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The Dead Can No Longer Die: Insurgency and the Crisis of Security Governance in Nigeria.

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[0217] Abstract

Since Boko Haram declared war on the Nigerian state in 2009, the country has lived in a permanent emergency that has stopped feeling like one. Death tolls that once horrified now pass with little notice. Military declarations of victory recur with numbing regularity, and the promises of governance reform accumulate unimplemented and largely unread. This paper asks what happens to a state and its people when mass political violence becomes routine enough that the dead no longer register as the dead, when grief is translated into administrative language and security failure is folded into strategic continuity. Working from a desk-based review of academic scholarship, institutional reports, verified conflict data, and policy analysis, it traces three structural features of Nigeria's security governance crisis: a counterinsurgency doctrine too rigid to adapt, a political economy in which elite interests are served by the conflict's continuation, and an accountability deficit so entrenched that institutional reform has become structurally impossible within present arrangements. The argument is that sustainable security in Nigeria depends less on military recalibration than on a comprehensive reconstitution of governance, one built around accountability, genuine community inclusion, and transparent legitimacy. Without that reconstitution, the security crisis will go on consuming lives at rates that normalization has rendered politically tolerable, even as they remain morally unacceptable.

Keywords: Counterinsurgency, Governance failure, Insurgency, Normalization of violence, Political economy, Security governance.

1. Introduction

When Death Becomes Background Noise

"I have buried four of my neighbours this year. Nobody came. Nobody counted them. They are not in any report I have seen. They died, and the government continued." - A resident of rural Borno State, as documented by Amnesty International (2025).

In December 2015, President Muhammadu Buhari announced that Boko Haram had been "technically defeated". A great deal of work was being done by that single qualifier. It opened a grammatical shelter in which reality and the official record could sit side by side, neither obliged to confront the other. The world moved on. Less than a decade later, in May 2025 alone, Nigeria recorded the highest number of violent incidents of any country in Africa in a single month: 365 events that left at least 635 people dead and 182 abducted (Madueke, 2026). Between February and June 2025, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) carried out twenty-two coordinated attacks on the military's fortified "supercamp" positions, killing scores of soldiers, seizing materiel, and pressing the very territorial claims the strategy had been designed to prevent (EUAA, 2025). Between November 2024 and April 2025, Nextier SPD

logged 252 attacks on Nigerian security and civilian targets, with more than 100 military personnel and over 200 civilians killed. Those figures moved through policy briefings and then disappeared, never generating the institutional crisis they warranted (Vanguard, 2025).

These are not the statistics of an emergency. They are the statistics of a normalized condition, one in which mass violence is no longer an aberration demanding an extraordinary response but a permanent feature of the landscape that the state has learned to administer rather than resolve. The title of this paper is not a rhetorical excess. To say that the dead can no longer die is to describe a governance condition with some precision. In a country where tens of thousands have been killed since 2009, where displacement has become generational, and where communities in the north-east have known little but war for close to two decades, the dead have accumulated beyond the state's capacity to mourn them, beyond the political system's incentive to prevent them, and beyond the public's ability to register them as individual human losses. Death has been institutionalized. Once institutional, it becomes inevitable, not because violence is natural but because governance is arranged so that the conditions producing it are never dismantled. Why, then, after fifteen years, hundreds of billions of Naira in security spending, and a succession of offensives, each announced with them, did Boko Haram reach into fresh territory and achieve a tactical sophistication that Nigerian security forces have repeatedly failed to match? The answer is not principally military. It is political, institutional, and structural: a governance failure so deep that it has become the very condition in which security responses are formulated and continue to fall short. Obi (2024) identifies the mechanism. When governance systematically shuts communities out of the institutions that decide their survival, those communities become available for the recruitment and radicalization that insurgencies require. Fifteen years of evidence in Nigeria have not falsified that claim. It has confirmed it repeatedly, at enormous human cost.

Research Objectives

This paper pursues four connected objectives. The first is to document the structural characteristics of Nigeria's security governance failure, tracing the specific institutional, political, and economic mechanisms through which insecurity is produced and reproduced rather than contained and resolved. The second is to analyse normalization itself: the process by which catastrophic violence becomes politically and socially tolerable, and what that tolerance does to the institutional capacity for reform. The third is to examine the distance between Nigeria's official counterinsurgency discourse and its operational reality, with particular attention to the 2025 collapse of the supercamp strategy and the persistence of institutional rigidity in the face of ISWAP's tactical evolution. The fourth, and the most practically urgent, is to develop a governance reform framework adequate to the depth of the problem, one that moves beyond prescribing security operations to confront the political economy of insecurity itself.

Significance and Relevance

Before reaching for analytical frameworks, it is worth dwelling on what this crisis means for human lives. In November 2025, at least 402 people, most of them schoolchildren, were kidnapped across four northern states in a single month, surpassing the scale of the 2014 Chibok abductions that briefly seized the world's conscience (Global Centre for R2P, 2026). The November 2025 kidnappings drew a fraction of that response, not because they were less serious but because the country had lived with this violence long enough that the threshold for shock had drifted out of reach. This is what normalization does: it does not make violence acceptable in any moral sense, but it strips away the political urgency that might otherwise turn moral unacceptability into institutional action.

The crisis carries implications for global stability well beyond West Africa. As the continent's most populous nation and largest economy, home to more than 230 million people, Nigeria's instability reverberates far past its borders (Madueke, 2026). In December 2024, ACLED ranked the country fifth globally for conflict severity; in 2025, it placed sixth on the Global Terrorism Index. ISWAP's deepening integration into the Islamic State's global network, marked by the creation of Maktab al-Furqan, the IS West Africa office, has turned the Lake Chad basin into a significant node in transnational terrorism, adding to European migration pressures and destabilizing the Sahel (Soufan Centre, 2025). A 2024 NOI

Polls survey found that seven in ten Nigerians described the situation as “dreadful” (Madueke, 2026). Seven in ten. In a functioning democracy, such a figure would amount to a mandate for change, and the tragedy lies in understanding why it has not become one.

2. Literature Review

Boko Haram, ISWAP, and How We Got Here

Mohammed Yusuf did not set out to build a terrorist organization. He set out to build a religious community that rejected what he saw as the corruption of secular education and the long abandonment of northern Muslim communities by a state whose promises had turned to ash. His Maiduguri movement drew fewer followers not because its ideology was more compelling, but because the conditions of life it spoke to were entirely real: poverty, unemployment, institutional neglect, and the bitter gap between oil wealth and community destitution. When Nigerian security forces killed Yusuf in police custody in 2009, filmed the extrajudicial execution, and circulated the footage, they did not destroy a movement. They handed it a martyrdom narrative and a permanent recruitment argument (Obi, 2015). Much of the insurgency that followed was built on the memory of what the state had done to its founder, and that memory proved far more durable than any military operation designed to erase it.

The subsequent trajectory is extensively documented: territorial expansion, the 2014 Chibok abductions, the 2015 affiliation with the Islamic State and adoption of the ISWAP name, the 2016 split between the JAS wing under Shekau and the ISWAP wing aligned with the global IS network, and the 2021 killing of Shekau and absorption of JAS survivors into ISWAP (International Crisis Group, 2025; Soufan Center, 2025). ISWAP has since established control across the Lake Chad basin and, by 2025, was conducting drone attacks on Nigerian military positions and coordinating with IS global command in ways that suggest it has matured from a domestic insurgency into a component of a transnational terrorist architecture. What the scholarly and policy literature has been slower to track is the Nigerian state's own part, through institutional failure, corruption, and political prioritization that enable each phase of that evolution. Obi (2015), in a foundational rethinking of the Boko Haram phenomenon, makes an argument whose importance is hard to overstate: the insurgency is not reducible to Islam, ideology, or cultural resistance. It is better understood as a manifestation of governance failure that produces radicalization by denying communities legitimate institutional channels for their grievances. Governance failure is not the backdrop to the insurgency. It is its engine.

Security Governance: What Failure Looks Like from the Inside

Scholarship on security governance in conflict-affected African states converges on findings that the Nigerian record amply confirms. Military-centric counterinsurgency that neglects political and developmental dimensions tends to fail over the long term, not occasionally or in exceptional circumstances but as a structural pattern (International Crisis Group, 2025). Corruption within the security forces is not simply a symptom of broader dysfunction; it is an active driver of insurgent recruitment. When soldiers extort checkpoint fees from the people they are meant to protect, when officers loot civilian property during operations, and when allegations of torture in custody meet institutional silence, the security forces do not shrink the insurgency's recruitment pool.

The single most significant piece of institutional evidence here is the 2020 preliminary examination by the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, which found reasonable grounds to believe that both Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity (Global Centre for R2P, 2026). This was no peripheral legal observation. It was a finding, by the most authoritative international body for atrocity accountability, that Nigeria's own security apparatus had contributed to the crisis it was nominally fighting. The political response was minimal; the institutional response was effectively nonexistent. That silence is itself part of the pattern this paper traces, in which failures occur and recur without consequence. Obi (2023) frames this

dynamic through his analysis of how extreme labels – "terrorist", "militant", and "criminal" – operate in governance discourse to mask the structural conditions that produce violence and to justify responses that perpetuate rather than resolve it. Where governance narratives rest on labelling rather than structural analysis; the conditions generating violence go permanently unaddressed, and the label comes to stand in for understanding.

The Political Economy of Persistence: A less-examined strand of the literature bears directly on this paper's central claim. It concerns the political economy of insurgency persistence: not why insurgencies are militarily hard to defeat, but why governing elites may lack the incentive to defeat them even when they have the capacity to do so. Conflict generates opportunities. Defence procurement opens avenues for corruption, emergency powers bypass democratic oversight, security imperatives justify the diversion of resources, and the politics of fear mobilize electoral constituencies while concentrating executive authority (Obi, 2024). These incentive structures require no conspiratorial elite deliberately sustaining the war. They require only institutional arrangements that make continuation profitable and reform costly, a far lower bar, and one that Nigeria's current architecture clears with dispiriting ease. Obi's (2024) analysis of civil society and violent extremism carries the argument down to the community level. When governance structures systematically exclude communities from the institutions that shape their material lives, those communities become available for recruitment and radicalization on which insurgencies depend. The exclusion is itself a driver of violence, which then justifies emergency governance, which entrenches the very exclusions that generate further violence. From the outside, the cycle looks like failure. From inside the institutions that perpetuate it, it looks like the usual way of doing things.

Theoretical Framework

This paper works within a political economy of insecurity framework that draws on three traditions. The first is the governance failure tradition, developed across the scholarship on state fragility and conflict in Africa, which holds that persistent armed conflict is driven less by ethnic hatred, religious extremism, or poverty as independent variables than by institutional arrangements that distribute power and resources in ways that generate and reproduce violent contestation (Madueke, 2026; International Crisis Group, 2025). In this account, the state is not the solution to the problem so much as, frequently, its primary architect.

The second is Obi's (2024) framework of governance failure as a structural producer of radicalization and violent extremism, which provides a more precise mechanism. The pathway from institutional exclusion to insurgent recruitment is not mysterious. Communities that cannot access justice, employment, physical security, or basic services through legitimate institutions are rational candidates for mobilization by those who offer these things in exchange for ideological commitment and armed service. The third tradition is the sociology of violence normalization, which examines how extraordinary levels of political violence become ordinary: how grief is bureaucratized, how institutional responses settle into routine, and how the political system loses the capacity to treat violence as the emergency it remains for those living through it. What these traditions share is a refusal to treat Nigeria's security crisis as a technical problem awaiting a technical fix. Security in Nigeria will not be secured by a better counterinsurgency doctrine or sharper military intelligence alone, though both matter at the margins. It will be secured, if at all, by a reconstitution of governance that removes the structural foundations on which violence is built and through which it is sustained.

3. Research Methodology

The paper employs a desk-based analytical method drawing on four categories of secondary sources, each chosen for transparency, institutional credibility, and verifiability through cross-referencing. The first is peer-reviewed scholarship on Nigerian insurgency, security governance, and political violence. The second is institutional and policy reporting from ACLED, the International Crisis Group, Amnesty International, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, the EUAA, and Nextier SPD. The third is specialist security intelligence analysis from SBM Intelligence, the Soufan Centre, and the Jamestown

Foundation. The fourth is a verified Nigerian and international scholarship, used to anchor the analysis in specific documented events.

A desk-based approach suits the task because the paper's core arguments concern structural and institutional patterns visible in the documentary record and because the security environment in north-eastern and north-western Nigeria makes conventional field research both ethically precarious and practically constrained. The temporal emphasis falls on 2023 to 2026. Where quantitative conflict data are used, their known limitations are acknowledged: systematic undercounting in areas with little media access, reporting delays, and contested attribution. The figures presented here are, therefore, lower bounds; the real death toll is higher, and the real displacement count larger. Where government statements and independent assessments conflict, the analysis favours sources with greater methodological transparency, reasoning that governments in active conflict have structural incentives to undercount failure and overstate success, and that independent analysis must account for these incentives.

Originality and Contribution

Most scholarship on Nigeria's security crisis takes the insurgency as its primary object: ISWAP's ideology, its territorial dynamics, its tactical evolution, or the military's counterinsurgency capacity. This paper shifts the analytical centre of gravity from the insurgency to the state, specifically to the governance architecture that has failed to contain it and whose failure is the insurgency's most essential enabling condition. The title performs that shift deliberately. Fifteen years of violence have persisted and, in governance terms, remained tolerable because of the political and institutional conditions that have enabled this. The second contribution is the paper's explicit treatment of normalization as a governance problem rather than merely a social or psychological one. Most accounts of normalization in the conflict literature focus on the experiences of affected communities. This paper argues that normalization is also a property of governance institutions: when violence comes to be expected, the institutional urgency needed to drive reform dissipates, and the political cost of failure falls in ways that allow structural causes to remain permanently unaddressed. The third contribution extends Obi's (2024) governance failure framework, developed mainly in relation to the origins of violent extremism, to the problem of its perpetuation. The same structural mechanisms that produce insurgency also sustain it, and policy that addresses symptoms while leaving those structures intact will keep failing. That has implications not only for Nigeria but also for the wider literature on insurgency persistence in governance-deficient states.

4. Results and Discussion

The Supercamp Collapse: What Military Failure Looks Like

The most visible recent dimension of Nigeria's security governance failure carries an irony that would be darkly comic if the consequences were not so grave. The supercamp strategy, introduced in 2019 as the military's primary counterinsurgency architecture, was meant to solve a genuine problem: how to defend a vast, thinly populated territory against a mobile insurgency with limited resources. The chosen solution was consolidation. Personnel and equipment would be concentrated into fortified hubs in major population centres, exposure to ambushes reduced, and the bases would be used as platforms for offensive operations. In theory, the approach was defensible. In practice, it created precisely the conditions ISWAP's tactical evolution was built to exploit. Having absorbed Shekau's JAS faction after he died in 2021, ISWAP read the supercamp strategy clearly. At night, it cut the roads and bridges around a base, severing any prospect of reinforcement, and then moved in, often with weapons taken from the previous operation and the one before that. Between February and June 2025, such an attack happened twenty-two times. Soldiers died, vehicles and weapons were seized, and the military lost the territory it had consolidated (Soufan Centre, 2025; EUAA, 2025).

In April 2025, Borno State's governor publicly warned of a Boko Haram comeback, and the Shehu of Borno claimed that at least three local government areas had fallen under insurgent control. The military disputed both claims. As SBM Intelligence observed, however, with each new attack, that denial grows harder to sustain (SBM Intelligence, 2025). What the collapse reveals is not merely a

tactical miscalculation but a failure of oversight and accountability. A functioning civil-military accountability relationship would have generated institutional pressure for strategic revision as the vulnerabilities became apparent, whether through legislative oversight, independent security review, or civil society monitoring. What existed instead was a culture of institutional self-protection in which failures were neither publicly acknowledged nor institutionally addressed. The national counter-terrorism strategy, according to SBM Intelligence (2025), had not been significantly updated since 2021. ISWAP, by contrast, updated its strategy continuously. The asymmetry is not mysterious; it is the predictable product of an accountability architecture that insulates security institutions from the pressure to learn from failure.

The Political Economy of a War That Will Not End: Beneath the tactical failures lies a political economy that explains, with uncomfortable clarity, why those failures persist without producing the reform they ought to demand. Defence procurement in Nigeria is marked by an opacity and elite capture that the governance architecture has proven unable to correct. Emergency powers justified by the insurgency have repeatedly been used to concentrate executive authority and weaken legislative oversight. And the geographic concentration of the conflict in the north-east, a region politically marginal relative to the southern economic and political centres, lowers the political cost of security failure for elites whose electoral bases and economic interests lie largely elsewhere. Obi (2024) names the structural mechanism with some precision: governance structures that exclude communities from decisions affecting their survival generate the grievance insurgents exploit, and those same exclusions shield governing elites from the full consequences of security failure. The communities of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa bear the mortality cost of the insurgency while holding minimal influence over the security decisions made in their name. This asymmetry is not incidental to the insurgency's persistence. It is one of its structural foundations. The emergence of new armed groups since 2023, Lakurawa in Sokoto and Kebbi and Mamuda in Kwara, makes the point with dispiriting clarity. Both exploit weak state capacity, porous borders, socioeconomic deprivation, and eroding trust in government, the very conditions Obi (2015) identified as foundational to Boko Haram's emergence more than a decade earlier (Madueke, 2026). The appearance of new groups is not a new crisis. It is the same crisis presenting itself in a new geography, and until the socioeconomic and governance conditions that feed insurgent recruitment are dismantled, geography is the only variable that changes.

The Face of Normalization: Perhaps the most significant and least theorized dimension of the crisis is the normalization that makes everything described above politically sustainable. Set two moments side by side. In April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno State, and the response was extraordinary: a global campaign under #BringBackOurGirls reached heads of state, mobilized international diplomatic pressure, and sustained the kind of moral outrage that briefly made governance accountability feel within reach. In November 2025, at least 402 people, most of them schoolchildren, were kidnapped across four northern states in a single month (Global Centre for R2P, 2026). Measured in political pressure, international attention, and institutional consequence, the response was a fraction of what Chibok had generated. Not because Nigerians had come to care less about their children, but because fifteen years of accumulated violence had pushed the threshold for shock past what people can sustainably maintain.

This normalization has direct and measurable institutional consequences. When violence is expected, the political cost of security failure falls, and the reform pressure that effective democracies depend on dissolves into fatalism. When death tolls become metrics, objects of analysis rather than tragedies demanding response, those responsible for governance are insulated from the moral accountability that might otherwise force change. Obi (2023) traces the process through the operation of extreme labels: once victims are pre-categorized as "insurgents", "militants", or "criminals", their deaths are converted from moral claims on governance into administrative entries. The governance failures that produced those deaths can then continue without consequence, because the dead have been defined out of the population that the state is obliged to protect. The Borno resident quoted at the opening of this paper describes the condition from its human interior. Those four buried neighbours appear in no Nextier SPD report, no ACLED database, and no official casualty figures. They were not

counted, and so, in governance terms, they were not dead at all. In this sense, the dead can no longer die. They are simply never registered as having lived.

Policy Implications

The implications of this analysis point unambiguously toward fundamental governance reconstitution rather than the incremental tactical adjustments that have defined Nigerian security policy for fifteen years. Three carry particular weight. First, the counterinsurgency strategy needs to be redesigned so that developmental and political dimensions become primary rather than supplementary. Military force fails comprehensively and repeatedly without improvements in governance, service delivery, economic opportunity, and the extension of legitimate institutional authority into areas the state has abandoned. The supercamp strategy is only the latest evidence of a pattern that runs through Nigeria's security history. Obi (2024) is unambiguous on this point: civil society must be resourced as a genuine partner in security provision, not merely consulted and then sidelined when strategic decisions are actually taken.

Secondly, accountability mechanisms for security force conduct need to be strengthened urgently and, just as importantly, credibly. The ICC's 2020 finding that Nigerian security forces committed war crimes remains an institutional assessment without an adequate institutional response. Impunity for security force abuses perpetuates the civilian alienation from the state on which insurgencies depend for their sustainability. Accountability here is not a liberal luxury. It is a counterinsurgency requirement. Thirdly, the political economy of insecurity has to be confronted directly rather than managed at the margins. That means transparency reform in defence procurement, genuine legislative oversight of security expenditure, and a decentralization of governance that gives affected communities meaningful authority over the decisions that shape their lives. Without these structural changes, security sector reform will remain a discourse conducted largely for external consumption, processed into reports and filed beside the unimplemented strategies that came before.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

What Accountability Demands: Every person who died in Nigeria's insurgency has a name. There are names for the children of Chibok and for those kidnapped in November 2025; names for the soldiers killed in supercamp attacks and the farmers who never came back from their fields; and names for the young men who joined Boko Haram and ISWAP from communities the Nigerian state had written off long before any insurgency arrived to claim them. Over fifteen years, these names have accumulated into a weight that governance has declined to carry. The dead have been converted into statistics, and statistics, unlike names, do not demand answers. Nigeria's security crisis is a governance production. It was produced by institutional arrangements that denied communities legitimate channels for their grievances. It has been sustained by political economies that make reform costly and continuation profitable.

It has been insulated from accountability by a normalization of violence that removes the political urgency that democratic systems need to self-correct. And it has been obscured by governance discourses built on labels rather than structural analysis, discourses that name problems without interrogating the conditions that produce them. Obi (2024) frames the necessary response with appropriate clarity: civil society autonomy, community inclusion, transparent governance, and accountability for institutional failure. These are not aspirational values floating free of the security problem. They are the structural preconditions for security itself. Until Nigerian governance can deliver them, not as rhetorical commitments but as institutional realities, the insurgency will keep finding in the state's failures the fuel that military operations cannot extinguish. In Nigeria's governance discourse, the dead can no longer die. They have been processed, categorized, and filed. The task of scholarship, and of policy, is to insist that they be named again and that the systems that failed them be reformed before those names multiply further.

The following recommendations are addressed to the Nigerian federal government, the state governments of conflict-affected zones, the National Assembly, civil society organizations, and the international community. They are offered not as a checklist but as a framework for the governance

reconstitution this analysis identifies as necessary. (a) **To the Federal Government:** Redesign the national counter-terrorism strategy, last updated in 2021, while insurgent tactics have evolved continuously, so that governance, development, and accountability sit alongside military operations. Establish independent civilian oversight of defence procurement and security force conduct, with real authority to investigate, recommend, and enforce. Introduce transitional justice mechanisms that address documented security force abuses and signal credibly to affected communities that accountability applies to all parties to the conflict, not only to insurgents. (b) **To State Governments in Conflict-Affected Zones:** Prioritize service delivery in health, education, and economic opportunity in the communities identified as insurgent recruitment pools. Build transparent engagement processes that give affected populations a meaningful voice in local security planning rather than notification after the fact. Partner with civil society organisations to monitor governance delivery and to document security force conduct independently and rigorously. (c) **To the National Assembly:** Exercise genuine oversight of security budgets, with detailed public accountability for expenditure outcomes. Establish a standing committee on security governance reform empowered to review and recommend revisions to counterinsurgency strategy. Ensure that the communities most affected by insecurity, particularly in the north-east, whose political marginalization has been both a cause and a consequence of the insurgency, are represented in security policy deliberations rather than being administered from a distance. (d) **To Civil Society:** Document governance failures and security force abuses with the rigour and independence that give documentation its authority. Facilitate dialogue between communities and security institutions. And resist co-optation by state actors seeking to fold civil society into governance architectures that are managed rather than reformed. Obi (2024) is precise here: civil society's effectiveness in countering violent extremism depends on exactly this autonomy. The moment it becomes an instrument of governance rather than an accountability mechanism for it, its value to affected communities dissolves. (e) **To the International Community:** Condition security assistance on verifiable accountability reform rather than operational cooperation alone. Support the funding and independence of Nigerian civil society monitoring organizations. Engage ECOWAS and the African Union in building regional accountability frameworks that reduce the political cover available to national governments for persistent institutional failure. And resist the temptation to treat Nigeria's security crisis as primarily a regional security problem requiring regional security solutions: at its foundation, it is a governance problem requiring governance transformation.

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