

Decentralized Chaos and Micro-Level Corruption as Critical Game Changers in Sustaining Terrorism in Borno State

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the persistent resilience of insurgent groups in Borno State, Nigeria, through the lens of decentralized chaos and micro-level corruption. Despite over a decade of intensive military operations and the degradation of the territorial "caliphate," groups such as ISWAP and JAS continue to maintain significant logistical fluidity. Moving away from macro-ideological analyses, this study employs an ethnographic-political economy approach to argue that the sustenance of terrorism is anchored in a "capillary level" of conflict. Drawing upon the Greed vs. Grievance and Principal-Agent theories, the research identifies how "decentralized chaos" in the borderlands creates a vacuum of oversight that facilitates a self-sustaining war economy. The findings reveal that micro-level corruption manifested through the "checkpoint economy," the illicit taxation of the dried-fish and cattle trades, and the systemic diversion of humanitarian aid serves as a critical game changer. These granular transactions act as a logistical bridge, allowing insurgents to bypass state-imposed sanctions and gain local legitimacy. The study concludes that the "Principal-Agent" disconnect between the central military command and frontline actors has resulted in a "managed conflict" where local stakeholders find the continuation of hostilities more economically viable than peace. The paper argues that victory in Borno is not merely a matter of kinetic force but requires a structural dismantling of the micro-incentives that fuel the conflict. Recommendations include the digitalization of commodity supply chains and the reform of incentive structures for frontline security personnel.

1. Introduction

The security landscape of Northeast Nigeria, particularly Borno State, has undergone a profound and violent metamorphosis over the last two decades. What began in 2002 as a localized socio-religious movement under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf has evolved into one of the world's most resilient and complex insurgent ecosystems. The transition from the localized "Boko Haram" (Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad or JAS) to the more tactically sophisticated Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) signifies more than a mere change in leadership or global affiliation. It represents a fundamental shift in the operational survival strategies of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) within the Lake Chad Basin.

For over fifteen years, the Nigerian state has employed a predominantly kinetic approach to counter-terrorism. Massive budgetary allocations have been directed toward hardware acquisition, aerial bombardments, and large-scale troop deployments under various operations such as Lafiya Dole and Hadin Kai. Despite these efforts and the periodic reclamation of territorial local government areas (LGAs), the insurgency persists. The resilience of these groups suggests that the conflict is no longer fueled solely by the ideological fervor of a "caliphate" but is instead anchored in a deeply entrenched, localized infrastructure of survival. As the conflict has lingered, the rigid hierarchies of early insurgent structures have dissolved into what this paper terms "decentralized chaos"—a state where conflict is sustained not by a central command alone, but by a fragmented network of local actors, interests, and illicit economies.

1.2 The Shift in Perspective: From Macro-Ideology to Micro-Dynamics

Mainstream academic discourse on terrorism in Nigeria has historically prioritized macro-level analyses. Scholars have extensively debated the roles of global jihadist expansion, high-level political sabotage in Abuja, and the overarching failures of regional military cooperation through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). While these perspectives remain valid, they often overlook the "capillary level" of the conflict—the mundane, everyday interactions that occur at the village market, the rural checkpoint, and the local administrative office.

This paper argues for a critical shift in perspective: from the macro-ideological to the micro-dynamic. While ideology may provide the initial recruitment drive, it is the "micro-level corruption" that provides the logistical oxygen for sustained warfare. Micro-level corruption in this context refers to the petty bribery, the skimming of humanitarian aid, the illicit taxation of the dried-fish and cattle

trades, and the "checkpoint economy" managed by low-level state and non-state actors. These granular transactions act as "critical game changers." They create a symbiotic relationship between the hunter and the hunted, where the continuation of a "managed conflict" becomes more economically viable for local stakeholders than the total imposition of peace. By focusing on these micro-dynamics, we reveal a conflict that is decentralized and, therefore, immune to traditional top-down military solutions.

1.3 Scope and Rationale: Borno State as the Epicenter

Borno State serves as the primary laboratory for this study due to its unique position as the geostrategic heart of the insurgency. Bordering Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, the state's porous frontiers facilitate a level of "decentralized chaos" that is difficult to replicate elsewhere. The collapse of formal judicial and administrative structures in LGAs such as Guzamala, Abadam, and Marte has allowed for the emergence of "shadow governances." In these spaces, the line between an insurgent, a local trader, and a security official often blurs through the medium of corrupt exchange.

The scope of this research is specifically bounded by the period of 2015 to the present, marking the era where the insurgency fragmented into competing factions (JAS vs. ISWAP). This fragmentation did not weaken the movement as expected; instead, it decentralized the chaos, making the insurgency more adaptable to local economic conditions. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the "victory" promised by military communiqués is consistently undermined by these micro-level realities. Until the internal mechanisms of decentralized corruption are dismantled, the structural integrity of terrorism in Borno State will remain intact, regardless of the number of insurgent leaders neutralized.

2. Statement of the Problem

The persistence of the insurgency in Borno State despite over a decade of intensive military operations (Operations Lafiya Dole and Hadin Kai) presents a fundamental paradox in security studies. While the Nigerian state has successfully degraded the insurgents' capacity to hold large urban centers, it has failed to dismantle the decentralized infrastructure that sustains their rural operations. The core of this failure lies in the transition of the conflict from a purely ideological struggle to a self-sustaining war economy characterized by "decentralized chaos."

The problem is twofold. First, the breakdown of formal state authority in the fringes of Borno has created ungoverned spaces where "chaos" is not merely an absence of order, but a functional, fragmented system of local control. Second, micro-level corruption—expressed through the illicit taxation of the fish and cattle trades, the diversion of humanitarian aid, and the "toll-gate" extortion at security checkpoints—has turned the conflict into a profitable enterprise for both state and non-state actors. This "capillary-level" corruption acts as a critical game changer by providing insurgents with a constant flow of fuel, food, and intelligence. Consequently, the traditional "top-down" military strategy is rendered ineffective because it ignores the "bottom-up" economic incentives that make the continuation of terrorism more lucrative for local stakeholders than its cessation.

3. Research Questions

To address the problem stated above, this study seeks to answer the following specific research questions:

- To what extent does "decentralized chaos" in the borderlands of Borno State facilitate the tactical flexibility and logistical resilience of ISWAP and JAS factions?
Sub-question: How has the fragmentation of insurgent groups into smaller, autonomous cells altered the economic landscape of the conflict?
- In what ways does micro-level corruption among local security actors and civilian administrators serve as a "logistical bridge" for terrorist sustenance?
Sub-question: What are the specific mechanisms (e.g., the checkpoint economy, fertilizer smuggling, aid skimming) that allow insurgents to bypass state-imposed sanctions?
- How do these micro-dynamic "game changers" undermine the efficacy of the Nigerian State's centralized counter-terrorism policies?
Sub-question: Why have high-level military victories failed to translate into a permanent cessation of hostilities at the grassroots level?

4. Conceptual Framework

The operational resilience of non-state armed groups in Northeast Nigeria is not a vacuum-sealed phenomenon but rather a product of a complex, interwoven conceptual ecosystem. In this study, the interplay between state fragility and insurgent longevity is mapped through three primary variables: decentralized chaos, micro-level corruption, and terrorism sustenance. Understanding the fluid boundaries and reciprocal relationships between these variables is essential for identifying why the insurgency in Borno State remains "sticky" and resistant to traditional military neutralization (Uchehara, 2019).

4.1 Variable Definitions

The primary independent variable in this analysis is Decentralized Chaos. Within the context of Borno's borderlands, this refers to the systemic breakdown of centralized command-and-control structures and the erosion of formal administrative hierarchies. As noted by Onuoha (2014), this state of affairs is characterized by "multi-centric" power dynamics, where the vacuum left by the retreating state is filled by a heterogeneous mix of actors, including splintered insurgent cells (such as ISWAP and the Shekau-aligned JAS factions), local vigilante groups like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), and opportunistic local warlords. This chaos is not merely the absence of order but the presence of a fragmented, competitive order where local actors operate with significant autonomy from their respective central commands.

Acting as the connective tissue in this framework is the mediating variable of Micro-level Corruption. Distinct from the "grand corruption" often discussed in the halls of power in Abuja—such as the diversion of massive defense procurement funds—micro-

level corruption refers to the "capillary" or granular exchanges that occur daily at the tactical level. This includes the petty bribery at security checkpoints, the illicit "protection fees" levied on rural farmers, and the systemic skimming of humanitarian resources intended for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) (Transparency International, 2021). It is this localized, transactional dishonesty that facilitates the physical movement of insurgent logistics through otherwise restricted zones.

The dependent variable, and the ultimate outcome of these interactions, is Terrorism Sustenance. This is defined as the capacity of insurgent organizations to maintain operational continuity, logistical fluidity, and recruitment cycles despite being "technically" or "kinetically" defeated on the conventional battlefield. Sustenance is achieved when the group successfully adapts its supply lines to circumvent state pressure, often by co-opting the very structures meant to suppress them (Felbab-Brown, 2018).

4.2 The Conceptual Relationship

The relationship between these variables is both symbiotic and cyclical, creating a self-perpetuating "conflict trap." Initially, decentralized chaos removes the institutional oversight and judicial transparency necessary to suppress illicit behavior, thereby creating a fertile environment for corruption to take root. This micro-level corruption then serves as the functional mechanism through which insurgents procure the "oxygen" of warfare—fuel, fertilizers for IEDs, food, and actionable intelligence—effectively buying the survival they cannot win through ideology alone.

Finally, as these logistical successes lead to sustained terrorism, the resulting insecurity ensures that state authority remains weak and centralized governance remains absent. This closes the loop: sustained terrorism necessitates a continued state of emergency and chaos, which in turn ensures that the local actors—both state and non-state—who profit from the "war economy" can continue their extractive activities without interference (Hoffmann & Verjee, 2021).

5. Theoretical Framework

To anchor the empirical analysis of this study, three complementary theoretical lenses are employed: the Greed vs. Grievance theory, the Principal-Agent theory, and Fragile State theory. Together, these provide a robust explanation for the persistence of conflict in the face of superior state force.

5.1 The Greed vs. Grievance Theory

The foundational work of Collier and Hoeffler (2004) regarding the "Greed vs. Grievance" dichotomy provides a vital lens for understanding the Borno conflict's evolution. While it is widely accepted that the early stages of the Boko Haram insurgency were fueled by legitimate grievances—including chronic socio-economic marginalization, poverty, and extrajudicial state violence—this paper posits that the conflict's current sustenance is increasingly driven by "Greed." In the burgeoning war economy of Northeast Nigeria, the continuation of hostilities has created a marketplace where insurgents "tax" lucrative trades such as the dried-fish industry in Baga and cattle rustling across the Lake Chad basin. When the economic benefits of a managed conflict outweigh the perceived benefits of peace for local stakeholders, "Greed" becomes the primary engine of insurgent longevity.

5.2 Principal-Agent Theory

The Principal-Agent theory offers a compelling explanation for the disconnect between the Nigerian state's strategic objectives and its tactical outcomes. In this model, the "Principal" (the federal government and high-level military command) seeks the total eradication of the insurgency. However, the "Agent" (the low-level soldier, police officer, or local official at a remote Borno checkpoint) is often faced with high personal risk, inadequate equipment, and inconsistent pay. As observed by Agbiboa (2018), this creates an incentive for the Agent to prioritize personal survival and financial gain over the Principal's mission. By engaging in micro-level corruption—such as accepting a bribe to allow a fuel tanker to pass into an insurgent-held "Red Zone"—the Agent acts as a "game changer," effectively undermining the state's macro-security goals to satisfy micro-economic needs.

5.3 Fragile State Theory

Complementing these perspectives is Fragile State theory, particularly the work of Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) on extractive institutions. This theory views the decentralized chaos in Borno not as an accidental byproduct of war, but as a structural manifestation of a state that lacks a "monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force." In such a state, institutions are designed to extract resources rather than provide security or services. When the state is present only as a predatory or extractive force, the distinction between "legal" and "illegal" governance vanishes. Consequently, the chaos becomes a structural prerequisite for micro-corruption to become the de facto law of the land, allowing terrorism to embed itself within the very fabric of local survival (Zenn, 2020).

6. Empirical Review

6.1 Theme I: The Political Economy of Insurgent Survival (Sources 1–8)

The survival of non-state armed groups is increasingly viewed through the lens of economic sustainability rather than purely ideological fervor. Scholarly inquiries into the "war economy" thesis suggest that insurgencies in Africa often transition from predatory violence to sophisticated resource management. Duffield (2001) and Le Billon (2001) laid the foundational groundwork for this theme, arguing that conflict zones are not merely areas of "breakdown" but are sites of innovative, albeit illicit, economic reordering. In the specific context of the Lake Chad Basin, Hoffmann and Verjee (2021) and Kalyvas (2006) observe that the persistence of violence is often linked to the ability of insurgents to integrate into local markets.

Further empirical evidence provided by Bøås (2015) and Tisseron (2017) highlights that ISWAP, in particular, has mastered the "governance" of trade routes, moving away from the erratic looting characteristic of the Shekau era toward a more stable system of "taxation" on dried fish and cattle. This thematic cluster is reinforced by Mustapha and Meagher (2020), who argue that the

"informalization" of the Borno economy has made it impossible to separate legitimate trade from insurgent financing, thereby creating a resilient financial base that resists external military shocks.

6.2 Theme II: Micro-Level Corruption and the "Checkpoint Economy" (Sources 9–16)

A significant body of literature identifies the frontline security checkpoint as the primary site of state-insurgent symbiosis. Agbibo (2015) and Onuoha (2016) provide extensive ethnographic evidence suggesting that the "toll-gate" system in Northeast Nigeria functions as a logistical bypass for prohibited goods. While the Nigerian state officially bans the movement of bulk urea (for IEDs) and fuel into "Red Zones," Smith (2007) and Enobi and Akanni (2020) demonstrate that micro-bribes paid to low-level agents effectively neutralize these prohibitions.

This theme is further expanded by Sayne (2012) and Page (2018), who describe "security sector corruption" not as an administrative error, but as a survival strategy for underpaid soldiers. Hassan (2014) and Omeni (2018) argue that this "petty extortion" at the micro-level aggregates into a macro-security failure, where the very agents of the state inadvertently become the quartermasters of the insurgency. This thematic link illustrates that the "decentralized chaos" of the battlefield is precisely what allows these transactional relationships to flourish without the fear of centralized oversight.

6.3 Theme III: The "Grievance" of Aid Diversion and IDP Management (Sources 17–24)

The management of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and humanitarian aid has emerged as a secondary front for micro-level corruption. Jacob and Akpan (2015) and Zenn (2020) have documented how the diversion of food and medical supplies by local officials creates a vacuum of trust between the state and the citizenry. Empirical studies by Umar (2018) and Okoli and Iortyer (2014) suggest that when aid is "skimmed" by local actors, the resulting starvation and desperation in IDP camps serve as a potent recruitment tool for insurgent groups.

Scholars like Adebayo (2017) and Idowu (2019) contend that the "humanitarian-industrial complex" in Borno has become a self-serving entity where certain local elites have a vested interest in the prolongation of the conflict. This cluster of work emphasizes that micro-corruption does not just sustain terrorism logistically; it sustains it ideologically by validating the insurgent narrative of a "corrupt and godless state."

6.4 Theme IV: Fragile Governance and the Rise of Local Militias (Sources 25–30)

The final thematic pillar examines the role of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and other decentralized "security providers." Balami et al. (2011) and Kyari (2019) analyze how the state's reliance on local militias has further decentralized authority in Borno. While Meagher (2012) and Pratten (2008) acknowledge the tactical successes of these groups, they also warn of "militia-ization" where these local actors eventually engage in the same micro-corrupt practices—such as illegal taxation and resource control—that they were meant to eradicate.

The work of Reno (1999) on "Shadow States" and Vlassenroot (2004) on "Socialized Conflict" provides a theoretical capstone to this cluster, suggesting that in decentralized chaos, the line between "protector" and "predator" becomes indistinguishable. By synthesizing these 30 works, it becomes clear that the sustaining force of terrorism in Borno is a multi-dimensional economic and social structure that traditional military hardware is ill-equipped to dismantle.

7. Findings

The empirical investigation into the sustenance of terrorism in Borno State reveals that the insurgency has morphed into a decentralized, semi-commercialized enterprise. These findings are categorized into three critical nodes: the taxation of local commodities, the "checkpoint economy" regarding prohibited logistics, and administrative leakage within humanitarian corridors.

7.1 Illicit Taxation and Commodity Control

A primary finding of this study is the sophistication with which ISWAP and JAS factions have integrated themselves into the Borno-Lake Chad trade axis. Specifically, in the Baga and Monguno sectors, insurgents have established a shadow regulatory framework for the dried-fish industry. Rather than dismantling the trade, insurgent cells act as predatory "gatekeepers," charging a "protection fee" or Zakat on every carton of fish transported toward Maiduguri.

Intermediaries and local traders, operating within the decentralized chaos of these remote regions, often prefer paying these predictable fees to insurgents over the unpredictable extortion experienced at multiple, uncoordinated state checkpoints. Similarly, the cattle trade has emerged as a significant revenue stream; evidence indicates that rustled or "taxed" livestock are integrated into local markets by collaborators who bypass formal veterinary and security clearances through micro-bribes.

7.2 The Checkpoint Economy and Logistical Fluidity

The study finds that the official ban on high-risk materials, such as urea-based fertilizers and bulk petroleum, is frequently neutralized at the micro-level. Evidence suggests that the "checkpoint economy" functions as a sieve rather than a barrier. Security agents—driven by the "Principal-Agent" disconnect, low morale, and poor remuneration—permit the passage of these materials in exchange for "settlement" fees. These granular transactions allow insurgent cells to maintain a steady supply of IED precursors and fuel for motorcycle-led mobility. Consequently, decentralized chaos prevents superior officers from monitoring the conduct of frontline agents, ensuring that the logistical "capillaries" of the insurgency remain open.

7.3 Humanitarian Leakage and Social Legitimacy

A third critical finding involves the diversion of aid within various IDP camps across "Garrison Towns." There is significant evidence of "skimming" by local administrative officials and their proxies. This micro-corruption has a dual effect: it reduces resources reaching the vulnerable and creates a grievance that insurgents actively exploit. Findings indicate that ISWAP, in

particular, utilizes its illicit tax revenue to provide basic services or food to communities where state aid has been diverted. In this way, micro-level corruption within state structures directly enhances the "competitive governance" and social legitimacy of terrorist factions.

8. Discussion of Findings

The findings presented above validate the theoretical assertion that the Borno conflict is sustained by a greed-driven war economy facilitated by state fragility. This section focuses on the implications of these findings for the broader regional security architecture.

8.1 *The Paradox of Managed Conflict*

The analysis reveals a disturbing trend toward "managed conflict." When state agents and insurgent cells both derive economic benefit from decentralized chaos, the incentive to reach a definitive military conclusion diminishes. The Principal-Agent theory is vividly illustrated here: while the "Principal" (the Federal Government) issues directives for a total blockade, the "Agent" (the local official) finds that the status quo of regulated smuggling is more profitable. This suggests that the insurgency is not merely an external threat, but a phenomenon that has been partially internalized within the state's own local administrative and security structures.

8.2 *Disruption of the Social Contract*

Furthermore, the findings regarding aid diversion and the "fish tax" indicate a profound erosion of the social contract in Borno State. Micro-level corruption acts as a force multiplier for terrorism. When the citizenry perceives the state as a predatory actor—collecting bribes at checkpoints while failing to secure aid—they are more likely to adopt a stance of neutrality or active collaboration with insurgents who offer a more "ordered" form of extortion. Thus, decentralized chaos is not just a tactical hurdle; it is a governance crisis that allows terrorism to be sustained as a viable, albeit violent, alternative to a corrupt state apparatus.

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