youth.

Recommended Policy Interventions

1 Boost livelihood activities specifically for youth

Lakurawa continues to exploit the economic vulnerabilities caused by banditry in the region to recruit young people who can no longer rely on income from farming or grazing due to insecurity. According to community members and local leaders, the group exploits pervasive poverty by distributing money, weapons and farm tools, particularly to local youth, as an outreach strategy. In several interviews, participants noted that recruits receive approximately one million naira (around US \$670), while local informants are paid roughly 10,000 naira (about US \$6). This highlights the economic incentives that bolster the group's influence.

Once recruited, individuals are subject to manipulation and control. Many young boys who join Lakurawa often help out at first by running errands—buying and loading recharge cards, supporting the group in navigating the local terrain. In addition, Lakurawa's transnational networks supply lethal weapons and specialised desert motorcycles for combating banditry. These motorbikes, which Nigerian security agencies do not possess, enable the rapid movement of multiple people across difficult terrain and are highly valued by young people who aspire to own them for self-defence. This access not only provides them with an alternative livelihood but also elevates their social status, earning them a special standing within their banditry-affected communities as 'heroes' or 'manly'. In at-risk communities in Kebbi and Sokoto state, possessing weapons has become a symbol of pride and status—a factor that Lakurawa skilfully exploits to recruit new members.

To reduce the economic appeal of Lakurawa and curb youth recruitment, Nigeria's federal and state governments must prioritise livelihood support in at-risk communities. Targeted interventions must focus on youth empowerment through improved access to education, vocational training and sustainable employment opportunities. These efforts should be locally tailored and community-driven to provide meaningful alternatives to insurgent recruitment and restore hope and dignity among young people in these high-risk areas.

2 Promote more inclusive security measures

Lakurawa exacerbates ethnic tensions through discriminatory cattle theft, demanding 15 to 20 per cent of livestock or an equivalent in cash from Fulani herders, while seizing all cattle from Hausa owners, creating an uneven playing field that increases suspicion and distrust among the farmers and herders. Lakurawa also exploits the fact that some vigilante groups fighting bandits are mostly from Hausa origin¹⁰. This ethnic-oriented security response creates suspicion among non-Hausa communities, further intensifying communal tensions, fuelling cycles of retaliation and deepening mistrust.

Furthermore, the fact that state security actors selectively target herders while sparing farmers has reinforced ethnic grievances, inadvertently pushing marginalised groups toward the Lakurawa insurgents. As communities become increasingly frustrated with discriminatory security responses and inadequate state protection they, inadvertently, seek alternative security arrangements, inviting groups like Lakurawa for protection. This desperation leaves such communities vulnerable to the insurgents who exploit local grievances for recruitment purposes. The group strategically embeds itself in these areas, portraying itself as a saviour while steadily expanding its influence.

To counter the ethnic divisions exploited by the Lakurawa insurgency, Nigeria's security responses must be impartial, inclusive of all ethnic groups, while being sensitive to local dynamics, particularly the complex Hausa–Fulani relationship. A transition towards professionalised, state-led protection must also be prioritised. The continued reliance on ethnically homogeneous vigilante groups has deepened communal mistrust and fuelled cycles of retaliation. These groups must be phased out and replaced with robust, neutral state security forces, particularly in vulnerable rural and border areas. Ensuring fair and equitable protection for all groups will enable the government to reduce community grievances, restore trust in state institutions and limit the insurgents' ability to exploit local divisions for recruitment and influence. This requires strengthening the capacity, accountability and responsiveness of formal policing institutions.

3 Engage at-risk communities

Our research findings indicate that security agencies, including the Nigerian military and police, have considerable gaps in their understanding of the Lakurawa insurgent group's methods of operation and recruitment strategies. At the same time, Lakurawa is misleading the local communities with its dual approach of offering short-term protection against banditry to

gain trust and support, while covertly expanding recruitment and establishing a long-term presence aimed at forming a parallel governance structure. As the Nigerian government intensifies military operations in these areas, there is a growing risk that Lakurawa may form an alliance with established bandit groups to enhance its firepower. This development could have far-reaching implications for stability in northern Nigeria.

To effectively counter Lakurawa's recruitment strategies, security actors, including the Nigerian military and police, must establish consistent and transparent communication with affected communities. Establishing consistent, two-way communication channels can help the authorities to better understand local concerns, dispel misinformation and build trust. Government outreach programmes should engage directly with affected communities, using tailored messaging to rebuild trust and clarify the military's role. The military and police must also create channels for receiving real-time feedback on their response to banditry from community stakeholders. Engaging trusted local leaders, religious figures and civil society actors as intermediaries in communication efforts can further amplify outreach and enhance community resilience against coercive recruitment tactics, including forced conscription and household-level enlistment. Moreover, supporting community-based peacebuilding platforms that facilitate dialogue, address grievances and mediate ethnic tensions is essential to reinforcing social cohesion.

4 Strengthen community protection efforts in banditry-affected areas

Lakurawa's initial invitation to border communities battling continued banditry highlights not only the fragile state of law enforcement in remote areas but also the Nigerian government's broader inability to secure its rural population. The Nigerian Army and police struggle to respond swiftly to security incidents in remote border areas, causing local communities to lose trust in them. Interview participants from near the Niger Republic borders (e.g. in Illela) said that they would rather seek assistance from Nigerian security forces than the Nigerian military, as the former are perceived as more reliable and quicker to act in a crisis.

Our interviews with state-level stakeholders highlight a critical coordination gap between state and federal authorities concerning the deployment of security personnel to banditry-affected areas in Northwest Nigeria. While the federal government retains exclusive authority over the deployment of military and police forces, state governments are mandated to support these operations through monthly financial disbursements known as 'security votes'. However, divergent political affiliations across government tiers, competing interests among state

actors and inter-agency rivalries continue to impede the timely deployment of security forces to high-risk areas. Similarly, the increasing reliance on military forces in contexts where police intervention would be more appropriate exacerbates institutional tensions and diminishes the effectiveness of community-level policing.

To effectively counter Lakurawa's recruitment drive, it is imperative to strengthen state-led protection efforts that are responsive, inclusive and community-informed. This requires enhancing the presence and operational capacity of well-trained, accountable security personnel, particularly in remote and high-risk areas. Addressing persistent logistical bottlenecks, stemming from political dissonance, inter-agency tensions and inadequate coordination, must be prioritised to enable the

timely and sustained deployment of security forces. Adequate and predictable resourcing, including funding, equipment and personnel, is essential to ensure that military and police forces can proactively respond to emerging threats.

A sustained presence of state actors in these border communities is critical to restoring trust, strengthening local governance and disrupting the insurgents' influence at the grass-roots level. Achieving this requires a holistic approach that integrates security operations with the consistent delivery of essential social services. Such integration not only enhances community resilience but also reduces the perceived legitimacy of insurgent groups as alternative providers of protection and basic welfare.

Endnotes

1. Jihadist insurgents are a group of individuals motivated by a particular interpretation of Islamic ideology known as 'jihad'. They engage in violent struggle ('holy war') and use violent threats against perceived enemies, including governments or individuals with differing views on Islamic interpretations.
2. Bandits are individuals or groups of individuals who take up arms for various reasons. These include political motives such as claiming to defend their communities against state neglect, exclusion from access to resources or threats to ethnic identity. Economic motives include individual or collective acts such as theft, extortion and land grabbing.
3. In December 2024, the Minister of State for Defence, Bello Matawalle, declared Nigeria free of the Lakurawa group https://guardian.ng/news/lakurawa-terror-group-chased-out-of-nigeria-says-fg/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
4. Findings are based on field research in Sokoto, Kebbi and Katsina, Northwest Nigeria, November–December 2024.
5. On 8 June 2025, Lakurawa launched an attack with IEDs in Gwaburo village in Tanzaga LGA, claiming the lives of six community members.
6. United Nations Security Council. (2025). Letter dated 6 February 2025 from the President of the Security Council (S/2025/71/Rev.1). <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4076001>
7. Similar heavy motorbikes are mostly used by the Al-Qaida-affiliated Malian insurgent group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) for operations in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Common brands include Haojue, TVS, and Bajaj, known for their fuel efficiency and ability to transport up to four or five fighters. These bikes have engine capacities ranging from 125 cc to 150 cc, offering a good balance between speed and maneuverability. The trafficking of such motorbikes has become widespread, with many being diverted from major seaports in West Africa and smuggled into the Sahel region.
8. Figure 1 shows selected areas affected by the Lakurawa group and banditry in Katsina, Kebbi and Sokoto. Although Zamfara is greatly affected by banditry, our focus is on the three states in Northwest Nigeria where Lakurawa currently operates.
9. In this context, 'voluntary' refers to individuals who choose to join the jihadist insurgents of their own free will, without external coercion. However, others who technically volunteer do so under economic, social, religious or other forms of pressure and manipulation.
10. A group of individuals fighting banditry backed by state or local communities.

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