



Failed State and the Phenomenon of Kidnapping and Hostage taking by Fulani Herdsmen in Nigeria: An Analysis

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Abstract	Nigeria has in the last decade witnessed an unprecedented escalation of kidnapping and hostage taking associated with the activities of armed Fulani herdsmen, a phenomenon that has ravaged rural and semi-urban communities across the North-Central, North-West, and increasingly the Southern parts of the country. What began as sporadic clashes between itinerant cattle herders and sedentary farming communities over access to land, water, and grazing routes has metastasized into an organized enterprise of abduction, ransom extraction, killing, and forced displacement that now rivals, and by several accounts surpasses, the lethality of Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province. This paper interrogates this trend through the lens of the Failed State Theory, examining the extent to which the persistence and expansion of these activities is symptomatic of the erosion of the Nigerian state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force and its incapacity to guarantee the basic constitutional right to security of lives and property. Employing the exploratory research design anchored on secondary data drawn from newspapers, research institutes, non-governmental organizations, and scholarly publications, the paper reviews the historical evolution of herder activities in Nigeria, catalogues the trend of kidnapping and hostage taking associated with them, and critically appraises the failures of the Nigerian security architecture in curbing these excesses. The paper finds that the inability of the state to control its territory, protect its citizens, punish perpetrators, and regulate the proliferation of small arms exhibits the classical attributes of state failure as articulated by Rotberg. The paper concludes that unless government demonstrates the political will to reform its security apparatus, resolve the underlying resource-based grievances, and hold perpetrators accountable regardless of ethnic or political considerations, the trend will continue to erode public confidence in the Nigerian state and further imperil its corporate existence. The paper recommends, among others, the establishment of state and community policing structures, the accelerated implementation of ranching and livestock reform programmes, and the enthronement of a non-partisan, intelligence-driven approach to the prosecution of perpetrators.
Keywords	Failed State, Fulani Herdsmen, Kidnapping, Hostage Taking, Insecurity, Nigeria.



Introduction

The Nigerian state was founded on the constitutional promise, enshrined in Section 14(2)(b) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended), that the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government. Yet, in the years following the return to democratic rule, and especially since 2015, this promise has been steadily eroded by a wave of violent criminality that has left thousands of dead, displaced, or held in captivity across the length and breadth of the country. Among the several dimensions of this insecurity, the activities of armed Fulani herdsmen occupy a peculiar and increasingly prominent place, not merely because of the scale of killing they have occasioned, but because of the manner in which they have evolved from localized disputes over grazing land into a sophisticated, cross-regional enterprise of kidnapping, mass abduction, and ransom extraction.

Historically, the relationship between itinerant Fulani cattle herders and sedentary farming communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt and northern regions was regulated by customary transhumance routes, seasonal migration patterns, and traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms mediated by local chiefs and district heads. However, a combination of demographic pressure, desertification of the Sahel, the expansion of agricultural land at the expense of traditional grazing routes, and the proliferation of small arms following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011 has transformed what was once a manageable seasonal friction into a violent and, in the assessment of several scholars and international observers, quasi-terroristic enterprise. According to the Global Terrorism Index, armed Fulani militants operating in Nigeria and the Central African Republic have on more than one occasion been ranked among the four deadliest non-state armed actors in the world, a ranking that ordinarily should have provoked a commensurate security response from the Nigerian state.

The response of the Nigerian state, however, has been characterized by a curious ambivalence: military operations that neutralize thousands of suspects on paper while communities continue to record fresh attacks; policy initiatives such as the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlement scheme and the National Livestock Transformation Plan that have been serially resisted, suspended, or under-implemented; and a security architecture that arrives, in the words of affected community leaders, only after the perpetrators have struck and departed. This pattern of reactive rather than preventive security response, combined with the apparent inability of the state to control the movement of arms and armed groups across its porous borders, is precisely the condition that failed state theorists identify as symptomatic of a state in the process of failure. It is against this backdrop that this paper sets out to examine, through the analytical lens of the Failed State Theory as propounded by Robert I. Rotberg, the current wave and spread of kidnapping and hostage taking associated to armed Fulani herdsmen activities in Nigeria.

The persistence and geographical spread of kidnapping and hostage taking linked to armed Fulani herdsmen constitute one of the most pressing, yet curiously under-theorized, security challenges confronting the Nigerian state today. Unlike the Boko Haram insurgency, which has attracted sustained international attention, military doctrine, and multinational cooperation through the Multinational Joint Task Force, the herdsmen-related violence has for years been euphemistically framed by government officials as a mere "farmer-herder clash" or a "communal crisis," a



characterization that scholars and civil society organizations argue has served to obscure its increasingly organized, lethal, and in some documented cases, ideologically-inflected character.

The problem, therefore, is threefold. First, there is the empirical problem of understanding the scale, pattern, and evolution of kidnapping and hostage taking associated with Fulani herdsmen activities in Nigeria. Second, there is the analytical problem of situating this phenomenon within an appropriate theoretical framework that captures its structural rather than merely episodic character. Third, there is the policy problem of identifying why existing state responses, ranging from military neutralization operations to livestock reform programmes, have failed to arrest the trend, and what alternative pathways might yield more durable outcomes. In doing this, the paper employed the exploratory research design and the secondary sources of data to explore these three dimensions of the problem using the Failed State Theory as its guiding analytical framework.

Review of Related Literature

Activities of Fulani Herdsmen in Nigeria

The Fulani are a predominantly Muslim, transnational pastoralist ethnic group numbering an estimated twenty to forty million people spread across at least seventeen West and Central African countries, including Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Cameroon, Chad, and the Central African Republic. In Nigeria, Fulani pastoralists have historically practiced transhumance, a seasonal pattern of cattle movement from the drier northern Sahel region southward to the more fertile middle belt and southern grazing areas during the dry season, and back northward during the rainy season, in search of water and pasture for their herds (Ugwu, 2022).

History of herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria, dates back to the twenty-first century, witnessed a significant expansion of the agriculturalist population and its cultivated land at the expense of traditional pasturelands in the Middle Belt, even as deteriorating environmental conditions, desertification, and soil degradation in the far north compelled herders to alter their traditional transhumance routes further south and into more densely farmed territories. According to Ugwu, (2022), this convergence of population growth, climate stress, breakdown of traditional dispute-resolution institutions, and the proliferation of small arms in the wider Sahel region has, since the founding of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999, produced farmer-herder violence estimated to have killed more than nineteen thousand people and displaced hundreds of thousands more. What began as localized clashes over crop destruction by grazing cattle has, over the past decade, evolved into what several security analysts now describe as an organized militia phenomenon, involving the use of sophisticated weaponry including AK-47 rifles, and characterized by night-time raids on entire villages rather than isolated confrontations between individual herders and farmers (Ugwu, 2022).

The scale of this violence has led some international monitors to classify armed Fulani militants among the deadliest non-state armed actors globally. The Global Terrorism Index, compiled by the Institute for Economics and Peace using data largely drawn from the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database, ranked armed Fulani militants operating in Nigeria and the Central African Republic as the fourth deadliest militant group in the world in its 2015 edition, behind only Boko Haram, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and al-Shabaab, with the group responsible for over a thousand deaths in a single reporting year. Advocacy groups such as the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa have since documented tens of thousands of civilian deaths attributed to what they term the Fulani Ethnic Militia between 2019 and 2024, figures which, if accurate, would place



the group's lethality well above that of Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province combined, even though the group has curiously disappeared from more recent editions of the Global Terrorism Index, a development some analysts attribute to the persistent official framing of the violence as communal conflict rather than organized terrorism.

Wikipedia (2026) notes, the trajectory of herder activity in Nigeria can usefully be periodized into three broad phases. The first phase, spanning roughly the pre-colonial and colonial eras up to the 1970s, was characterized by relatively peaceful, seasonally regulated transhumance, mediated through customary institutions and formal colonial-era grazing reserve legislation, including the Grazing Reserve Law enacted in several northern regions. The second phase, spanning roughly the 1980s through the early 2000s, witnessed the gradual encroachment of agricultural expansion onto traditional grazing routes, producing episodic but generally localized and low-casualty clashes between herders and farmers, often resolved through the intervention of district heads, emirs, and local government administration. The third and current phase, dating roughly from the mid-2000s to the present, has been marked by a qualitative transformation in both the scale and character of the violence: the widespread availability of military-grade small arms, the collapse of customary land governance in the face of rapid population growth, and the infiltration of criminal and, according to some accounts, extremist elements into pastoralist migration networks have together produced a phenomenon that bears only a superficial resemblance to the historical farmer-herder friction from which it evolved. Distinguishing these phases is analytically important because it clarifies that the present crisis is not simply an intensification of an age-old, natural resource dispute, but represents a qualitatively distinct security emergency requiring correspondingly distinct policy tools.

It bears emphasis that the Fulani are not a monolithic group, and the overwhelming majority of Fulani in Nigeria, including those represented by advocacy bodies such as Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria, are law-abiding pastoralists and citizens who are themselves victims of the criminality perpetrated by armed splinter groups, foreign mercenaries, and bandits who have hijacked the pastoralist identity for criminal ends. Nonetheless, the scale and coordination of the violence attributed to armed elements operating under the Fulani identity has made the phenomenon a central and unavoidable subject of any serious inquiry into contemporary Nigerian insecurity.

Scholars have offered competing but complementary explanations for the transformation of Fulani pastoralist activity from a subsistence livelihood practice into an increasingly militarized enterprise. Obianeri (2022), emphasize the ecological dimension, arguing that the desiccation of the Sahel and the shrinking of Lake Chad have compelled herders to migrate ever further south into territories with which they have weaker customary ties and correspondingly weaker incentives for peaceful coexistence with resident populations. Others emphasize the political economy of arms proliferation, noting that the collapse of the Gaddafi government in Libya in 2011 released vast quantities of military-grade weaponry into the Sahelian arms market, dramatically lowering the cost and raising the availability of assault rifles to pastoralist and criminal networks alike, a development that transformed the character of herder-related violence from machete-and-stick confrontations into firefights involving automatic weapons. Still others point to the weakening of traditional governance institutions, arguing that colonial and post-colonial state-building processes progressively stripped traditional rulers and district heads of the customary authority they once



wielded to mediate and enforce settlements between herders and farmers, leaving a governance vacuum that neither traditional nor modern state institutions have adequately filled.

A further body of literature situates the phenomenon within the broader West African and Sahelian security crisis, noting that Fulani pastoralist populations exist across at least seventeen countries, several of which, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, have themselves experienced significant jihadist insurgency and, in recent years, military coups attributed in part to the failure of civilian governments to contain such insurgencies. Cross-border linkages between Nigerian herder-bandit networks and armed groups operating in these neighbouring Sahelian states, including the alleged supply of weapons, fighters, and safe havens, have been documented by several security analysts, reinforcing the argument that the Nigerian dimension of the crisis cannot be fully understood, nor resolved, in isolation from the wider regional security architecture of the Sahel.

Kidnapping and Hostage Taking by Fulani Herdsmen in Nigeria

While the farmer-herder crisis was historically characterized by clashes, reprisal killings, and the destruction of farmland and property, the last decade has witnessed a marked shift toward kidnapping for ransom as the dominant *modus operandi* of armed groups operating under the Fulani pastoralist identity. This shift reflects a broader trend across Nigeria's North-West and North-Central regions, where banditry, cattle rustling, and kidnapping have become deeply intertwined criminal enterprises, often operating from forest enclaves such as the Kagara, Rugu, and Kamuku forests that straddle several states (Ugwu, 2022)

Numerous documented incidents illustrate the scale and character of this trend. In September 2024, armed herdsmen raided two churches in Kaduna State during worship services, murdering three worshippers and abducting thirty congregants. In the same period, mass abductions of Christian farmers working in their fields in Kachia County, Kaduna State, became a near-weekly occurrence, with victims including women, children, and the elderly. Christian Post (2024) described cases in which as many as one hundred captives were marched into forest hideouts and held for months while families were compelled to sell farmland and livestock to raise the demanded ransom. The Hudson Institute has documented the existence of a hidden terrorist camp in Kaduna State, in proximity to a military base, where over two hundred Christians were reportedly held hostage, starved, and tortured, with survivors recounting being whipped and chained for periods extending beyond eighty days before their release following payment of ransom (Adebayo, 2024).

Beyond religiously-inflected attacks on rural Christian communities, the kidnapping enterprise associated with herdsmen and allied bandit groups has also targeted the political and traditional elite, illustrating the indiscriminate reach of the criminality. In Anambra State, for instance, the killing of a sitting member of the State House of Assembly, Dr Okechukwu Okoye, alongside his campaign director in May 2022, and the subsequent display of their severed heads, demonstrated that even legislators enjoying constitutional immunity and armed protocol escorts were not beyond the reach of armed groups operating in the country's security vacuum (Mark, & Obi 2022). Similarly, mass school abductions, most notably the November 2025 kidnapping of over three hundred students in circumstances reminiscent of the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls' abduction, and the earlier 2021 Kagara and Kankara school kidnappings, have underscored the extent to which the education sector itself has become a target of opportunity for armed groups operating in the same ungoverned spaces long associated with herder-related banditry.



The economic dimension of this trend is staggering. Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics reported that between May 2023 and April 2024, Nigerians paid an estimated two point two three trillion naira in kidnap ransom payments nationwide, a figure that reflects both the scale of victimization and the extent to which ransom extraction has become embedded as a criminal economy parallel to, and in places more lucrative than, formal economic activity in affected regions. Communities affected by these tactics, according to relief organizations such as Open Doors, have in several cases been rendered destitute for generations, with the psychological toll on survivors, many of whom witness fellow captives being killed for failure to meet ransom demands, compounding the material losses.

The religious dimension of this violence has become an increasingly prominent feature of scholarly and advocacy literature. According to the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA). (2025), documented survivor testimonies indicating that captives are frequently addressed in explicitly religious terms by their abductors, with several accounts describing captors invoking religious slogans during attacks and singling out clergy and church-going community members for abduction. Open Doors' World Watch List has for several consecutive years ranked Nigeria among the most dangerous countries in the world in which to practice the Christian faith, attributing thousands of abductions in the north-central region to armed herder militants over a five-year period, with statistical analysis suggesting that Christians in the affected region faced a markedly higher likelihood of abduction relative to their proportion of the local population. It bears emphasis, however, that Nigerian government officials and some Christian and Muslim community leaders have pushed back against a purely religious framing of the violence, arguing that foreign advocacy groups have at times exaggerated or selectively presented the data to fit a persecution narrative, and that Muslim Fulani communities, Hausa farmers, and other Muslim populations in the affected regions have also been victims of banditry and kidnapping (Christian Post, (2024). This paper takes the position that, whatever the precise motivational mix of economic predation, ethnic assertion, and religious ideology driving individual attacks, the empirical scale of abduction and hostage taking documented across multiple independent sources is sufficient to warrant serious scholarly and policy attention regardless of how the phenomenon is ultimately characterized.

How Nigeria's Security System Has Failed in the Fight Against Kidnapping and Hostage Taking by Fulani Herdsmen

A recurring theme across journals, news reports, advocacy reports, and community testimonies is the persistent lag between the outbreak of violence and the arrival, if at all, by state security forces. Community leaders in Benue State have repeatedly complained that traditional rulers had engaged in weeks of mediation with herder groups prior to attacks, alerting security agencies of the impending danger, only for the military and police to arrive after the attacks had concluded and the perpetrators had withdrawn. This pattern was starkly illustrated in the February 2025 massacre of villagers in Amagu, Amaokwe, and Umunesha in Ebonyi State, where suspected Fulani terrorists killed scores of residents despite prior community warnings to security agencies (Obianeri, 2022).

Several structural failures account for this pattern. First, there is the problem of chronic under-policing: Nigeria's police-to-population ratio remains far below international benchmarks, and the bulk of available personnel are concentrated in urban centres and on the protocol duties of political office holders, leaving vast rural and forested territories, precisely the terrain favoured by armed



herder-bandit groups, effectively ungoverned. Second, there is the problem of intelligence failure: despite repeated community alerts, security agencies have often failed to act preemptively, suggesting either a shortage of credible early-warning mechanisms or a deliberate unwillingness to engage armed groups believed, in some communities' perception, to enjoy political protection. Third, there is the problem of accountability and prosecution: notwithstanding the Nigerian military's own claims of having neutralized over eight thousand terrorists and arrested over eleven thousand suspects in a single reporting year, the rate of successful prosecution and conviction of kidnapping kingpins remains negligible, breeding a culture of impunity that emboldens repeat offenders. Fourth, the banning of community-based defence structures such as the Eastern Security Network in the South-East, without a commensurate strengthening of orthodox security presence in the vacated space, has in the assessment of several commentators removed one of the few deterrent structures that had existed against herder incursions in that region.

A further and particularly corrosive failure has been the politicization and, in several documented testimonies, ethnicization of the security response. Survivors and community leaders across the Middle Belt have alleged that security personnel drawn disproportionately from the same ethnic stock as the perpetrators have displayed reluctance to engage armed herder groups with the same vigour applied against other criminal or insurgent formations, a perception that, whether or not empirically verifiable in every instance, has itself become a significant driver of the collapse of public trust in state security institutions. This erosion of trust has, in turn, fuelled the proliferation of ethnic and communal self-defence militias, a development that failed state theorists identify as both a symptom and an accelerant of state failure, since it signals that citizens no longer expect the state to fulfil its most basic protective function and have begun to arrogate that function to themselves.

A further and often overlooked dimension of this failure concerns the judicial and correctional pipeline that follows arrest. Even where security operations succeed in apprehending suspects, as the Nigerian military's own figures of thousands of arrests annually suggest they periodically do, the subsequent stages of investigation, prosecution, and conviction remain chronically weak. Nigeria's judiciary continues to grapple with a substantial backlog of criminal cases, inadequate forensic and investigative capacity, and, in some documented instances, the compromise of witnesses and investigators through intimidation or bribery by well-resourced criminal syndicates. The result is a revolving-door phenomenon in which suspects arrested in one operation are, within a relatively short period, back in circulation, either through weak prosecution, corruption, or outright escape from custodial facilities, several of which have themselves been the target of large-scale jailbreaks in northern Nigeria in recent years. This judicial bottleneck compounds the operational failures at the point of first response, ensuring that even the security successes that are achieved fail to translate into a durable deterrent effect.

How Nigeria's System Has Attempted to Track the Activities of Fulani Herdsmen

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the Nigerian state has been wholly inert in the face of this crisis. Successive administrations have deployed a combination of kinetic and non-kinetic measures in an attempt to track, contain, and ultimately resolve the herder-related violence. On the kinetic side, the Nigerian military has conducted sustained operations, including aerial bombardment of suspected bandit and herder-militia camps in the forests of Zamfara, Katsina, Niger, and Kaduna States. According to the Director of Defence Media Operations, the Nigerian military neutralized



over eight thousand terrorists, arrested more than eleven thousand suspects, and rescued over six thousand kidnapped victims in operations conducted across the country between January and December 2024 alone, alongside the recovery of thousands of weapons and hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition. State-level security outfits, such as the South-West's Amotekun Corps, have similarly expanded their personnel strength and operational reach, with recruitment drives across several states aimed at bolstering community-level intelligence gathering and rapid response capacity.

On the non-kinetic and policy side, the federal government has, since at least 2016, sought to address the underlying resource competition between herders and farmers through a succession of ranching and grazing reform initiatives. The National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill of 2016 sought to empower a National Grazing Reserve Commission to acquire land across all thirty-six states for the establishment of grazing corridors, but was abandoned in the face of widespread opposition rooted in its perceived inconsistency with the Land Use Act and constitutional property rights. This was followed in 2018 by the National Livestock Transformation Plan, a decade-long blueprint, running from 2019 to 2028 and initially budgeted at one hundred billion naira with an eighty-twenty federal-state cost-sharing arrangement, aimed at establishing ranches in pilot states including Adamawa, Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau, Taraba, and Zamfara. The 2019 Rural Grazing Area settlement scheme, popularly known as RUGA, represented a parallel and more controversial attempt to permanently settle herders on designated land, but was suspended by President Muhammadu Buhari within weeks of its announcement following fierce opposition from Middle Belt and southern state governors, several of whom viewed it as a scheme to forcibly alienate their states' land in favour of Fulani settlement.

More recently, the establishment of a dedicated Federal Ministry of Livestock Development under the administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu signals a renewed, if still nascent, attempt to professionalize and formalize the transition from open grazing to ranching. Several state governments, including Benue, Ekiti, Taraba, and Oyo, have independently enacted Anti-Open Grazing legislation in an effort to curb the incursion of cattle onto farmland, though enforcement of these laws has remained inconsistent, and their unilateral character, absent a corresponding federal framework, has in places exacerbated rather than resolved inter-state tension over the movement of herders. Taken together, this record demonstrates that Nigeria's tracking of, and response to, herder-related violence has been neither entirely absent nor coherent, but rather episodic, underfunded relative to the scale of the challenge, and repeatedly undermined by the absence of sustained political will to see reform initiatives through to full implementation.

It is also worth recording that these reform efforts have consistently foundered on the shoals of Nigeria's federal structure and its attendant land tenure complexities. The Land Use Act of 1978 vests radical title to land in state governors, meaning that any federally-driven grazing reserve or ranching scheme requires the voluntary cooperation of state governments in allocating land, a requirement that has proven politically untenable in states where herder-farmer tension is already acute and where opposition politicians have found it expedient to frame land allocation to herders as a ceding of indigenous territory to a perceived outsider group. This structural tension between federal policy ambition and sub-national political reality has been a recurring theme in virtually every ranching initiative since the 2016 Grazing Reserve Bill, and helps to explain why, despite nearly a decade of policy activity on paper, the actual number of functional, fully-equipped ranches



operating across the pilot states remains a small fraction of the ninety-four originally envisaged under the National Livestock Transformation Plan.

How Nigeria's System Can Tackle and Curb the Activities of Fulani Herdsmen

A durable resolution of the crisis requires interventions that operate simultaneously at the security, economic, and governance levels. At the security level, there is an urgent need for the decentralization of policing, through the full operationalization of state and community policing structures that can complement the overstretched federal police and military, coupled with investment in modern surveillance technology, including drones and satellite monitoring, to track the movement of armed groups through Nigeria's vast forest reserves. At the economic level, the accelerated, adequately funded, and genuinely consultative implementation of ranching and livestock transformation programmes, rather than their perennial suspension in the face of political opposition, remains indispensable to removing the underlying resource competition that continues to fuel the crisis. This must be complemented by border security reforms aimed at curbing the influx of foreign armed herders and mercenaries from the wider Sahel region, a dimension of the crisis that has been repeatedly flagged by security analysts but which remains inadequately addressed given the porosity of Nigeria's northern borders.

At the governance level, there is a need for depoliticized and religiously and ethnically impartial prosecution of perpetrators, regardless of their identity, in order to restore public confidence that the state applies the law evenhandedly. Equally critical is the strengthening of grassroots intelligence-sharing mechanisms between security agencies and traditional rulers, community leaders, and local vigilante groups, who by virtue of their proximity to affected communities are often the first to detect early warning signs of impending attacks. Finally, sustained investment in the socio-economic development of the affected regions, including youth employment programmes that reduce the pool of recruits available to armed groups, remains a long-term but essential component of any comprehensive response.

A regional comparative perspective further illuminates the Nigerian case. Similar patterns of pastoralist-linked violence, kidnapping, and territorial contestation have been documented in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where jihadist-affiliated groups have in several instances co-opted or allied with Fulani pastoralist communities aggrieved by state neglect or discriminatory treatment, producing a regional Sahelian security crisis of which the Nigerian dimension forms only one part. The Economic Community of West African States and the African Union have both flagged the Sahel-wide dimension of pastoralist-linked insecurity as a priority concern, yet coordinated regional response mechanisms remain underdeveloped relative to the scale and cross-border character of the threat, a further governance gap that compounds the specifically Nigerian failures documented in this paper.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts the Failed State Theory which emerged within the discipline of International Relations and Comparative Politics in the aftermath of the Cold War, as scholars sought to account for the collapse of central governmental authority in states such as Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the formal apparatus of the state persisted in name while its capacity to perform the core functions of governance, security provision, and service delivery had effectively disintegrated (Moritz, 2013).



The failed state theory is attributed to Robert I. Rotberg, former Director of the Program on Intrastate Conflict and Conflict Resolution at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, whose seminal works, particularly the 2003 edited volume "State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror" and the subsequent 2004 volume "When States Fail: Causes and Consequences," provided the theoretical foundation (Rotberg, 2003).

Rotberg's central thesis is that nation-states fail when they are convulsed by internal violence and cease delivering positive political goods to their inhabitants, a condition that causes their governments to progressively lose legitimacy in the eyes of a growing proportion of their own citizens. For Rotberg, security, understood as the guarantee of freedom from external and internal harm to person and property, constitutes the paramount political good, since without it, the delivery of all other goods, including the rule of law, political participation, education, and health care, becomes impossible (Rotberg, 2003).

Moritz (2013), identifies a set of empirical indicators by which the degree of state failure can be assessed, including the prevalence of internal civil violence and communal conflict, the loss of governmental control over peripheral or even core regions of the state's territory, the rise of criminal violence and the emergence of warlords or non-state armed actors who usurp functions properly belonging to the state, the deterioration of physical infrastructure, a declining or stagnant per capita gross domestic product, the hollowing out of formal state institutions in favour of informal or predatory governance arrangements, and, ultimately, the citizenry's recourse to ethnic, clan, or communal militias for protection in place of state security agencies.

Rotberg, Chris Dorff and William Zartman have observed, that state failure need not imply complete governmental collapse into anarchy or civil war, but can equally describe a gradual process involving the progressive weakening of a state's capacity to provide legitimate governance across its territory, a nuance that is particularly instructive for understanding the Nigerian case, where formal state institutions remain intact and internationally recognized even as vast swathes of its rural territory have become effectively ungoverned spaces (Rotberg, 2003)..

At its core, the theory posits a continuum of statehood, ranging from strong states, through weak states, failing states, to failed and ultimately collapsed states, with each stage marked by a progressive erosion of the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force, its control over its territory, and its capacity to provide predictable, systematized methods of dispute resolution and the rule of law (Rotberg, 2003). A failed state, in this framework, is not one that has necessarily disappeared from the map or lost international recognition, but one whose government has lost effective control over significant portions of its territory, whose security forces are unable to guarantee the safety of the population, and whose citizens increasingly turn to non-state actors, whether warlords, criminal syndicates, or ethnic militias, for the protection and services that the state itself is failing to provide (Moritz, 2013).

Applying Rotberg's framework to the Nigerian case reveals a disquieting congruence between the theory's indicators of state failure and the empirical realities of the herder-related insecurity crisis. First, the sheer scale of internal violence associated with armed herder groups, with documented civilian death tolls running into the tens of thousands over the past decade, satisfies Rotberg's primary indicator that failed states are consumed by internal violence beyond the state's capacity to contain. Second, the well-documented phenomenon of security forces arriving at the scene of



attacks only after perpetrators have struck and withdrawn, despite prior community warnings, illustrates a substantial erosion of the state's control over its own rural and forested territories, a second key Rotbergian indicator. Third, the emergence and proliferation of armed vigilante groups, ethnic militias, and community defence networks across the Middle Belt, South-East, and South-West, formed explicitly because communities no longer trust state security agencies to protect them, exemplifies precisely the recourse to non-state protective arrangements that Rotberg identifies as both symptomatic of and further accelerant to the process of state failure (Rotberg, 2003).

Fourth, the entrenchment of a criminal ransom economy, in which an estimated two point two three trillion naira changed hands in a single year as ransom payments, demonstrates the extent to which non-state, criminal actors have effectively displaced the state as the arbiter of security and dispute resolution in affected communities, with families and religious institutions negotiating directly with armed groups in the complete absence of effective state mediation or rescue capacity. Fifth, the perception, whether fully substantiated or not, among affected communities that security responses are shaped by ethnic or political considerations rather than an impartial application of the law, speaks to the erosion of governmental legitimacy that Rotberg (2003), identifies as the defining psychological correlate of state failure: citizens who no longer believe the state will protect them impartially begin to withdraw their allegiance from it. Taken together, these indicators suggest that, while Nigeria as a whole cannot yet be classified as a fully collapsed state, given the continued functioning of its central government, judiciary, and armed forces, the herder-related insecurity crisis exhibits the classical signature of a failing state: a state whose capacity to deliver the fundamental political good of security is being steadily and visibly outpaced by the violence it is meant to contain.

In the writing of Dorff (2007), failing states are frequently characterized by a widening gap between the state's formal juridical sovereignty, its continued recognition by other states and international bodies as the legitimate authority over its territory, and its empirical sovereignty, its actual capacity to exercise effective control and provide governance across that territory. Nigeria continues to enjoy undiminished juridical sovereignty: it retains its seat at the United Nations, its diplomatic missions, its currency, and its formal constitutional order. Yet the empirical reality documented throughout this paper, of armed non-state actors exercising effective territorial control over forest enclaves, extracting resources from the population through coercion, and, in some communities, being treated by residents as the *de facto* governing authority to whom deference or tribute must be paid for survival, illustrates precisely the widening juridical-empirical sovereignty gap that Rotberg identifies as the hallmark of a state in the process of failing.

Failed State and Kidnapping in Nigeria

Through the lens of the Failed State Theory, the phenomenon of kidnapping in Nigeria, whether perpetrated by armed herder groups, bandits, or other criminal syndicates, is not merely a law-and-order problem to be resolved through episodic military operations, but a structural manifestation of the state's declining monopoly over the legitimate use of coercive force within its territory. Rotberg (2003), framework holds that once a state loses the capacity to guarantee its citizens' security, informal and often violent non-state actors inevitably move to fill the resulting vacuum, extracting resources from the population through coercion in a manner functionally analogous to a predatory shadow government. The kidnap-for-ransom economy that has developed around herder-related



banditry in Nigeria's North-West, North-Central and South East regions exhibits precisely this predatory, quasi-governmental character: armed groups operating from forest enclaves effectively tax rural populations through abduction and ransom demands (Elekweke 2022).

Moreover, the geographic pattern of kidnapping, concentrated overwhelmingly in remote rural areas, forest fringes, and highway corridors where state security presence is thinnest, corroborates Rotberg's emphasis on loss of territorial control as a core indicator of state failure. The fact that armed groups can operate with relative impunity from identifiable forest camps, in some cases in close proximity to military installations, as documented in the case of the Kaduna hostage camp uncovered near the Kaduna-Abuja expressway, suggests either a profound intelligence and operational failure or, as some analysts and affected community members allege, elements of complicity or willful neglect within segments of the security architecture, either of which would further corroborate the Rotbergian thesis that failing states are characterized by predatory or compromised security institutions that cease to function as neutral guarantors of public safety.

Failed State and Hostage taking in Nigeria

Hostage taking, understood as the prolonged detention of captives for the purpose of extracting ransom, political concession, or ideological submission, represents an even more acute manifestation of state failure than episodic kidnapping, since it presupposes the existence of secure, semi-permanent territorial enclaves under the effective control of non-state armed actors, enclaves in which captives can be held for weeks or months without meaningful risk of state intervention or rescue. The documented cases of Christian captives held for periods exceeding eighty days in forest camps, subjected to starvation, torture, and in several instances execution when ransom demands were not met, illustrate a level of territorial and coercive control by non-state actors that goes well beyond the sporadic banditry associated with weaker forms of criminality, and squarely fits Rotberg (2003) description of failed states as territories in which the state's writ simply does not run.

This form of hostage taking also carries a profound legitimacy cost for the state, in Rotberg's terms. Each prolonged hostage crisis that concludes not through state rescue but through private ransom negotiation, often involving churches, families, or community associations directly engaging with captors, represents a further public demonstration that the state cannot or will not perform its most basic protective function. Over time, as this pattern repeats across dozens or hundreds of communities, it produces a cumulative and corrosive delegitimization of the state in the eyes of its citizens, precisely the psychological and political dynamic that Rotberg identifies as both a symptom and a driver of the deepening cycle of state failure. The reported allegation, made by clerical and community sources in several affected states, that captors in some instances explicitly framed their actions in religious or ethnic-supremacist terms, telling captives that "Nigeria belongs to the Fulani," further underscores how the vacuum left by state failure can be filled not merely by criminal opportunism but by actors pursuing an explicit project of territorial and demographic conquest, a dynamic with implications for the corporate unity and future stability of the Nigerian federation.

How the Activities of Fulani Herdsmen can be Checkmated and Curtailed

Consistent with the diagnosis offered by the Failed State Theory, an effective response to the herder-related kidnapping and hostage-taking crisis must aim at restoring the state's territorial control, its coercive legitimacy, and its capacity to deliver the political good of security impartially.



This requires, first, the reclamation of ungoverned forest spaces through sustained, intelligence-led, and adequately resourced joint military and police operations, rather than episodic bombardment campaigns that displace but do not permanently dislodge armed groups from their enclaves. Second, it requires the depoliticization of the security response, ensuring that operations against armed herder groups proceed with the same vigour, resourcing, and command attention as operations against Boko Haram and other formally designated terrorist organizations, thereby removing the perception of selective enforcement that has done so much to erode public trust. Third, it requires a genuine, well-funded, and politically insulated implementation of ranching and livestock transformation programmes that addresses the underlying resource competition between herders and farmers, rather than allowing such programmes to become perennial casualties of gubernatorial and communal politics. Fourth, it requires strengthened border security and regional cooperation with neighbouring Sahelian states to curb the cross-border movement of armed groups and illicit small arms. Fifth, and perhaps most fundamentally, it requires the restoration of a functioning, impartial, and accessible system of criminal prosecution, so that perpetrators of kidnapping and hostage taking, irrespective of their ethnic or political identity, are reliably brought to justice, thereby re-establishing the deterrent effect that impunity has for years steadily eroded (Tribune, 2025).

It is instructive, finally, to consider the counter-argument advanced by some Nigerian government officials and a segment of scholarly opinion, namely that the application of the Failed State Theory to Nigeria risks overstating the severity of the crisis and understating the continued resilience of Nigerian state institutions relative to genuinely collapsed states such as Somalia in the early 1990s or Libya after 2011. Proponents of this more cautious view point to Nigeria's continued conduct of regular elections, the peaceful transfer of power between political parties and administrations, the persistence of a functioning, if imperfect, judiciary, and the country's continued status as Africa's largest economy, as evidence that talk of "state failure" is, at minimum, premature. This paper does not dispute the continued institutional resilience of the Nigerian state at the national level; rather, it argues, consistent with Rotberg (2004), own more nuanced formulation, that state failure is a matter of degree and unevenness rather than a binary condition, and that the empirical realities documented across the herder-related insecurity crisis in Nigeria's rural periphery satisfy the theory's core indicators even as the state's central institutions continue to function. The analytical value of the Failed State framework, in other words, lies not in definitively labelling Nigeria as a "failed state" in the collapsed sense, but in diagnosing, with precision, the specific dimensions along which its governance and security capacity are eroding, so that policy responses can be correspondingly targeted.

Conclusion

This paper examined the escalating phenomenon of kidnapping and hostage taking associated with armed Fulani herdsman activities in Nigeria through the analytical lens of the Failed State Theory as propounded by Rotberg, (2003) and (2004). The evidence reviewed demonstrates that this phenomenon is not a transient or purely localized law-and-order problem, but rather a structural manifestation of the progressive erosion of the Nigerian state's monopoly over legitimate coercive force, its control over vast stretches of its rural and forested territory, and its capacity to deliver the fundamental political good of security impartially to all segments of its citizenry. The scale of civilian death and abduction, the entrenchment of a multi-trillion-naira ransom economy, the persistent lag between community warning and state response, the proliferation of ethnic and



communal self-defence militias, and the perception of selective or compromised security enforcement collectively satisfies the core indicators of state failure articulated in the Rotbergian framework.

While Nigeria as a corporate entity continues to function, retaining its central government, judiciary, and formal security architecture, the persistence and expansion of the herder-related insecurity crisis represents a state in the advanced stages of what Rotberg (2003) terms "failing," a condition from which recovery remains possible but which, absent decisive and sustained corrective action, risks deepening into more entrenched forms of state weakness. The paper concludes that the responsibility for reversing this trajectory rests squarely with the Nigerian state, whose demonstrated political will, resourcing priorities, and evenhandedness in the application of security and justice will ultimately determine whether the country arrests its drift toward deeper state failure or reclaims its constitutional promise of security for all its citizens.

Beyond the immediate security and policy prescriptions, the paper argues that the long-term resolution of the crisis will also depend on a broader national conversation about the terms of Nigeria's federal arrangement, particularly as they relate to land tenure, resource control, and the constitutional balance between federal policy ambition and state-level authority over land allocation. So long as ranching and grazing reform proposals continue to be perceived, rightly or wrongly, through the prism of ethnic favouritism rather than as neutral instruments of national economic and security policy, their prospects for durable, cross-regional acceptance will remain limited. A restructured approach that decentralizes livestock policy design to genuinely reflect the input and consent of state and local governments, while providing federal financing and technical support, may prove more politically sustainable than the historically top-down federal initiatives that have repeatedly stalled since 2016.

Recommendations

1. The Federal Government should accelerate and adequately fund the full implementation of the National Livestock Transformation Plan and related ranching reform initiatives, insulating them from partisan and gubernatorial politics, so as to durably resolve the underlying resource competition between herders and farming communities that continues to fuel violent conflict.
2. Security agencies should adopt a depoliticized, intelligence-led, and evenhanded approach to the prosecution of armed herder groups and their sponsors, ensuring that operations against them receive the same command attention, resourcing, and legal follow-through as operations against other designated terrorist and criminal organizations, in order to restore public confidence in the impartiality of the Nigerian security and justice system.
3. Government at federal and state levels should invest in the establishment of properly resourced, trained, and coordinated state and community policing structures, alongside modern surveillance and border-control technology, to reclaim ungoverned forest enclaves, curb the cross-border movement of armed groups and illicit arms, and strengthen early-warning cooperation between security agencies and traditional and community leadership structures.



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