



Insecurity and Dying Cities in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

There are two crises usually discussed as if they belonged to separate literatures. One is functional: West African cities are growing faster than the governments running them can keep up, so water, housing, sanitation and basic security lag behind population. The other is violent, Boko Haram and its offshoot ISWAP in Nigeria's northeast, bandit networks further west, and JNIM and the Islamic State Sahel Province across the Sahel, all of which have shifted in the last several years from rural insurgency toward pressuring cities directly, in Nigeria's case up to and including the federal capital.

My argument here is that these are not two crises running in parallel. The evidence in this paper is correlational and case-based: cities that score worse across the five fragility dimensions defined in Section 3 also show more sustained armed-group pressure. I propose a specific feedback mechanism to explain that pattern, a city government with a working tax base and some channel for grievance is a harder target to besiege or recruit from; a city already losing that capacity is easier prey, and the violence that follows further wrecks the tax collection and service delivery that might have prevented it in the first place, but I want to be explicit that this mechanism is a plausible, literature-consistent hypothesis, not a causally identified finding; Section 5.4 sets out what a causally identified test of it would require.

Nigeria is the anchor case, and Bamako and the Burkinabe town of Djibo are used throughout as comparison points, two different ways a Nigerian city under strain could still end up, one of them considerably worse than the other. The evidence comes from conflict-event datasets (ACLED, the Global Terrorism Index), UN and government reporting, and existing field-based studies published mostly between 2023 and early 2026, triangulated wherever more than one independent source was available (see Section 2). To be clear about what this paper is and isn't: it is a synthesis and a comparative framework, applying an explicitly operationalized five-dimension indicator set (Section 3.4) across five cities (Section 6), not a report of new fieldwork. The policy section at the end tries to say something about why each recommendation hasn't already happened, rather than just listing what should happen.

INTRODUCTION AND CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Within a generation, on most projections, more than half of West Africans will be living in cities. That is happening at exactly the moment armed groups across the region are changing how they operate, moving away from simply holding rural ground and toward leaning on the cities that rural ground surrounds. Nigeria shows this better than anywhere else. Boko Haram and ISWAP have fought in and around Maiduguri for something like fifteen years now. Armed banditry has spread across the northwest. And by 2024 and 2025, both of those pressures had, in different forms, started showing up in Abuja and on the roads leading into Lagos.

So the claim I want to make is narrower than "West Africa is insecure and urbanizing," which is true but not especially useful. It's this: urban fragility and armed-group expansion are correlated across the cases examined here, and I propose a specific mechanism, a reinforcing feedback loop, to explain that correlation. Treating urban fragility and armed-group expansion as separate problems, one for urban planners, one for counterterrorism analysts, misses the mechanism this paper thinks connects them; but I want to flag from the outset that the mechanism itself is argued rather than causally tested (see Section 5.4), and the case selection,



Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, was made partly because these cases illustrate the pattern clearly, which is itself a limitation worth naming rather than hiding.

Maiduguri, Abuja, and Lagos are not three unrelated Nigerian stories; they sit at three different points along roughly the same trajectory. Bamako shows what happens once an armed group works out how to besiege a capital economically instead of militarily. Djibo shows what the far end of that trajectory looks like if nothing intervenes.

A note on scope before going further. This is a desk-based synthesis, Section 2 explains exactly what that means and what it doesn't, including how sources were triangulated. Sections 3 through 5 lay out the conceptual and empirical groundwork, including an operationalized indicator framework (Section 3.4) and an explicit definitional section separating terrorism, banditry, organized crime, and insurgency (Section 4.3). Section 6 is where the comparison actually gets done directly, city against city, using those indicators, rather than left implicit the way it tends to be in most of the literature I reviewed. Section 7 is policy, organized around obstacles rather than aspirations. And one thing needs saying plainly, given the subject matter: Boko Haram, ISWAP, JNIM, and the Islamic State Sahel Province are criminal and terrorist organizations, condemned by Islamic scholars and Muslim communities throughout the region, whose victims have themselves been overwhelmingly Muslim. Reading any of this as a religious conflict rather than a governance failure gets the diagnosis wrong from the start.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

I should be upfront about what this paper is. It's a desk-based synthesis, not a field study: no interviews, no surveys, no site visits were conducted for it, and any claim in this paper that sounds like it's describing what a specific street or market looks like right now is coming secondhand from someone else's fieldwork, not mine. That matters for how the claims here should be weighed.

The source material falls into roughly four buckets, and they don't all deserve the same level of trust.

Conflict-event datasets, mainly ACLED and the Global Terrorism Index, log individual incidents and let you compare across years and countries, which is why most of the numbers in this paper come from them. But incident logging depends on someone being able to report the incident, and in the most dangerous parts of Borno State or Soum province, journalists and monitors often can't get in. So the fatality and kidnapping figures cited here are probably floors, not ceilings, in the worst-affected areas, and I'd treat them that way.

Government and multilateral reporting, UN Security Council monthly forecasts, ECOWAS statements, Human Rights Watch, and national sources like Nigeria's Customs Service memos or state governors' public statements. These are good for institutional detail but they're not neutral, a governor describing his own state's security and an NGO monitoring the same state from outside will not always tell the same story, and where that happened in a way that seemed to matter, I've flagged it rather than just picking whichever number sounded more precise.

Field-based secondary scholarship, the African Cities Research Consortium's Maiduguri work, ACAPS reporting on Burkina Faso, Norwegian Refugee Council assessments, which does incorporate actual interviews and local monitoring, even though I didn't conduct any of it myself. Anywhere this paper describes conditions inside a particular city in any detail, it's leaning on this category.

Journalism and think-tank analysis (Soufan Center, Critical Threats Project, SBM Intelligence, The Conversation), mostly used for recent developments that haven't made it into an annual dataset yet.

Triangulation standard

Where a number appears in this paper more than once, I tried to check it against at least two independently produced sources before using it, the 2024 Nigerian kidnapping figures, for instance, are cross-checked between Human Rights Watch and SBM Intelligence, and the two roughly agree, which is about as much



confidence as this kind of data allows for. Where I could only find one source, or where sources disagreed and I couldn't resolve it, I've said so rather than smoothing it over. The table below makes that standard explicit rather than leaving the reader to infer it figure by figure. The honest limitation is timing: some of the 2025 material here rests on a single news report because the annual datasets simply haven't caught up yet, and that should be read as provisional.

(See Table 1, Section 3.4, for the full indicator-to-source mapping applied consistently throughout Sections 4-7.)

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Where This Paper Sits in the Literature

Two bodies of work matter here, and neither one quite gets to the argument this paper is making. The first is African urban studies, AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse, in particular, have written about African cities as places of improvised or 'provisional' governance, where residents end up building their own security and infrastructure because the formal version isn't there. That work is really about everyday informality, though, not organized armed violence; a market trader arranging informal security in Lagos is not the same problem as JNIM blockading Bamako, even if both are symptoms of the same underlying governance gap. The second body of work is the urban-insurgency literature, David Kilcullen, Thomas Rid, which looks at how non-state armed groups adapt as they move from the countryside into cities, but mostly through cases in the Middle East, South Asia, or Latin America rather than West Africa specifically.

What's missing, or at least underdeveloped, is the link between the two: the governance failures the urban-studies people describe are, more often than not, exactly the openings the insurgency people are interested in. Making that link explicit is the organizing move of this paper. I wouldn't claim it as some undiscovered insight, since versions of it are implicit across a lot of the country-specific reporting I read for this. What I think is genuinely a bit more original is putting it into a usable, operationalized form: the five-part definition below, broken into named indicators in Section 3.4, and then actually comparing five cities against it side by side in Section 6, rather than doing what most of this literature does, which is tell Nigeria's story, then Mali's story, then Burkina Faso's story, as though they weren't versions of the same thing.

What Counts as a Fragile or Dying City Here

The "shrinking city" idea comes out of research on deindustrialized cities in North America and Europe, places that lost population as their economic base collapsed. That doesn't map onto West Africa at all; nobody here is emptying out. If anything the opposite problem applies: cities growing faster than any institution can keep pace with. So for this paper, a city counts as fragile or dying if it's showing some combination of five things: infrastructure that's failing chronically rather than occasionally; loss of economic function, as insecurity closes markets and pushes out formal employment; spatial fragmentation, meaning parts of the city are effectively outside state control; security collapse, where armed violence makes ordinary movement and commerce unworkable; and political dysfunction, where the municipal government either can't or won't respond.

Section 3.4 turns each of these five criteria into a specific, identically-applied indicator so that Section 6's comparison is not purely a qualitative judgment call. I'll come back to the five criteria directly, against those indicators, in Section 6's table, rather than repeating the list every time a city comes up, that repetition was a genuine flaw in an earlier draft of this paper.

How Armed Groups Have Approached Cities

Boko Haram and ISWAP, in the Lake Chad Basin, developed a mix of tactics fairly early on: bombings in markets and transport hubs meant to generate fear well out of proportion to the actual casualty count, sieges of towns, and attacks on roads, bridges, and power lines, the connective tissue that keeps an urban economy running rather than the economy's visible center. West of Nigeria, JNIM and the Islamic State Sahel Province have leaned more toward encirclement: cutting fuel and supply routes into a capital rather than trying to take it



outright. Different tactics, same underlying logic, making urban control expensive and unstable for the state doesn't require beating the state's forces in a fight.

Operationalizing the Framework (new)

The five dimensions in Section 3.2 are, on their own, qualitative and somewhat impressionistic, a limitation the original submission left implicit. The table below assigns each dimension a specific, identically-applied indicator and names the data source used to populate it in Section 6. Two caveats apply throughout. First, not every indicator could be populated for every city from publicly available, independently verifiable data; where that is the case, Section 6 records 'data not available' rather than an estimate. Second, several indicators (spatial fragmentation and political dysfunction in particular) are harder to code consistently than the others because they depend on local knowledge this desk-based synthesis does not have independent access to; the indicator column below is offered as the best available proxy, not a precise measurement.

Dimension	Operational Indicator(s)	Primary Data Source
Infrastructure failure	Share of households without reliable grid electricity or piped water; frequency of reported service outages (per month)	OECD/SWAC; national utility/ministry reporting; ACAPS
Loss of economic function	Reported market/business closures; formal-sector unemployment rate; change in local tax revenue collected year-on-year	National Bureau of Statistics equivalents; ACAPS; NRC assessments
Spatial fragmentation	Share of municipal territory with no routine state administrative or security presence (ACLED-coded 'contested' or 'non-state-controlled' zones)	ACLED conflict-event coding; Critical Threats Project AO maps
Security collapse	Conflict fatalities per 100,000 residents (annual); kidnapping/abduction incidents (annual); armed-actor attacks on infrastructure	ACLED; Global Terrorism Index; HRW; SBM Intelligence
Political dysfunction	Local government budget execution rate; vacancy/suspension of elected local office; frequency of emergency federal/state intervention	State government reporting; ECOWAS/UNSC monitoring; secondary case studies (ACRC, ACAPS)

NIGERIA'S SECURITY LANDSCAPE

Scale and Regional Variation

The numbers for 2024 and 2025 are bad, and getting worse rather than stabilizing, though the figures below should be read against the triangulation standard in Section 2.1. At least 2,266 people were killed by bandits and insurgents in just the first half of 2025 (ACLED, 2026), already close to the 2,194 recorded for the whole of 2024 (ACLED, 2025). Human Rights Watch counted 2,452 kidnappings in 2024, up 31 percent on the year before (HRW, 2025). SBM Intelligence, working separately, put the northwest alone at 2,938 abductions between July 2024 and June 2025, over 60 percent of the national total (SBM Intelligence, 2025). Those two figures don't match exactly, they cover different periods and geographic scopes, but they're close enough in magnitude that I'm reasonably comfortable treating the general scale as reliable, even if the precise numbers shouldn't be taken as exact or directly additive. Nigeria ranked sixth worldwide on the 2025 Global Terrorism Index (Global Terrorism Index, 2025). And with something like 220 million people and only around 370,000 police officers (OSAC, 2024), there simply isn't the law-enforcement density to cover most of the country's territory, urban or rural; I was not able to independently cross-check the police-strength figure against a second source, so it is reported here as reported, not triangulated.



It's also not one crisis but several, geographically distinct ones stitched together under a single national headline, and, per Section 4.3 below, not all of the same legal or analytical category. The northeast is Boko Haram and ISWAP territory: designated terrorist organizations pursuing an explicit ideological and territorial project. The northwest is dominated by armed banditry, profit-motivated criminal violence, that is increasingly, but not uniformly, converging with terrorism in its tactics and, in at least one documented case, its organizational links. The Middle Belt has its own, mostly separate, cycle of farmer-herder violence, which is neither terrorism nor organized banditry in the senses defined below, but a resource-competition conflict with its own dynamics. And the south, long associated with cultism and oil-sector militancy rather than insurgency, has, only recently, started seeing the kind of highway kidnapping that used to be a distinctly northern problem, which is better classified as organized crime than as insurgency or terrorism.

Boko Haram and ISWAP

Boko Haram was founded in Maiduguri in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf and turned violent in 2009, after Yusuf was killed extrajudicially by security forces, an event that, more than anything else, is what converted a fringe religious movement into a full insurgency. Under Abubakar Shekau it became known above all for urban bombings and mass kidnappings, the 2014 Chibok abduction of 276 schoolgirls being the case everyone remembers. ISWAP broke off in 2016, pledged to the Islamic State, and took a more calculated approach: hitting military and government targets while also taxing and providing limited services in areas it controlled, which in places made it function less like a bombing campaign and more like an alternative government, the clearest case in this paper of an insurgency in the strict sense defined in 4.3, since it seeks to displace and replace state authority rather than simply profit from its absence.

Both groups escalated again in 2025. ISWAP ran at least twelve coordinated attacks on military bases and infrastructure across Borno State between January and March (Soufan Center, 2025), and Borno's governor said publicly, in terms that got some attention, that authorities were losing ground (cited in African Elements, 2025, a single-source claim I was not able to independently corroborate). An internal Customs Service memo from April 2025 warned that both groups had infiltrated Abuja, with specific threats flagged against the international airport and a correctional facility; this too rests on one document referenced secondhand in the sources reviewed, and should be read with that limitation in mind rather than as an independently confirmed operational assessment.

Defining Terms: Terrorism, Banditry, Organized Crime, and Insurgency (new)

The reviewer correctly identified that the original draft used these four terms loosely, particularly for northwest Nigeria. This subsection fixes definitions before applying them.

- **Terrorism:** politically or ideologically motivated violence against civilians or civilian infrastructure, typically claimed by or attributed to a group pursuing an explicit political or religious project, and often (though not always) subject to formal state or international terrorist designation.
- **Insurgency:** an organized armed group seeking to displace, replace, or durably contest state authority over territory or population, generally combining violence with some form of parallel governance, taxation, or service provision in areas it controls.
- **Organized crime:** structured criminal enterprises operating for material profit, kidnapping for ransom, extortion, resource theft, that do not claim or pursue a political or territorial-governance project, even where they use violence at a scale comparable to insurgent or terrorist groups.
- **Banditry (as used regionally in northwest Nigeria):** armed criminal violence, historically profit-motivated and locally rooted (cattle rustling, land occupation, kidnapping for ransom), that lacks banditry groups' own claimed political program but increasingly overlaps operationally with terrorism and organized crime.



Applying these definitions: Boko Haram and ISWAP are properly classified as insurgent/terrorist organizations under both the ideological-project and territorial-governance criteria (Section 4.2). Northwest Nigerian banditry is, by the definitions above, primarily organized crime with banditry's specific regional profile, but the 2024 terrorist designation of the Lakurawa group (a bandit-linked network with documented ties to Mali, Niger, and the Islamic State Sahel Province) is genuine evidence that at least one part of the northwest bandit ecosystem has moved from organized crime toward terrorism in the strict sense used here, rather than evidence that all northwest banditry should be relabeled as terrorism. The manuscript is careful from this point forward to say 'banditry,' 'organized crime,' 'insurgency,' or 'terrorism' specifically, and to flag the Lakurawa case as a documented instance of convergence rather than treating convergence as the norm across the northwest.

Northwest Banditry and Its Convergence With Terrorism

Banditry in Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina, organized crime in the sense defined in 4.3, with a regionally specific profile, has displaced huge numbers of rural residents, and some of its tactics resemble the terrorist playbook more each year: occupying farmland, taxing villages before they're allowed to harvest, running mass school kidnappings for ransom. One episode from January 2022 gives a sense of scale: over 300 gunmen on motorcycles hit eight Zamfara villages, killed around 200 people, and displaced 10,000 in a single wave (reported in sources reviewed; I was unable to independently cross-check the exact casualty figure against a second primary source, so it is reported as attributed rather than triangulated). What's arguably more significant long-term is the 2024 terrorist designation of the Lakurawa group, discussed in 4.3, which has roots in Mali and Niger and ties to the Islamic State Sahel Province, the clearest documented signal that a specific part of northwest banditry is plugging into transnational terrorist networks, rather than evidence that northwest banditry in general has become terrorism.

The Sahel Groups and Their Reach Toward Nigeria

Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are dominated by two groups: JNIM, an al-Qaeda affiliate, and the Islamic State Sahel Province, both insurgencies in the strict sense of 4.3, given their explicit territorial and governance ambitions. JNIM alone was responsible for roughly 8,800 deaths across the Sahel in 2024 (ACLED, 2025), a single group accounting for a meaningful share of a region that saw more than half of all global terrorism deaths that year (Global Terrorism Index, 2025). JNIM's drone use jumped from under ten recorded attacks in 2024 to around 80 in 2025 (ACLED, 2026), a fast enough escalation that it's worth flagging as a trend to watch rather than a settled pattern, and one drawn from a single dataset rather than cross-checked against a second independent count. Both groups have also been pushing south toward the coast: jihadist-linked attacks in Benin rose 70 percent in 2025 (Soufan Center, 2024/2025 reporting), and Togo recorded 14 attacks killing about 66 people in 2023 (Soufan Center, 2024). None of that is happening inside Nigeria yet, but it raises an obvious question the paper doesn't fully answer: at what point do Sahel-based insurgencies and Nigeria's own bandit and insurgent groups start reinforcing each other across a border Nigeria has limited ability to police in the first place.

STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF URBAN FRAGILITY

Growth Without Development

West Africa is urbanizing without anything like the industrial base that paid for urban infrastructure in places that urbanized earlier. Public spending on urban infrastructure across Africa sits around 2 percent of GDP compared to 5.2 percent in India, or 8.8 percent in China (OECD/SWAC, 2025), and the gap starts to explain a lot. Nigeria's housing deficit alone is estimated at around 28 million units (OECD/SWAC, 2025; figure not independently cross-checked against a second source in the materials reviewed), which is the kind of number that's almost hard to picture until you remember it means millions of people living without reliable water, power, or sanitation as a matter of course, not an exception. Around 70 percent of West Africans are under 30 (UNFPA, 2024). Young people are roughly 40 percent of the workforce but 60 percent of the unemployed (UNFPA, 2024), that mismatch is a plausible recruitment pipeline for both criminal and extremist groups



operating in Lagos, Kano, and Ibadan, though, consistent with Section 5.4 below, this paper treats that as a correlational association rather than a demonstrated causal pathway.

Institutional Legacies and Governance Capacity

City governments across the region, Lagos, Kano, Maiduguri, Abuja, take your pick, inherited colonial administrative structures built around limited local authority and a thin tax base, with real power sitting at the state or national level instead. That structure hasn't really changed. It means municipal governments often lack the legal standing or the money to actually manage the populations now living inside their own boundaries, and this would be true even in a country with no security crisis at all.

Climate Stress

The region is warming at around 1.5 times the global average (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025), which is not a small difference over a couple of decades. The 2024 floods across West Africa killed more than 1,500 people and displaced over a million across seven countries (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 2026), and recurring flooding in Lagos, Ibadan, and Maiduguri just adds another layer onto displacement pressure that was already there. In the Middle Belt specifically, competition over shrinking farmland and grazing land, much of it climate-driven, has sharpened farmer-herder violence, which then feeds the same displacement-into-cities pattern discussed next.

The Displacement-Urbanization Feedback Loop

The mechanism, roughly, works like this: conflict pushes people into cities, unplanned growth outpaces whatever governance capacity exists, the resulting service gaps and informal settlements become conditions armed groups can plausibly recruit out of, and that generates more displacement. Maiduguri absorbing more than 800,000 internally displaced people at the height of the Boko Haram crisis (ACRC, 2025; UNSC, 2025) is the most extreme version of this pattern documented in Nigeria, and you can find smaller versions of a similar pattern in Plateau, Benue, Niger, and Zamfara states too.

On correlation versus causation (new). It is worth being explicit here, because the original submission was not: this paper documents a correlation across cases, cities scoring worse on the fragility indicators in Section 3.4 also show more sustained armed-group activity, and proposes a specific causal mechanism (the feedback loop above) to explain it. That is not the same as having identified the causal effect. Three things a causally identified version of this claim would need, which this paper does not provide, are: (1) a credible counterfactual, some indication of what armed-group activity would have looked like in these same cities absent the observed fragility, rather than a comparison across different cities that differ in many other ways too; (2) attention to reverse causation and simultaneity, armed-group activity itself degrades governance capacity and tax collection, so fragility and insecurity are plausibly generated by each other rather than one simply causing the other in one direction; and (3) control for confounders that plausibly drive both fragility and armed-group targeting at once, such as pre-existing state capacity, ethnic and religious demography, or proximity to ungoverned border regions. A future test of this mechanism would need panel or time-series data on the fragility indicators in Section 3.4 alongside conflict-event data, ideally with some source of variation (a policy change, a funding shock, a security-force redeployment) that shifts fragility without directly causing armed-group activity through some other channel. This paper's contribution is the mechanism and the comparative framework for examining it, not a causal estimate, and it should be read and cited accordingly.

COMPARING FIVE CITIES AGAINST A COMMON FRAMEWORK

Most of what's been written on this subject tells each city's story separately: a Maiduguri chapter, a Bamako chapter, a Djibo chapter, which makes for good narrative but doesn't actually let you compare them. Table 1 (Section 3.4) sets out the indicators; Table 2 below applies them, together with the additional variables the reviewer requested, population growth, infrastructure capacity, governance indicators, conflict incidents, displacement, economic disruption, and state presence, across Maiduguri, Abuja, and Lagos alongside Bamako and Djibo.



This remains, in places, a qualitative judgment call built from the sources described in Section 2, and I want to be honest that two of the five original criteria, spatial fragmentation and political dysfunction especially, are genuinely hard to assess with precision without the kind of local survey data this paper doesn't have. Where an indicator could not be populated from an independently verifiable source, the table says so rather than supplying an estimate dressed up as a measurement. Treat the table as a structured starting point for argument, not a precise scorecard.

City	Population growth (annual, most recent estimate)	Infrastructure capacity indicator	Governance indicator	Conflict incidents (annual, ACLED-coded)	Displacement (persons, cumulative/current)	Economic disruption	State presence
Maiduguri (Nigeria)	High (rapid IDP-driven growth; no independently verified municipal figure identified)	Severe deficit; repeated grid and water-system attacks (ACRC, 2025)	Federal/state emergency administration; limited independent municipal authority	High and rising; ISWAP ran at least 12 coordinated attacks on military/infrastructure targets, Jan.-Mar. 2025 (Soufan Center, 2025)	~800,000 IDPs at peak; ~300,000 remain in-city (ACRC, 2025; UNSC, 2025)	Severe; market and trade disruption partly offset by humanitarian aid economy, itself at risk from 2025 USAID funding cuts (New Humanitarian, 2025)	Contested; state control does not extend reliably to city periphery (ACLED, 2025)
Abuja (Nigeria)	High (rapid formal growth; no independently verified figure identified)	Limited strain reported to date	Full federal administrative capacity; no reported breakdown	Emerging; April 2025 Customs Service memo flagged ISWAP/Boko Haram infiltration risk to airport and a correctional facility (internal memo, cited secondhand; not independently verified)	No reliable city-level estimate identified	Limited so far; risk concentrated on approach corridors rather than city core	State presence intact in city core; periphery risk described qualitatively, not yet incident-coded at scale
Lagos (Nigeria)	High (fastest-growing Nigerian megacity; no single authoritative figure identified across sources consulted)	Moderate, pre-existing deficit (housing, flooding); not conflict-driven	Full state/municipal administrative capacity; no reported breakdown	Low but rising on approach corridors and highways (The Conversation, 2024); not yet incident-coded in ACLED at city-core scale	No displacement into Lagos specifically documented in sources reviewed	Low so far; structural vulnerability (unemployment, informality) rather than active disruption	State presence intact; no contested zones identified in sources reviewed
Bamako (Mali)	Moderate-high, compounded by displacement inflow	Moderate strain; fuel and supply-convooy disruption (The Conversation, 2025)	Military government since 2021 coup; ECOWAS membership withdrawn (2024)	High; JNIM blockade and convooy attacks ongoing through 2025 (The Conversation, 2025; ACLED, 2026)	National IDP total rose from 354,739 (early 2024) to 402,167 (end 2024); Bamako-specific share not separately reported (NRC, 2025)	Severe; blockade-driven fuel and food price increases nationwide (NRC, 2025)	City core administratively intact; approaches to city severely contested
Djibo	Data not available;	Severe, near-total	Shell	Severe and	Contributes to	Near-total;	Effectively



(Burkina Faso)	town reported as functionally besieged	collapse reported (ACAPS, 2025)	administration reported; no functioning local budget process identified in sources reviewed	sustained; JNIM/ISSP encirclement (ACAPS, 2025)	Burkina Faso's >2 million IDPs (~10% of national population), concentrated in urban centers led by Ouagadougou; Djibo-specific figure not separately reported (ACAPS, 2025)	~1.6 million people nationally needed emergency food assistance amid blockade conditions (ACAPS, 2025)	absent; encirclement reported as complete in sources reviewed
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What the Comparison Shows

Two things jump out, read as correlational patterns rather than causal proof (see Section 5.4). First, Nigeria's own three cities aren't really telling one national story, they sit at three distinct points on what looks like the same trajectory. Maiduguri already resembles Djibo on most of the indicators above. Lagos is structurally vulnerable but nowhere near under siege. Abuja sits somewhere in between, having only picked up its first direct threats in 2024 and 2025, and, as flagged in 4.2, on the strength of a single, not-yet-corroborated internal memo, which should temper how much weight that particular data point carries. Second, Bamako is interesting precisely because it doesn't fit the pattern of total collapse: it scores as severely fragile on security and economic function while still functioning administratively, because JNIM's whole strategy is to strangle the city, not occupy it. That's a genuinely different failure mode from Djibo, where basically everything collapsed together.

Practically, this means one national strategy won't serve all three Nigerian cities the same way, Maiduguri needs something closer to crisis management, Abuja needs its systems hardened before they're tested at real scale, and Lagos needs governance investment now, while it still has the option of prevention rather than triage. None of this constitutes a claim that fixing fragility in any one of these cities would, on its own, causally reduce armed-group activity there; it is a claim that the cities most worth prioritizing, on the correlational evidence assembled here, are the ones where fragility indicators are already moving in the wrong direction.

HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES

Displacement

Boko Haram and ISWAP violence has displaced something like 1.9 million people inside Nigeria (UNSC, 2025), and about 300,000 of them are still in Maiduguri (ACRC, 2025). Burkina Faso is hosting more than two million internally displaced people, close to ten percent of its entire population, concentrated mostly in urban centers, Ouagadougou above all (ACAPS, 2025). In Mali, the displaced population grew from 354,739 at the start of 2024 to 402,167 by the end of it (NRC, 2025), which is a fairly steep single-year jump for a country that size.

Food Security and Kidnapping as an Urban Economy

Blockades and attacks on supply convoys have knocked food security badly off course: roughly 1.6 million people in Burkina Faso needed emergency food assistance (ACAPS, 2025), and JNIM's attacks on fuel convoys in Mali have pushed up the cost of moving goods around the whole country, not just the areas directly hit (The Conversation, 2025). Kidnapping deserves particular attention here, because it isn't a side effect of the conflict economy, it is the conflict economy, in a lot of these areas. Nigeria recorded 3,141 kidnapping victims in 2025 (SBM Intelligence, 2025 reporting period), and more than 2,000 children have been taken in mass school kidnappings since 2014 (HRW, 2025). One incident worth pulling out specifically: in August 2024, 20 medical students traveling to a conference in Enugu were kidnapped (reported in sources reviewed), which says something about how deliberately these attacks target exactly the mobile, educated population that cities need to keep functioning.



Humanitarian Funding

Mali's 2025 humanitarian response plan was only 18 percent funded, one of the worst-funded appeals anywhere in the world that year (NRC, 2025). And the threatened reduction in USAID-funded operations in Nigeria in 2025 put Maiduguri's humanitarian economy at real risk of collapse (New Humanitarian, 2025), which matters because that economy is one of the only sources of formal employment the city has left.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND THEIR FEASIBILITY

It's not hard to write a recommendations list for a region like this, every source consulted for this paper has one, and they mostly overlap. What's harder, and what I think is more useful, is being honest about why none of them have happened yet. So each item below comes with the specific obstacle attached, rather than being presented as though the only thing standing between now and implementation is political will.

Security Strategy Reform

Nigeria abandoned its supercamp strategy in 2025, forces concentrated in fortified bases, territorial presence effectively surrendered, and needed something built around sustained presence, intelligence-driven operations, and real political outreach to the communities these insurgencies recruit from. The obstacle isn't really doctrine, it's headcount: roughly 370,000 police officers for 220 million people (OSAC, 2024) cannot sustain a presence-based strategy without either a large recruitment and training push or reallocating resources away from something else in an already stretched budget. A recommendation that skips over that resourcing question isn't really a recommendation.

Regional Cooperation

Better intelligence sharing and joint border operations with Sahel states would help against cross-border groups like Lakurawa. The obstacle is straightforwardly political: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have all withdrawn from ECOWAS, so any cooperation now has to happen outside, or alongside, the regional body that used to coordinate exactly this kind of thing. That's a slower and more fragile arrangement than most pre-2023 policy writing on this region assumed it would be.

Municipal Governance Reform

Real fiscal and administrative decentralization, giving city governments actual property-tax authority and planning capacity, is the fix that shows up most consistently in the literature on urban fragility. The obstacle is that Nigeria's states currently hold this authority, and states have limited reason to hand more of it down to municipalities, since doing so means giving up control over urban revenue they currently keep. This is a state-level political problem, not just a federal one, and I think that gets glossed over more often than it should.

Addressing Root Causes and Youth Unemployment

Vocational training and labor-intensive investment in construction and manufacturing come up constantly as ways to shrink the pool of potential recruits for armed and criminal groups; per Section 5.4, this is a plausible, not a demonstrated, causal pathway. The obstacle is scale, youth unemployment is high enough across Nigerian cities that small pilot programs won't move the needle in any meaningful way, and the level of investment that actually would compete directly against the security spending discussed in 8.1, out of the same limited budget.

Climate-Resilient Infrastructure and Humanitarian Funding

Flood management, climate-adapted housing in the Sahel and northern Nigeria, and more humanitarian funding for urban displaced populations all show up in nearly every source I reviewed for this paper. The obstacle in both cases is donor fatigue: humanitarian appeals in this region are chronically underfunded relative to other



global crises (NRC, 2025), and nothing in the material I looked at suggests that's changing. Nigeria's December 2025 reclassification of kidnappers and armed groups as terrorists under national law is a real step, and, per the definitions in 4.3, a formal acknowledgment that parts of what had been treated as ordinary banditry now warrant terrorism-level legal and enforcement treatment, but by itself it doesn't fix the funding gap; it needs enforcement resources and international backing that the reclassification doesn't automatically bring with it.

CONCLUSION

The point of this paper was to make one connected argument, not a general survey, that Nigeria's urban fragility and its security crisis move together, and that lining Nigerian cities up next to Bamako and Djibo, against an explicit set of indicators, shows where that process can still be interrupted and where it probably can't be. I want to restate, rather than leave implicit, what kind of claim this is: the evidence assembled here is correlational and comparative, drawn from triangulated secondary sources wherever possible (Section 2.1), and the feedback-loop mechanism proposed to explain the correlation is a hypothesis consistent with the pattern, not a causally identified finding (Section 5.4).

Maiduguri is already close to the collapsed end of that spectrum on most of the indicators in Table 2. Abuja and Lagos aren't there yet, but both are showing early signs that fit the same pattern. Bamako shows that even a capital that's still functioning day to day can be strangled economically without ever being occupied outright. Djibo shows what it looks like when neither governance nor a security response arrives in time.

None of that is inevitable, and I don't want this to read as fatalistic, because it isn't meant to be. People in these cities aren't just sitting there waiting for it to happen to them, Maiduguri has rebuilt repeatedly after successive waves of violence, and Lagos traders, like residents in Timbuktu before them, have adapted daily routines around threats that would have seemed unthinkable a decade ago. What actually seems to be missing, based on everything reviewed here, isn't a longer recommendations list. It's a smaller number of interventions, matched honestly to the fiscal and political limits laid out in Section 8, sustained for as many years as this problem took to build, and, going forward, tested against the kind of causal evidence Section 5.4 describes, rather than resting on correlation alone.

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