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A Comparative Analysis of Non-State Armed Groups and Bandits

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Abstract

The difference between Non-state armed groups (NSAG) and bandits is one that stakeholders often confuse or purposely do not differentiate. The purpose behind this lack of precision is due to the seemingly similar and inter-connected traits between these two categories of villains. The purpose of this paper is to take an empirical approach through a comparative essay. This heuristic approach will permit stakeholders to delineate, differentiate or identify patterns and behaviors that characterize each group. The conclusion shows that while NSAG and bandits could sometimes have common or overlapping malicious actions, their differentiation lies in their aim of origins and final objectives, while NSAG are driven by politic, ethnic, or social endeavors, bandits' remains focus only on economic gain.

Keywords

Non-State Armed Groups, Bandits

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era, nations worldwide are confronted with a plethora of challenges, both from external sources and from within their own societies. It has been demonstrated that the aforementioned categories of threats are analogous in terms of their composition and the entities responsible for their perpetration. A considerable number of states across the globe are currently grappling with the formidable challenge of combating the proliferation of Non-state Armed Groups (NSAG) and bandits. This issue will be the primary focus of this written analysis, with a particular emphasis on the sub-Saharan African region. Indeed, the distinction between non-state actors and bandits is one that is difficult to delineate due to the overlap in their traits and characteristics.

The objective of this paper is to elucidate the intricacies of these groups and

render their issues comprehensible and actionable for scholars, chroniclers, and those who endeavor to counter their actions by defense and security forces. We will therefore initiate the analysis by establishing a clear distinction between the characteristics, modus operandi, and behavior of NSAG and bandits. Subsequent to this initial step, we will proceed to evaluate how these entities are identified by international law and how they are apprehended by state governments.

In conclusion, the distinguishing characteristics of non-state armed groups and bandits include motivation, structural organization, territorial control, laws, and the choice of government forces employed to combat them. These elements serve as the foundation for a comparative empirical analytic approach and will be used on this ground throughout the paper.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study was predominantly qualitative in nature. It is imperative to explicitly state that the groups employed as exemplars in this paper are those that have attained preeminent national, regional, and international renown. The distinguishing characteristic of these groups is that they are already understood and classified as either bandits or NSAG by virtue of their public perception or official state designation within their respective operational domains. It is evident that these groups have gained notoriety over time, thereby enabling a comprehensive distinction. The utilization of a comparative approach, predicated on the groups' status and reputation, facilitates a comprehensive overview of the subject matter for the reader.

2.1. What Is a Non-State Armed Group?

A Non-State Armed Group (NSAG) is defined as an organized entity that operates independently of government control and utilizes armed violence to achieve political, ideological, or economic objectives. These groups, including rebels, militias, and insurgents, function beyond the reach of state authority, frequently exercising control over specific territories, adhering to a structured command hierarchy, and engaging in military-style operations (Hofmann & Schneckener, 2011). Despite the absence of a universally recognized international treaty that provides a comprehensive definition, entities such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations have developed specific criteria to identify them within the context of armed conflict (Bouchet-Saulnier, n.d.).

In order to be classified as a non-state armed group, as opposed to a criminal gang or an unorganized mob, a group must demonstrate the following characteristics:

- **Independence**: These actors do not operate within the formal military structures of any state.
- **Organization**: The group's organizational structure is characterized by a clearly delineated chain of command, a distinct group identity, and the capacity to execute military operations through meticulous planning.
- **Political motivation**: In contrast to purely criminal groups, NSAGs typically

aspire to influence government policy, gain autonomy, or overthrow a regime.

- **Territorial Control**: Many NSAGs exercise "de facto" authority over specific geographic areas, and in some cases, they provide services such as justice or healthcare to the local population (Ibid).

The term "NSAG" functions as an overarching designation that encompasses a diverse range of subcategories, each with its own unique characteristics and operational modalities. Although there is a possibility that analogous traits and characteristics may coincide and manifest within the same group, the objective of this example is to provide the reader with a clear understanding.

- **Insurgent/Rebel groups**: The objective is to overthrow the government in power (e.g., **the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), or the Indigenous People of the Biafra**).
- **Liberation Movements**: Engaging in resistance against colonial rule or advocating for self-determination. (**e.g., The African National Congress (ANC), The Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA)**).
- **Militias**: Local groups were formed for the purpose of self-defense or to express support or opposition for a particular state. (**e.g., The March 23 Movement (M23), Seleka, Anti-balakas**).
- **Violent Extremist Groups**: The motivation to engage in extremist activities is often rooted in specific religious or ideological beliefs, as evidenced by the actions of extremist. (e.g**., Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab**).
- **Warlords**: Individuals who employ armed force for the purpose of preserving their economic and political dominance over a specific region (e.g., **Thomas Lubanga, Joshua Blahyi, and Josef Kony**).

A significant distinction between NSAG and bandits pertains to the legal responsibility before the law. In contrast to bandits who are subject to national laws, NSAGs are bound by international laws. Notwithstanding their non-state status, NSAGs are subject to particular obligations under International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

To facilitate the reader's understanding of the differentiation between NSAGs and bandits, it is important to state that, from a legal perspective, IHL applies to the former group only when the conflict meets the requisite internal level of organization and intensity of the violence thresholds. Banditry, in contrast, below that threshold, remains primarily a matter of domestic criminal law.

- **Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions**: All parties involved in armed conflict—including non-state actors—are obligated to ensure the humane treatment of non-combatants.
- **Prohibited acts**: The aforementioned actors are strictly forbidden from committing war crimes, such as targeting civilians, taking hostages, or using child soldiers.
- **Humanitarian Access**: In principle, the provision of humanitarian aid to ci-

vilians within the territory of a state is contingent upon the authorization of said state to impartial humanitarian organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Ibid).

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) recognizes two primary types of armed conflict, A—International Armed Conflict (IAC), B—Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC). The classification is of the utmost importance because it determines which specific legal rules apply to the parties involved.

(A) IAC

The definition of "international armed conflict" (IAC) is the use of armed force by two or more states against each other. The use of armed force is a significant component of the definition, and it implies a certain level of aggression. The governing legal basis principles of this regime are articulated in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocol I.

(B) NIAC

A non-international armed conflict, also referred to as a civil war, is defined as an internal armed conflict within the territorial boundaries of a state that involves either government forces or organized armed groups in conflict with each other. Legal Basis: The governing legal basis principles are outlined in Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II.

In addition to the two aforementioned conflicts, there exists yet another category of armed conflict: the internationalized armed conflict.

(C) Internationalized armed conflict

An Internationalized Non-International Armed Conflict (INIAC) is defined as a civil war that has become internationalized due to the intervention of a foreign state. While not a formal legal category under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), it describes a factual shift in which an internal conflict acquires international dimensions (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2026).

In a standard NIAC, rebels can be prosecuted for simply taking up arms. In the event that the conflict escalates to an international level, prisoners of war (POWs) may be designated as such, which would preclude them from being prosecuted for actions that are considered lawful within the context of warfare. Prisoners of war (POW) status is a specific legal standing under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) that grants captured individuals protections and rights during an International Armed Conflict (IAC). The primary governing body is the Third Geneva Convention (GCIII) and Additional Protocol I (API) (Ibid).

In the preceding paragraph, a comprehensive overview of the legal framework pertaining to the treatment of a prisoner of war is presented, with particular emphasis on the factors that determine this treatment, contingent on the status of the individual concerned. The aforementioned fundamental principles serve as a basis for distinguishing NSAG from bandits. This concept also incorporates the principles of jus ad bellum, which pertains to the conditions under which states are permitted to engage in warfare. Jus in Bello, meanwhile, refers to the rules that govern the conduct of parties during an armed conflict (Stahn, 2006). In the following

paragraph, an exposition of their ideology and objectives will be presented.

2.2. Presentation of NSAG Ideology and Objectives

In contradistinction to the mere bandits, NSAG have articulated explicit objectives and ideology. It is evident that the objectives of these entities are not invariably aligned with economic imperatives; rather, they are often articulated as being contingent upon a broader overarching objective or raison d'être. The objective that they have delineated is to prioritize political, confessional, and identity reasoning. These objectives are both meticulous and well-founded. In the majority of cases, armed groups receive support from the local population, for whom they profess to be fighting.

The objectives of armed groups exhibit significant variation based on their origins, ideologies, and the social contexts in which they operate. At a fundamental level, the objective is to establish, protect, or challenge the prevailing social and political order through the application of force (McQuinn & Courchesne, 2020). A pervasive phenomenon among these groups is the pursuit of challenging the state's authority or legitimacy.

(A) Political aims

The following four primary types of political purposes, regime change, self-determination, political inclusion, revolutionary agendas, are subject to evaluation: While there is intermittent interconnection among them, it is imperative to distinguish between them and identify the reasoning behind their opposition to the state, while giving clear examples.

- Regime Change: The overthrow of the prevailing government and the subsequent establishment of a new leadership.

The March 23 Movement (M23) has undergone a substantial shift in its objectives, transitioning from the pursuit of local ethnic protection to the initiation of a formal campaign for regime change in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).** The organization's initial concentration on the rights of the Tutsi minority in the East has been superseded by its current overt objective of overthrowing President Félix Tshisekedi's government (International Crisis Group, 2025).

- Self-Determination: Engaging in efforts to achieve autonomy and self-governance, or to secure the rights of a particular ethnic, religious, or social group.

The Niger Delta self-determination movement aspires to achieve greater autonomy, resource control, and environmental justice for the region's ethnic communities. This pursuit is driven by a history of marginalization, poverty, and oil pollution that has persisted for decades. In lieu of outright secession, the agitation frequently centers on internal self-determination, encompassing the control of local resources and the determination of their own political and economic futures within the **Nigerian state** (Ikeke, 2018).

- Political inclusion: The objective is to address historical grievances or exclusion from state power.

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) has historically centered its struggle on the "historic political inclusion" of marginalized groups in **Sudan**. The initiative was initially conceptualized as a "New Sudan", a secular, democratic, and inclusive state predicated on citizenship as the fundamental criterion for political belonging, superseding considerations of ethnicity or religion (Du & Ponce de Leon, 2026).

- Revolutionary Agendas: The advancement of specific ideologies, such as Marxism and religious fundamentalism, is a key component in the transformation of society.

The African National Congress (ANC) is the governing party in **South Africa** and the oldest liberation movement on the African continent. While it is currently a mainstream political party, it functioned as an underground and exiled group for decades (1960-1990), fighting to overthrow the apartheid system (South African History Online, 2019).

(B) Economic and resources objectives

Two factors have been identified as the underlying causes of conflict among groups: space and resources (Bakayoko et al., 2021). This is the section in which the distinction between NSAG and bandits becomes blurred, as both groups seek to obtain resources for survival purposes. However, in this context, groups often assert that they possess a legitimate argument to justify their claim to the resources in question. In contrast to the actions of bandits, who are believed to act only on the basis of malevolence, NSAGs are believed to have a more justifiable reason for their predatory behaviors.

- Territorial Control: The establishment of "shadow governments" has been observed to involve the taxation of local populations and the management of resources.

In **Cameroon**, the formation of an Ambazonian[1] shadow government (Margolin & Neumann, 2025). is conventionally understood to signify the establishment of the **Interim Government (IG)**, which was initially proclaimed on October 1, 2017, subsequent to a symbolic declaration of independence from Cameroon. Throughout the years, the "government in exile" has undergone various transformations, including leadership shifts, cabinet restructurings, and internal divisions.

- Resource Extraction: The strategic management of valuable commodities, including minerals, timber, and drugs, is a critical aspect of operational funding.

The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) employs a sophisticated "competitive control" model to manage strategic resources in the **Lake Chad Basin** (Intelbrief, 2025). This model involves the strategic exchange of control over these resources among various groups, thereby ensuring a competitive and dynamic environment for resource management. In contrast to the predatory tactics

[1]Ambazonia, often referred to as "Ambaland" or the Federal Republic of Ambazonia, is a self-proclaimed breakaway state encompassing the English-speaking Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon.

employed by its rival, JAS (Boko Haram), ISWAP functions as a proto-state, engaging in regulatory oversight and taxation of critical economic sector (Stoddard, 2023).

- Predatory Activities: Engaging in the following illicit activities for financial gain: kidnapping, robbery, and extortion.

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is a militant group that has gained notoriety for its "predatory" violence against civilians in **Uganda**, the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), and South Sudan** (Fick, 2010). Among these exactions, the Abduction of Children: The utilization of child soldiers, male and female, in combat and sexual slavery, respectively, is a profound violation of human rights. The occurrence of violence and mutilation has been documented. The perpetrators of these crimes have been known to engage in acts of mass killing, rape, and the intentional mutilation of victims. Furthermore, these perpetrators have been responsible for looting and displacement. The practice of raiding villages for food and supplies has resulted in the displacement of a significant number of individuals, amounting to hundreds of thousands.

(C) Social and Governance Objective

As previously stated, political and economic objectives are of paramount importance. However, it must be noted that the social and governance objective may very well be the most crucial aspect for the NSAG (Stewart, 2021). This element ensures that NSAG actors are met with sympathy and support from the population. This support is essential for distinguishing this type of organization from mere bandits. While bandits systematically arm, rape, and loot the population, NSAG is not a paragon of virtue. Nevertheless, they endeavor to establish a robust domestic apparatus to ensure their survival and protect themselves from the national government. They also seek to garner political rentability and credibility from the international community. The National **Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)** serves as a pertinent exemplar in this regard, as it demonstrates a clear inclination to subjugate and coax the populace into compliance. The MNLA purports to serve as a representative body for the marginalized voices of the Sahel, particularly those of the Tuareg and other minority groups (Ananyev & Poyker, 2023).

- Service Provision: The provision of food, medicine, and social services is intended to achieve two primary objectives: first, to win "hearts and minds" through the demonstration of benevolence and care for the local populace; and second, to fulfill the fundamental needs of the community.
  - ➢ Redressing Marginalization

The MNLA's objectives include the termination of the systematic economic neglect of northern Mali, the implementation of equitable distribution of national resources, and the enhancement of access to fundamental services.

- Order and Justice: The provision of dispute resolution and security in areas where the state is absent or weak is of particular concern.

➢ Justice and equity

The movement's platform places significant emphasis on the principles of "peace and justice" for the Azawadian community, with the objective of addressing long-standing grievances that have persisted since previous peace accords that have ultimately proved unsuccessful.

➢ Social Stability

The MNLA's assertion of authority over specific regions has been a strategic move to establish a form of "rebel governance", aimed at providing fundamental security and mechanisms for dispute resolution. However, the effectiveness of this initiative has been hindered by internal conflict and competition with other NSAGs.

- Protecting Identity: The act of providing a defense for particular communities or ethnic groups against perceived threats.

➢ Cultural Preservation

A fundamental objective of the organization is the recognition and protection of Tuareg identity, language, and pastoralist way of life. The Tuareg people perceive these aspects of their culture to have been suppressed by the government, which is dominated by the southern regions of the country (Chauzal & Van Damme, 2015).

Although the preceding objectives may appear to be a standard undertaking for any conventional political party, NSAG is, in essence, a structured military entity that seeks to achieve decisive military victories and launch offensives against the regular army. In this regard, the military organization of these groups is characterized by a high level of sophistication, as evidenced by their substantial numbers of combatants, well-developed leadership structures, and refined military strategies (Maddocks, 2024). In contrast, bandits typically exhibit a lower level of organization and operational effectiveness. However, bandits may be able to operate more effectively in states that are inherently unstable, such as Haiti. The Republic of Haiti is currently grappling with a pervasive security and humanitarian crisis, widely regarded as a failed or collapsed state. Armed gangs exercise control over approximately 80% - 90% of the capital city, Port-au-Prince. In the aftermath of the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, the nation has been engulfed in a state of chaos, with violent coalitions establishing a power vacuum, thereby rendering the police powerless and precipitating the collapse of government infrastructure (Sabatini, 2024).

➢ Tactical and Military Objectives

In the context of active conflict, the primary objectives of military entities transition to the attainment of military superiority. This strategic shift in priorities is characterized by the implementation of tactical and military operations designed to achieve this overarching aim.

➢ Neutralizing Enemies

This dynamic is further compounded by the strategic objective of neutralizing or capturing opposing combatants or strategic territory.

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), an al-Qaeda affiliate, has demonstrated a marked escalation in its territorial expansion and the number of opposing combatants it has early 2026 period. The group's tactics have evolved from sporadic, dispersed attacks to a more systematic strategy of encirclement, blockading major population centers, and seizing control of key infrastructure (Eizenga, 2025).

- Disruption

The objective of this strategy is to weaken state forces by severing supply lines, thereby disrupting the flow of essential resources such as fuel, food, and ammunition. The JNIM has imposed a months-long economic blockade on Bamako. By cutting off major supply routes, they have caused severe fuel shortages, power outages, and skyrocketing prices.

The JNIM strategy entails the disruption of supply lines and the subjugation of rural regions, with the objective of compelling military juntas within the designated area to engage in negotiations. The group exercises control over artisanal gold mining sites and utilizes coercive measures to ensure the compliance of local communities, thereby acquiring the resources necessary to sustain their operations. The JNIM has adopted an encirclement strategy in Burkina Faso and Mali, targeting commercial routes (e.g., the Bamako-Segou corridor) and isolating military units to their bases.

- Survival

To ensure survival, it is essential to engage in a "tactical pause" during peace processes. This pause allows for regrouping and rearming, two crucial steps in the process of ensuring survival and the continued functioning of the organization.

Despite the absence of a formal peace agreement, there have been sporadic, localized "arrangements" put in place to address humanitarian crises. However, these arrangements are often characterized by fragility and are frequently followed by a resumption of hostilities. In essence, these arrangements can be regarded as tactical retreats, providing the involved groups with a respite to regroup, regain momentum, and strengthen their position.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the NSAG, it is imperative to elucidate its distinguishing characteristics, organizational structure, and overarching objectives. The objective at this juncture is to undertake the same process to distinctly identify what is required for the purpose of this paper, a group of bandits. It is the objective of this article to facilitate the reader's comprehension of the distinction between the two entities, thereby enabling them to discern the distinguishing characteristics that set them apart. Therefore, it is imperative to categorize bandits according to their respective group or category.

2.3. The Differentiation of Composites between Banditry and NSAG

Bandits are principally profit-driven criminal actors who engage in activities such as robbery, kidnapping, and extortion for the purpose of personal enrichment. In contrast, NSAGs are organized entities that operate beyond the scope of state con-

trol, driven by specific political, ideological, or religious agendas, frequently aspiring to achieve territorial control or governance. Bandits exhibit opportunistic tendencies, characterized by the absence of rigid structures, in contrast to the conventional, defined command structures exhibited by NSAGs (Osasona, 2024). Here is the differentiation of composites between both groups:

- Motivation: Banditry is driven by economic gain (exploitation, extortion), while NSAGs are motivated by political change, religious ideology, or separatist agendas.
- Structure and Organization: Bandits frequently engage in criminal activities as part of loosely structured, flexible gangs or criminal networks. NSAGs frequently exhibit more formal structures, command control, and consistent recruitment strategies.
- Targeting: Bandits frequently engage in acts of extortion, kidnapping, or cattle rustling, often targeting civilians indiscriminately. NSAGs have been known to target state infrastructure, military forces, or specific demographics in pursuit of political objectives.
- Legitimacy and Ideology: Bandits are known to be devoid of a political agenda or ideology. In contrast, NSAGs frequently establish "violent legitimacy" or function as alternative governance providers in regions they dominate.
- Operational Area: While both may occupy similar geographical spaces, particularly in lawless zones, bandits are generally regarded as organized criminal groups rather than political insurgents. However, the distinction is becoming increasingly blurred in certain contexts, such as the Sahel (D'Amato & Baldaro, 2025).

A confounding element in the comparison of the two groups is the apparent convergence of their goals or the intermingling of their objectives. This perplexity has led numerous analysts, journalists, and other stakeholders in this domain to neglect the task of explicitly distinguishing between the groups and emphasizing their unique characteristics and behaviors.

In contemporary conflicts, the distinction between these two categories can become indistinct, thereby establishing a nexus between crime and terrorism.

- Hybridization: In the context of armed conflict, a political group (NSAG) may resort to "bandit tactics", including kidnapping, as a means of financing its war efforts.

Kidnapping has evolved from an opportunistic tactic into a central "financing architecture" for Boko Haram. As traditional funding sources, such as foreign donations and bank robberies, have faced increased scrutiny and military pressure, the group has shifted toward a highly structured, profit-seeking kidnapping industry to sustain its operations (Radford, 2021).

- Devolution: In the event that a rebel group loses its political leadership, the group may fracture into smaller, purely criminal bandit gangs.

The transition of **UNITA** (National Union for the Total Independence of **Angola**) from a formal revolutionary movement to what were often termed "bandits" was a complex shift driven by the loss of international support and the death of its

leader, Jonas Savimbi. The appellation "bandit" was employed by the Angolan government as a political instrument and by **UNITA** as a description of its survival tactics in its final years.

Cooperation: It has been posited that criminal organizations may offer logistical support or impose "taxes" on mining operations in exchange for security or advanced weaponry from extremist groups.

In regions such as the Sahel and West Africa, bandits and NSAGs have increasingly developed cooperative relationships, thereby blurring the distinction between politically motivated insurgents and criminal entities. This collaborative endeavor has enabled the sharing of resources, intelligence, and capabilities, thereby enhanced their effectiveness and fortified their position in the region (Ojo, 2004).

2.4. Categorization of Bandit Models

- Organized Criminal Groups/Syndicates: Organized groups engaged in illicit activities that necessitate specialized networks, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, and kidnapping for ransom.

The organizational charts of such entities are characterized by clearly delineated command structures, with leadership roles that include bosses, dons, captains, and soldiers, as observed in various examples such as Mafia organizations and drug cartels.

- Street/Youth Gangs: It is evident that neighborhood-based groups tend to prioritize the establishment of territorial dominance and the perpetration of illicit activities at the retail level.

In rural banditry, fluid networks and patron-client networks have been observed to exhibit a lesser degree of rigidity in comparison to other networks. These networks are characterized by their informal nature, with personal relationships, family ties, and shared traditional values serving as the foundation for their formation.

- **Area Boys (Agberos): In Lagos (Nigeria),** a term has been coined to describe loosely organized groups of young men who engage in activities that fall under the umbrella of extortion. These individuals, operating in a largely unregulated manner, target drivers, traders, and pedestrians, demanding financial compensation under the guise of providing an "informal security" service.
- Armed Robbers/Marauders: There are groups that have a specialization in violent robberies, community raids, and rustling.
- **Vumbunu Gang (Zimbabwe/South Africa):** A recent group of Zimbabwean armed robbers has been linked to the massive US$4 million Bulawayo Ecobank heist in 2025 and several other heists, often operating between Zimbabwe and South Africa.
- Kidnapping Syndicates: The organization has demonstrated a marked tendency toward the commission of "kidnapping for ransom" and abduction of individuals, with such incidents occurring in both highway settings and within

the confines of communities.

Kidnapping syndicates in Africa have evolved into sophisticated, transnational criminal enterprises. While this phenomenon is pervasive, it has reached particularly problematic levels in regions such as South Africa, Mozambique, and Nigeria, where the practice of "kidnapping-as-a-service" has emerged as a lucrative business model.

- **The Satar-Nangy Gang (Mozambique/South Africa)**: This syndicate is considered the progenitor of the kidnapping-for-ransom phenomenon targeting affluent businessmen in South Africa and Mozambique. It is led by prominent figures such as Momade Assife "Nini" Satar and Esmael Malude Ramos Nangy.
- Resource control groups. These actors have demonstrated a marked tendency to target and exert control over natural resources, including gold mining sites and agricultural land.

In Africa, the formation of resource control groups is often the result of the establishment of communities, ethnic groups, or armed organizations in resource-rich regions. These groups aim to manage, profit from, or gain independence over local resources, including oil, diamonds, and minerals. The formation of these groups is often precipitated by sentiments of neglect, marginalization, or environmental degradation (Olanrewaju et al., 2020).

- Piracy/Maritime Bandits: The entity in question has a particular expertise in the domain of maritime theft and hijacking.

Piracy and maritime banditry in Africa are concentrated in specific regions, with the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa being the most prominent hotspots. These groups frequently engage in oil theft, kidnapping for ransom, and armed robbery against commercial vessels.

2.5. Quantitative Data to Demonstrate the Impact of NGAS and Bandit across Nations

To enhance the empirical rigor of our research, it is advisable to complement our qualitative analysis with a quantitative one. The integration of these two methods will introduce a more heuristic dimension to the article. The subsequent discussion will employ quantitative data to elucidate the impact of NGAS and Bandit on nations and individuals.

The profound impact of NSAGs is evident, with their influence extending to hundreds of millions of individuals worldwide. This impact is manifested through territorial control, violence, and economic disruption. By the year 2025, these groups had evolved into quasi-state actors, exercising governance over substantial populations in the absence of legitimate government authority (Petrini, 2025). Recent years have seen a precipitous rise in the number of individuals residing in regions under the control of NSAGs.

➢ The Impact on Demographics and Society

Recent years have seen a precipitous rise in the number of individuals residing in regions under the influence of non-state armed groups. The geographic distri-

bution of individuals residing in regions under armed group control or contestation is predominantly concentrated across Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, select regions of Latin America, and South/Southeast Asia.

- As of late 2025, the population residing in areas under the control or contestation of armed groups stood at 204 million.
- It is estimated that 74 million individuals are currently living under the complete authority of these groups, representing an increase of 16 million since 2023.
- It is reported that 130 million people inhabit "contested" zones where the state and armed groups are actively engaged in a struggle for control.
- In regions across the globe, approximately 33 million individuals, constituting 18% of the global population, reside under the governance of NSAGs (Bamber-Zryd, 2025).

➢ Violence & Fatalities

The preponderance of NSAGs as the primary perpetrators of specific violent acts, particularly one-sided violence against civilians, is a salient concern. The primary concern pertains to the observation, as it has the potential to induce confusion with regular bandits. Indeed, the intricate interrelationship, particularly with regard to its impact on civilians, necessitates a meticulous and methodical analysis.

The objective is to provide a quantitative analysis of the security challenges posed by non-state actors, including political militias, rebel factions, and international terrorist networks. The analysis will examine the direct impact of these actors on society, in comparison (without disctinction) of regions experiencing civil conflict, such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Mayanmar, and Yemen. The objective is to demonstrate that the impact of these groups on a global scale is more detrimental and ongoing than that of civil wars, which are more frequently covered by television and subjected to close scrutiny.

- In 2024, 75% of one-sided violence fatalities were attributable to non-state actors (10,300 deaths), in contrast to the 3,400 deaths caused by state actors.
- In 2024, 130 active conflicts were documented, representing a more than two-fold increase compared to 15 years prior. The majority of these conflicts involved at least one NSAG.
- A 70% increase in missing persons was recorded by the Red Cross in 2025, with 284,000 individuals affected. This increase was primarily driven by conflicts involving non-state actors (Rustad, 2025).

➢ Economic & Developmental Impact

The presence of armed groups has been demonstrated to have a significant negative impact on national and regional development. This instability directly contributes to the escalation of internal conflict by engendering poverty, governmental instability, and social unrest.

- In the ten most conflict-affected countries, 30% to 68% of GDP is forfeited due to violence and displacement.

- Typically, a 20% cumulative loss in per capita GDP is observed five years after the onset of high-intensity conflict involving NSAGs.
- A study of countries with active armed groups reveals that a 5% to 10% delay in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is common, with education and infrastructure (SDGs 4 and 9) being the most impacted.
- It is estimated that South Sudan will incur an annual loss of $4 billion due to a combination of factors, including reduced productivity and the destruction of infrastructure resulting from the protracted nature of the conflict (Jundi, 2024).

➢ Humanitarian Access

The presence of armed groups has been demonstrated to impede the flow of humanitarian aid, effectively functioning as the "de facto" authority with which NGOs must engage. This phenomenon underscores the vulnerability of government and highlights the imperative for regional integration and collaborative efforts.

- A recent study revealed that 75% of the known armed groups (465 out of 614 identified by the ICRC) have established direct communication with humanitarian organizations to negotiate the provision of aid.
- A substantial proportion of the global population, constituting 90% of individuals residing in regions under the control of armed groups, is concentrated in the 31 countries that are deemed to be the most critical humanitarian crisis countries.
- In the year 2024, 96% of aid worker fatalities were attributed to national staff members. These individuals frequently encounter elevated levels of risk when traversing front lines that are under the control of NSAGs (ICRC, 2021).

The figures presented herein demonstrate the mounting influence of NSAG in diverse geographical regions worldwide. A comprehensive analysis encompasses a wide array of metrics, including demographic and economic factors, which collectively offer a nuanced perspective on the scope of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Consequently, the subsequent elaboration will expound on the ramifications of bandits on a global scale, employing the identical approach and patent illustrations. Adopting an oppositional stance toward the utilization of statistical data facilitates a more straightforward interpretation of the comparison employed in this study.

The emergence of organized banditry is often associated with conditions of weak governance, high levels of poverty, and high rates of unemployment.

The repercussions of banditry and organized criminal violence on national economies are significant and quantifiable, particularly in developing regions. In the period 2025-2026, banditry underwent a transformation, evolving from sporadic incidents of robbery to a systematic "kidnap-for-ransom" industry. This development subsequently became a significant impediment to food security and economic growth (UNODC, 2024).

2.6. Impact of NSAG and Banditry on the Sahel Region, the Caribbean, Nigeria, Latin America

These regions are impacted by high levels of banditry and organized crime due to a "perfect storm" of state fragility, economic exclusion, and geographic vulnerability. While each region has unique local drivers—like climate change in the Sahel or drug transit in the Caribbean—they share a common pattern: where the state fails to provide security and opportunity, criminal organizations step in as "alternative governors".

The Sahel region, the Caribbean, Nigeria, and Latin America have been particularly affected by the presence of bandits and criminal organizations. This phenomenon is attributable to a combination of factors, including weak governance, entrenched poverty, high inequality, and porous borders that facilitate illicit trafficking. It has been demonstrated that these regions are susceptible to security vacuums, which permit criminal gangs to exploit rural distress and gain territorial control through violence, kidnapping, and the illicit economy (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026).

➢ Nigeria:

The escalation of banditry in the North-West and North-Central regions has reached crisis levels.

- Kidnappings: From July 2024 to June 2025, the number of kidnappings increased by 31% compared to the previous year, reaching 4,722 cases.
- Ransom: Furthermore, victims and families paid approximately ₦2.57 billion ($1.66 million) in ransom during the same period, with total demands estimated at ₦48 billion.

In Nigeria, it was estimated that 2.2 trillion naira was paid in ransoms in a single year as kidnapping evolved into a high-stakes industry.

- Fatalities: It is estimated that 762 lives were lost due to banditry between July 2024 and June 2025.
- Economic repercussions: of these events are significant. The ongoing conflict in Northeast Nigeria, which encompasses banditry, has resulted in economic losses amounting to over ₦4.2 trillion ($11 billion). This has led to a precipitous decline in regional GDP, with a drop exceeding 50% between 2015 and 2020.

In 2024, the global economic impact of violence amounted to $19.1 trillion, constituting approximately 11.6% of global GDP.

The total value of organized crime across key sectors, including technology, finance, and natural resources, was estimated to be 7% of global GDP.

30% - 50% A decline in household income for rural families in banditry-prone areas due to illegal taxation and displacement has also been observed.

- Food Insecurity: The ongoing banditry has compelled farmers to vacate their lands, exacerbating a pervasive food security crisis that has impacted 9.2 million individuals.

70% represents, a significant decline in agricultural productivity has been doc-

umented in conflict-affected regions, resulting in severe food insecurity.

➢ Latin America and the Caribbean:

Organized crime and gang violence have been identified as significant contributors to economic decline in the region.

- GDP Loss: The impact of crime on the regional GDP is estimated to be an average of 3.5%.
- Homicides: The region is responsible for 37% of global homicides, despite comprising only 9% - 13% of the world's population.
- Impact on Cities: In metropolitan areas such as Port-au-Prince, Haiti, criminal organizations wield significant influence, controlling approximately 85% of the capital and impeding economic activity.
- Investment: A reduction in homicide rates to the global average has the potential to stimulate annual GDP growth by 0.5 percentage points.

➢ The Sahel Region (comprised of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger)

- Fiscal Loss: The illicit trade of gold has resulted in an annual fiscal loss exceeding $490 million in Burkina Faso, thereby surpassing the nation's entire public health budget for the year 2023.
- Fuel Fraud: In the West African nation of Niger, illicit trade in petroleum products exacted a substantial financial toll on the country, amounting to a loss of over $15.8 million during the period spanning from 2017 to 2018 (UNODC, 2024).

➢ Key Impacts on National Structures

- Internal Displacement: In Nigeria, banditry has led to the displacement of 8% of surveyed households in the North West, as reported in 2025.
- Shrinking Revenue: Banditry has been demonstrated to have a deleterious effect on foreign direct investment (FDI), leading to a decline in local commercial activity and, in some cases, the closure of rural markets.
- Corruption Infiltration: Criminal groups leverage their profits to penetrate state institutions, offering bribes to law enforcement personnel (e.g., $553 - $1106 per truck in the Sahel) to facilitate illicit activities (Osorio, 2024).

➢ Emergent Threats

- The contemporary security landscape is undergoing a transformation due to the integration of advanced technology by criminal organizations.
- Drone Warfare: The utilization of drones for surveillance and offensive operations by insurgent and bandit groups has been documented, with 77 incidents recorded between 2024 and 2025.
- Digital Terrorism: A surge in cyberattacks targeting infrastructure is poised to inflict significant economic harm on national economies without resulting in physical fatalities.
- Ransom laundering: The utilization of global financial networks for the purpose of laundering ransom money has been on the rise, thereby establishing a connection between local criminal activities and international crime syndicates (Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2026).

In summary, the following factors have been identified as contributing to the emergence of bandits in the specified regions (Nigeria, the Caribbean, the Sahel region, and Latin America):

- Weak governance
- Poverty and a paucity of opportunities
- Proliferation of weapons
- Illicit markets and geographical factors
- Intertwined local conflicts.

It is evident that these regions are frequently characterized by a historical legacy of marginalization, a deficient rule of law, and elevated levels of socioeconomic disparity.

2.7. Operational Policies to Combat Bandits and Non-State Armed Groups

The primary mission of forces designed to combat bandits is law enforcement and the disruption of criminal activities. In contrast, the primary mission of forces targeting non-state armed groups (NSAGs) is to implement counter-insurgency doctrines aimed at defeating entities that challenge state sovereignty. While both groups may employ similar armaments (e.g., AK-47s) and utilize rural tactics, the primary distinction between them lies in their respective objectives. Bandits typically pursue economic gain, while NSAGs aim to achieve political power, territory, or ideological dominance (Ojewale, 2024).

The fundamental distinction between the forces employed in confronting bandits and those utilized in the context of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) is predicated on the legal framework (domestic criminal law as opposed to international humanitarian law) and the operational objective (law enforcement as opposed to military neutralization) (Table 1).

Table 1. The differences between combating bandits and combating NSAGs.

Feature	Combatting Bandits	Combatting NSAGs
Primary Framework	**Domestic Law** Individuals in question are often subjected to criminal charges, such as robbery or kidnapping.	**International Humanitarian Law (IHL)** If they meet the established criteria for "intensity" and "organization", they are to be regarded as parties to the conflict.
Status of Members	**Criminals** The individual in question will not be accorded any special status; rather, they will be subject to arrest and prosecution for common crimes.	**Fighters** These organizations are regarded as formal, structured branches of a political party. While they do not possess the status of Prisoners of War, they are accorded protection from summary execution in the event that they are killed or captured outside of combat.
Authority to Use Force	**Police Power** Force used is typically for arrest and self-defense; lethal force is a last resort.	**Military Necessity** Permission is frequently granted for status-based targeting, enabling the utilization of military force to neutralize the threat.

In order to develop a practical and hands-on understanding of the approaches employed by security and military forces to combat bandits and non-governmental armed groups (NGAs), the following is a detailed breakdown of how forces are being deployed.

1) Forces for Combatting Bandits

Force Structure and Tactics:

- Law Enforcement and Paramilitary Personnel:

Typically, these operations are led by police units and frequently receive support from specialized squads targeting robbery and kidnapping.

- Vigilante and Community Groups

Local communities often establish "self-defense" or "vigilante" groups to address security concerns in areas where formal police presence is deficient.

- Hybrid Models

In certain instances, governments may opt to establish "Joint Task Forces" (JTF) that integrate law enforcement and military capacities to address matters such as kidnapping or cattle rustling.

The overarching objective of this approach is to enhance the effectiveness of response and recovery operations in such contexts. The primary objectives of the initiative are threefold: first, to restore public order; second, to recover stolen property; and third, to rescue kidnapping victims (Ibid).

2) Forces for Combatting NSAGs (Insurgents/Militias)

- Military Dominance: Operations are overseen by the regular army and air force, frequently employing heavy weaponry, air strikes, and intelligence surveillance.
- Counterinsurgency (COIN) Units: Specialized units (for example, India's Rashtriya Rifles) are established with the explicit purpose of combating organized insurgencies.
- Tactics: These operations include "cordon and search" activities, psychological operations (PSYOPS), and civic actions aimed at influencing public opinion and fostering support.

The objective of these efforts is to secure "hearts and minds" in the pursuit of strategic objectives. The objective of the military operation is to vanquish the military might of a given group and to reestablish territorial control over those regions currently under its governance.

2.8. Factors Differentiating NSAG and Bandits

As demonstrated in this reading, bandits and NSAGs appear analogous only from a distance and from a profane perspective. Nevertheless, a multitude of substantial disparities were incorporated, thereby distinguishing them in a readily apparent manner, particularly from a police and military perspective.

- Motivation

Bandits are typically motivated by the pursuit of profit, which may take the form of ransom or theft. They endeavor to circumvent direct confrontation with

the state in order to safeguard their commercial activities. NSAGs frequently possess political or sectarian objectives and proactively endeavor to contest state authority over territory or populations.

- Negotiation

In certain circumstances, governments may opt to offer amnesty to outlaws as a provisional peace measure. Negotiations with NSAGs are characterized by a high degree of complexity, frequently encompassing formal disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes or peace agreements facilitated by international actors, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

- Complexity

The intricacy of these negotiations is further compounded by the frequent overlap between these categories in contemporary conflict contexts. Criminal elements may provide financial support to political insurgents, and insurgents, in turn, may resort to banditry as a means of generating revenue, thereby creating a "mixed group" challenge for security forces (Mustasilta, 2022).

3. Conclusion

NSAGs and bandits are both criminal entities that exert significant influence on the nation and its population. However, they have distinct differences that form the basis of the approach to qualify them. While bandits generally prioritize economic profit as their primary motivation, NSAGs demonstrate a more expansive ideological orientation, suggesting that they may pursue objectives beyond mere financial gain. Furthermore, banditry is a nationwide phenomenon, despite the fact that criminal activities may, on occasion, transcend national borders. Nonetheless, NSAGs have been known to occupy more expansive territories, a phenomenon that can be attributed, at least in part, to the role that identity factors play in facilitating such endeavors. There are instances when these groups find themselves in need of a secure refuge. The response from law enforcement and national law is also different. They focus on bandits. NSAGs are confronted by international humanitarian law and military forces.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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