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Lakurawa Jihadis And Ungoverned Space In North-Western Nigeria

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Abstract: *The Lakurawas were herders from Mali and Niger. They are light-skinned, they speaks Arabic and Fulfulde languages initially they were recruited by the Traditional authorities in Sokoto state, to protect their rural communities from armed bandits from Zamfara State known as Zamfarawa. Lakurawa were paid for their services and succeeded in disrupting the bandit threat between 2016 and 2017 but soon began their own campaign of violence. These actions threatened the leaders who invited them to form an armed Group, leading to a dispute that culminated in the killing of a local district head*

Keywords: Lakurawas, Jihadis, Ungoverned Space, North-Western, Nigeria

Introduction

Authorities in Sokoto called them a new terrorist group, even though they had existed for more than six years. When they infiltrated the state, helpless and unsuspecting villagers saw them as angels sent down to wipe out rural terrorists. On Nov. 6, the Sokoto government officially announced the existence of the Lakurawa terrorist group, raising an alarm over its deadly tendencies in parts of the state. The defence headquarters would later confirm the state report, declaring the Lakurawa terrorist leaders wanted. The news made disturbing waves on social media, with concerned Nigerians worried about the safety of civilians. Sadly, a few days after these announcements, the terrorists struck in neighbouring Kebbi state, killing 15 people and displacing several others (Abiodun, 2024). The Nigerian Army has labeled Lukarawas as a new group, but Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, an associate professor of peace and conflict studies at Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, wrote that the group has been operating in several communities along the Nigeria-Niger border since 1999. Rufa'i believes the military labels the group as new to deflect blame for recent attacks (ADF, 2024).

For over six years, the criminal organisation operated in an immersive fashion in different areas of Sokoto state, including Tangaza, Gudu, and Binji. They played on the emotion of a people Desperate for protection against roving terrorists. Just when the people thought they had found new saviours, the Lakurawa introduced their radical ideologies and activities, putting civilians in
A more difficult situation. Now, they do worse than the existing rural criminals, killing unarmed villagers, attacking security agents, taxing farmers, herders and traders and imposing radical Islamist rules (Abiodun, 2024).

In a region already plagued by many terror groups, the foreign-linked Lakurawa was appearing to be greater threats to ordinary people. Locals say they fear a resurgence of a group similar to the deadly Boko Haram. The Arewa Consultative Forum, a group of concerned citizens from Northern Nigeria, has shown concern about the group, asking authorities to uproot them lest they pose more threats to human existence in the region. "Lakurawa, at this early stage of its emergence, must not be tolerated or allowed to entrench itself in our communities through benign neglect or kid-glove treatment, as was the case with Boko Haram insurgency, farmer-herder clashes, and banditry in the northeast, north-central, and northwest regions, respectively," the group said in a statement. "This is the moment for our security agencies to act swiftly and decisively, using all available human and material resources without hesitation. We must leave no one in doubt about the national resolve to deal decisively with any threat to Nigeria's peace and stability." (Abiodun, 2024).

The Concept of Ungoverned Space

Ungoverned spaces generally refer to geographical areas where the state is either absent or unable to exercise effective authority and provide basic governance functions such as security, justice, infrastructure, and public services. These spaces are typically characterised by a lack of institutional presence, enabling non-state actors, such as insurgent groups, terrorists, and criminal
Networks, to assert influence or control. The idea has deep roots in classical political theory, particularly in the Westphalian notion of the state, which assumes that states hold sovereign authority over a clearly defined territory. According to this model, governance entails a state's ability to maintain law and order, implement policies, and regulate activities within its borders. When parts of a state's territory fall outside its effective reach, they are deemed "ungoverned." (Hussaini, 2025)

However, the term gained global prominence in the aftermath of the September11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when U.S. and Western national security strategies began to link "ungoverned spaces" to the rise of transnational threats. In the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy, failed and weak states were identified as potential sanctuaries for terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, whose operations thrived in areas lacking strong state presence, such as Afghanistan's mountainous regions. This Perspective positioned ungoverned spaces as local challenges and international security risks. Since then, ungoverned spaces have become central to global security and development discourse. These areas are often found in remote or rural regions with weak infrastructure, Conflict-affected zones where the state has lost control, borderlands where jurisdiction is unclear or contested, in some cases, armed controlled urban slums, and increasingly, non-territorial domains such as cyberspace(Hussaini, 2025).

In many conflict-affected regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, non-state actors often step into governance vacuums by providing basic services, enforcing rules, or offering protection. These actors create alternative governance systems that either compete with or entirely substitute for formal state authority. This conception of ungoverned spaces is particularly salient in regions like the central Sahel, where the absence of effective state presence in the northern territories has been widely cited as a key driver of insecurity. Security analysts frequently highlight these zones on maps, categorising them as "ungoverned spaces" due to the state's limited or non-existent control. In Nigeria, such spaces are typically found in forest reserves, sparsely populated rural areas, and rugged terrains, especially across the northern part of the country, where state presence is minimal and non-state actors, including insurgents and criminal networks, operate with relative impunity (Hussaini, 2025).

The reality, however, is that these so-called "ungoverned spaces" are not devoid of governance, they are governed, just not by the Nigerian State. Instead, they are alternatively governed spaces where non-state actors have supplanted official authority. Armed groups, bandits, terrorists, and criminal networks dominate these areas, imposing their own systems of control over the populations.While their authority is neither democratically sanctioned nor benign, often enforced through coercion and brutality, it nonetheless constitutes a form of governance. These groups enforce rules, collect taxes or levies, control access to land and resources, manage local economies, adjudicate disputes, and even appoint local leaders. In some communities, farming activities are tightly regulated: criminal authorities allocate land, oversee agricultural production, and in some cases operate communal farms using forced labour. They also provide a form of "security," paradoxically protecting residents primarily from their own or rival violence, while determining who may live, work, or travel within the territory. This form of governance reflects not a vacuum, but a contested and deeply fractured sovereignty, where state absence has enabled the rise of violent, parallel orders (Hussaini, 2025).

Take, for example, the flow of cash within these territories. While many Nigerians struggle with access to cash due to banking constraints, criminal networks in these "ungoverned" areas seem to operate with fluid and untraceable financial systems. Ransoms worth billions of naira are paid and received without a trace. While it is often assumed that this money is used to buy more weapons, there is a more complex and organised system at play, one that suggests these groups are not just violent actors, but economic and political ones as well (Hussaini, 2025).

Labeling areas as "ungoverned spaces" is, in essence, an admission of state failure, a self-indictment. Governance is the fundamental responsibility of the state; when the state fails to govern, other actors inevitably step in. Like animal groups, human societies will always find mechanisms to organise and manage themselves. These mechanisms may not align with formal legal or ethical standards, but they often serve functional purposes for the people living within those spaces. If we are serious about tackling insecurity in Nigeria, we must start by challenging the concept of "ungoverned spaces." We must recognise that these are territories governed by alternative authorities, criminal, violent, and illegitimate though they may be. Until we acknowledge this reality, our strategies will remain misaligned, and our response ineffective (Hussaini, 2025).

The Origin and Development of Lakuruwa in North Western Nigeria

Little is known about the origins of the cross-border armed group known as the "Lakurawa". Some sources indicate that the group was formed in 2010 by herdsmen from Mali and Niger who settled in Sokoto State, which had long been impacted by instances of banditry and cattle rustling. Although difficult to verify and confirm at the time of writing, one well-placed MEAC source traced the origins of the Lakurawa to a group of Malian herdsman who fought alongside the Séléka militia coalition against the Anti-balaka in the Central African Republic around 2012-2013. After eventually returning to Mali, the group clashed with the military, forcing them to relocate to Niger. Following several years of moving in and out of Nigeria's northwestern region, the group appears to have settled in Nigeria more permanently. Other sources indeed indicate that sometime around 2017, the herdsmen, who initially carried rifles to protect themselves and their cattle, were seasonally hired by local leaders in the North West of Nigeria to combat bandits and provide protection to communities. While the Lakurawa was reportedly successful in pushing back various bandit groups, it gradually turned against the communities it was hired to protect. The herdsmen-turned-militiamen established bases in border communities in north-western Sokoto, levied taxes against them, and sought to impose their version of Sharia law, harshly punishing those accused of breaking its strict code. As a result, the relationship between the group and communities quickly deteriorated and turned violent, and in 2022, the group was dislodged by Nigerian security forces and retreated into Niger (UNIDIR, 2025).

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The Anatomy of Ungoverned Space and the Emergence of Lakuruwa in Northwestern Nigeria

For nearly a decade now, the northwestern region has been a haven for rural terrorists. They've emptied villages and driven farmers from their farms, controlled a thriving kidnap-for-ransom enterprise that has disrupted the livelihood of the largely farming communities and impoverished families across the region. The people of Wassaniya, Tabaringa, Mulawa, and Jina-Jini were not exempted. The rural communities of the region where these terrorists hold sway, as there is little to no government presence. And most of the time, they're left at the mercy of the marauding terrorists (Abiodun, 2024).

Therefore, some traditional authorities in these areas invited the Lakurawas to provide "security to our communities." "The District Head of Balle in Gudu Local Government together with the District Head of Gongono in Tangaza Local Government met with Alhaji Bello Wamakko, the then Chairman of Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) and discussed how to tackle Zamfarawa (Bandits). They finally reached the conclusion to hire Lakurawa from Mali in order to deal with Zamfarawa bandits (Abiodun, 2024).

Through the traditional rulers in Balle, the Lakurawa requested funds to buy weapons for the newly recruited members and money was given to them. One resident who spoke to Daily Trust said some members of the group were invited to rescue a kidnap victim. "The locals were initially happy with their coming because of the way they sacked bandits in their communities but their refusal to consult their leaders and hand over recovered cattle as well as the way they were forcing people to give out animals as Zakkat which they used to take to their countries made us suspicious and decided to report the matter to constituted authorities," the local added The relationships soured when the group accused Muktar, son of the district head and chief treasurer of the group, who had died in a fire incident, of misappropriating about N63 million belonging to them (Abiodun, 2024).

According to Rufa'i, the group initially was recruited by local governments to protect communities from armed bandits from Zamfara State. Lakurawa were paid for their services and succeeded in disrupting the bandit threat between 2016 and 2017 but soon began their own campaign of violence. These actions threatened the leaders who invited them to form an armed
Group, leading to a dispute that culminated in the killing of a local district head (ADF, 2024).

In recent statements, the Nigerian military attributed the Lakurawa's reemergence in September 2024 to a gap in security coordination between Niger and Nigeria following the suspension of Joint border patrols due to the coup in Niger in July 2023. The group now operates primarily in the dense forests of northwestern Sokoto and northern Kebbi states, along the Niger-Nigeria border. Suspected of being affiliated with the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS), the Lakurawa is estimated to be composed of some 200 fighters and is reportedly well-armed with small arms and light weapons, explosives and drones. Nigerian authorities proscribed the Lakurawa as a terrorist organization in January 2025, paving the way for the use of military force against the group (UNIDIR, 2025).

Recruitment Pattern

In an effort to recruit more members, the Lakurawa has reportedly been offering various incentives to those who agree to join its ranks, including money, seeds, farming tools and irrigation machines much needed items in an area deeply affected by climate change and the loss of agriculture-based livelihoods (UNIDIR, 2025).Members from Mali also have settled in northwest Nigeria communities, where they have married locals and recruited young people into Jihadism. Many of them speak Fulfulde, which is commonly spoken by the Fulani ethnic group (ADF, 2024).

The Geography of Lakurawas Jihadis

The Lakurawa Jihadis has been active in at least nine areas across three local governments Tangaza, Gudu, and Silame in Sokoto state, as well as in Marake and Illela localities near Zamfara. These towns are situated in the porous borders of Sokoto state, enabling armed groups to cross freely between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Once over the border, they establish camps in the region's expansive bush land. Although the areas are within the Sudan savannah, they contain dense forests and ungoverned spaces that provide cover and concealment to the terrorists in the region. A similar situation occurred in Sambisa, a forest area connecting multiple communities in Borno state. From a geographical perspective, however, these three local governments have always been vulnerable to transnational criminals, making it unsurprising that they are affected. Historically, similar ungovernable areas in this region have been targeted by terror groups. This is why the Lakurawa were initially enlisted to guard communities but have since adopted methods and goals similar to the enemies they once opposed (ADF, 2024). Following their incursion about six years ago, the roving Lakurawa criminal organisation established camps which it called Darul Islam around the Gwangwano, Mulawa, Wassaniya, and Tunigara areas along Nigeria-Niger border areas. The sect has grown from less than 50 members to over 200, with young men aged 18-35. The Chairman of the Tangaza Local Government, Isah Salihu Kalenjeni, who spoke to Hum Angle, said: "We suspect that these groups are about 300 splitting across Illela, Tangaza, Gudu, Silami and Binji forest areas. They frequently visit our villages meeting rural people dressed in Muslim attire sometimes with turban visiting mosques. Our fear is that they are planning to take over our redundant youths, luring them into their criminal activities." (Abiodun, 2024).

Ideology of the Group

According to the perception of Muslim communities in northern Nigeria, Lukurawa adheres to extremist ideologies akin to the "Khawârij", expressing the idea of dissidence from the politico-religious order. Ideologically, this perception refers to the revolts and dissidences following the battle of Siffîn (657 AD), when a sort of "third way" emerged, giving rise to a sect that subsequently claimed to be neither mainstream Sunnism nor Shi'ism. Care should be taken with this "Khawârij" label, which is also sometimes subjectively applied to any movement opposing the dominant political order in various countries (Timbuktu Institute African Center for Peace Studies, 2024). The followers of the sect have a similar pattern of religious separatism with any other radical Islamic movements. The group claims ideological purity and avoids contact with the rest of the society. The Lakurawas use arms to intimidate and harass locals under the pretext of enforcing sharia in the affected areas (Abiodun, 2024).Initially herders, Lukarawa now promotes its own version of Islam as it seeks to form a caliphate. It is known to move from community to community, preaching against Western civilization and participatory governance. This is similar to the book used by Boko Haram, which also is linked to the IS (ADF, 2024).

It embraces unorthodox practices and esoteric interpretations of the Qur'an. The Lakurawa's activities have since spiralled out of local control. The group preached in public places, imposed levies on herders under the guise of Zakat and flogged villagers for playing music or dancing and chastising them for un-Islamic activities (Abiodun, 2024).

The Negative Impact of the Lakuruwas in North Western Nigeria

As the Lakurawa is expanding the frontiers of conflict in the North West, its impact on an already fragile region must be closely monitored. The group's presence in an area already deeply affected by banditry violence will worsen security challenges for communities and complicate the role of other non-state community-based security actors in the region, such as the Yan Sakai. In addition, efforts by the Lakurawa to cooperate or merge with local bandit groups or armed groups such as Boko Haram could further compound security threats and regionalize the conflict. The fragmentation and multiplication of armed groups throughout the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin highlight the need for greater and more effective conflict-prevention mechanisms, as well as greater investment in stabilization programming (UNIDIR, 2025).

Response from the Government

In response, Nigerian security forces launched air and ground assaults on camps belonging to the group, resulting in the seizure of stolen cattle and the forced retreat of the group toward Borgu, a "strategic area near the Nigeria-Benin border," according to a report by Zagazola Makama, an Independent counter terrorism and crime prevention network based in the Lake Chad region. The researchers John Sunday Ojo, of the Institute of Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University in the Netherlands, and Ezenwa E. Olumba, of the Royal Holloway University of London's Conflict, Violence, & Terrorism Research Center, argue that such operations have not stopped Boko Haram or its affiliates in the past. They said a lack of preventive intelligence operations to stop terror groups from infiltrating communities is a major challenge." The reliance of communities on groups like the Lakurawa for protection made it possible for a band of armed herders in Mali to become a powerful terror group in Nigeria," Ojo and Olumba wrote. "This situation shows how security agencies in Nigeria have failed these communities."(ADF, 2024).Therefore, the military, declared nine members of the group wanted. They are Abu Khadijah, Abdurrahman, Dadi Gumba a.k.a Abu Muhammed, Usman Shehu, Abu Yusuf, Musa Wa'a, Ibrahim Suyeka, Ba Sulhu and Idris Taklakse (Abiodun, 2024).

Conclusion

A resurgent armed group, the Lakurawa is plaguing the North West of Nigeria, adding to the victimization faced by communities already deeply affected by banditry violence, farmer-herder conflicts and climate change.

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